

Nature, crisis and transformation

Article

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Nature, Crisis and Transformation

Most readers of this journal will likely concur that there needs to be a radical transformation away from the currently-dominant forms of social and economic organisation. They may also hold that some kind of transformation is inevitable, necessitated by imminent or already-realised peak oil and climate change. These far-reaching processes seem certain to impose themselves by sheer force of biophysical reality, whether recognised and anticipated or not. It seems reasonable that an appropriate response would span wholesale changes to monetary and fiscal systems, agriculture and land management, systemic controls on resource extraction, pre-emptive re-localisation of economic activity and more (Bardsley 2012). Academically at least, the aligned discourse of intentional degrowth (Alier 2009, Kallis 2010, 2017) is burgeoning. Whilst this has its detractors, it seems implausible to argue that the scale of change envisaged by degrowth proponents is out of step with the challenges. Far less certainty obtains, however, over whether and how a proactive transformation, rather than a disorderly collapse, might occur or how people might be mobilised to bring it about.

The papers in the current issue of *Environmental Values* touch upon the possibility of such a reshaping. It is natural to look to the work of the sociologist Karl Polanyi to consider the theme of collective response to momentous change. In his celebrated work *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi argued, *inter alia*, that civil society showed a capacity to spontaneously self-organise in response to the destruction of traditional ways of life and livelihoods caused by marketisation and the industrial revolution. This revolution brought about the commodification of human life itself, as wage labour, and the subjection of the fate of each individual to impersonal and constantly-changing market forces, severing the certainties provided by traditional society. The responses Polanyi emphasised were in large part forms of voluntary association, in co-operatives, political parties, trade unions, workers' educational groups, and so on, in profusion and diversity. Such responses also contributed, on this view, to political and institutional change, giving rise to characteristic features of modern nation states, including the welfare state.

Two of the papers in this issue contain apparently contrasting evidence on whether a tendency of spontaneous societal reaction transfers to the energy and environmental crises, further consequences of industrialised liberal capitalism. Long et al.'s paper seems to offer a negative view. The authors conduct qualitative research with flood victims, in an area of France affected by repeated flooding. Most participants were victims of more than one flood. The authors find, using factorial correspondence analysis, that their participants' reports of experiencing flooding seem unassociated with how they speak about climate change, individual pro-ecological behaviour or political responses. This disconnection is reported to extend to their *own* degree of pro-environmental

behaviour, reports of which are lexically distant from pronouncements on climate change. The authors interpret this as an expression of fatalism and perceived powerlessness. Based on more familiar qualitative analysis, simply reading the interviews, the respondents are reported to see no link between their experiences of flooding and the extent of their pro-environmental behaviour or thinking.

In contrast, Ebel et al. report the establishment of a community-managed marine protected area in Carelmapu, Chile. This is seen to have occurred in response to adverse ecological events associated with climate change: 'red tides'. These are periodic contaminations of marine life by algal blooms, rendering seafood unfit for human consumption. The indigenous people pushed for and obtained legal recognition of their ancestral practices in the post-Pinochet era, leading to the establishment of a protected area, following a severe red tide event. In the words of an indigenous interviewee:

"For me this is my sea, it is the sea of my daughters, it is the sea of my grandchildren, and of the generations that come, so if I can have the opportunity to protect it, that is what I am going to do ... *the effects of the red tide were evil but came for a good reason because we woke up, we just realised we need to take more protective measures at sea.*" [editor's emphasis].

Whilst one might question whether two case studies in very different contexts should yield similar results, it is more interesting to consider integrating the findings. Long et al. report that education seems to account for subjects' environmental engagement, rather than experience of crisis. Ebel et al. also report contrasting findings concerning the non-indigenous community, organised via fishing unions, who apparently did not wish to participate in the marine protected area. These differences are plausibly related to culture and education. The framing of the red tides problem by the non-indigenous community is reportedly in terms of management of resource extraction, rather than protection. Ebel et al. interpret this as indicating a distinct ontology of the indigenous people, in terms of their belief in a reciprocal relationship existing between people and the Earth's provisioning: nurture the Earth and it will provide.

One would like to see this 'ontological' interpretation expounded further and evidenced more definitively through qualitative data from the Chilean indigenous people. It seems congruent however with the observed differences in value distributions between the two groups, with indigenous respondents far less willing to accept that humans 'have control' of nature. The importance of culture is in any case underscored by the finding that the indigenous members of the fishing unions seem to differ from the other union members in this respect.

We have a plausible local example of crisis-driven pressure from a social movement, then, giving rise to protective legal and institutional changes. However, what might this tell us about a wholesale transformation of *society*? Gareth Dale's paper explicitly addresses Polanyi's work for insights into

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prospects for a wider transformation via a 'Green New Deal' (GND). The paper contains a rebuke of Polanyi's theme that society has an inherent tendency to respond to the threats posed by industrialised capitalism. With respect to Roosevelt's original New Deal, Dale argues that Polanyi paid little attention to the contemporaneous workers' struggles that could have forced it into a more socialist direction. Dale argues that such a transformation has to be fought for and won. In the absence of such a victory, it was primarily rearmament that revitalised the economy ahead of the second World War, such that the New Deal left the capitalist system largely intact, and even strengthened it.

The context Dale takes as the setting for a potential GND, with the economy on something like a war footing to combat the ecological crisis and achieve whatever energy substitution can be viable, is a post-pandemic global recession. Dale regards this as imminent, and analogous to the Great Depression of the '20s and '30s to which Roosevelt's administration was responding. Now as then, according to Dale's thesis, a progressive transformation away from destructive neoliberal extractivism will be hard won. Dale proposes that what is required is a 'Red-Green coalition'.

The prospective coalition is not further elaborated by Dale, but the preconditions for this certainly give pause for thought. There was no such coalition evident in Ebel et al.'s example: indeed, there was conflict between the indigenous movement organised for protection and the fishing unions organised for marine livelihoods. Unfortunately one need not look very hard to find related contradictions between Red and Green elsewhere. In the UK, for example, Corbynism combined a laudable progressive social policy front with an unecological embrace of the 'fourth industrial revolution'. Much of the left seems to retain an unalloyed commitment to full employment, without the critical understanding of the concept of employment afforded by Polanyi's thesis of both labour and money as fictitious commodities. Polanyi also classed 'land' as a fictitious commodity, the paradigmatic natural commons. Commodification of locations and their amenities seems to necessitate so much wage labour, either to pay rent to a private landlord or to escape that obligation through purchase. Whilst a short-term common cause in calling for 'green jobs' can easily be found, the ongoing commitment to full employment seems inconsistent with intentional degrowth and 'energy descent'. Capitalism brought home the goods, Polanyi explained, referring to its survival. Red is seemingly still too firmly fixated on those goods for a fit-for-purpose Red-Green coalition.

A different perspective on transformation is provided by Hagbert et al. Their focus is mainly on institutional and political actors as agents of change, given that it is through them that institutional and state transformation, whether reactive or proactive, must be fashioned. They empirically explore these actors' beliefs for the case of Sweden, sampling local, regional and national actors with sustainability-oriented roles in policy and planning.. Amongst the sample the pace of change, particularly towards climate change mitigation, is universally

perceived as very inadequate. Many see the discourses of sustainable development and ecological modernism as part of the problem, undermining the requisite sense of urgency. Notwithstanding this, some remain committed to them. The authors suggest some actors manifest contradictory views, as well as the sample as a whole showing divergent tendencies.

Hagbert et al. develop an argument that this and related contradictions afford an opportunity for paradigm change within the institutions. It is notable that the authors explicitly differentiate the Nordic context as one which has unusually high mutual trust between establishment governance institutions and the populace. It may strike readers elsewhere that such ‘cracks’ in prevailing ideology afford an opportunity in a world where policy is driven by rational consensus, but unfortunately the world is not much like that. The ongoing ‘strange non-death of neoliberalism’ (Crouch 2011) is testament to this, and as the authors themselves observe, Sweden has moved closer to this model in recent times. There are only hints at why the problematic discourses are retained, for example, an interviewee’s reference to ‘large companies’ preventing a different model taking root since the 1970s.

In terms of understanding the mechanisms of institutional stasis, it seems reasonable to assign a role to what cannot be openly said. Consider that the authors themselves seem to have avoided framing their study in terms of degrowth as originally intended. This is despite the fact that *contraction* has been part of mainstream climate policy discourse for a very long time. What separates contraction from degrowth is supposedly resource efficiency, but at a global level – the only level that matters for the climate – greater efficiency is associated with *increased* emissions (Garrett 2011). The counterpart in Sweden to this unreality of ‘decoupling’ is the extent of outsourced emissions, which cast doubt on the country’s status as environmental exemplar (Isenhour and Feng 2016). Perhaps the authors perceived they could not speak to the sample in terms of degrowth, just as the sample sense they cannot speak to colleagues except in terms of the growth economy, for fear of not being taken seriously? The stasis is not complete however. The same sample report that crisis narratives are increasingly openly articulated, for example via climate emergency declarations, whereas previously they were avoided.

Overall, the paper seems to this editor to underscore Dale’s argument that a broad-based struggle would be necessary to secure near-term proactive progressive change. Considering the suggestion of Ebel et al. that an ontology of reciprocal relationship to ‘nature’ helps secure a more ecologically oriented response to crisis, such an understanding might also help prospects of red-green coalition. It is therefore worth thinking about how such a conceptualisation could become more widespread and not be dismissed as unscientific in secular society. An example of something that may help is a recent movement in biological farming, known as ‘regenerative agriculture’ (Perkins 2019), which is starting to gain mainstream traction. The central idea is not to ‘grow food’ but

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to farm microbes, which given their role in soil production and symbiosis with crops and livestock, make it possible to provide food with far fewer synthetic inputs. Allow the soil to recover and, reciprocally, it will provide; this seems close to Ebel's indigenous participants' understanding of our relationship to the Earth. A by-product of these practices is carbon sequestration, which on some views would be significant at sufficient scale for climate change mitigation (Teague et al. 2016). It is perhaps no accident that Mike Davis's example of grassroots transformative change under the New Deal, cited by Dale, is agricultural. In current circumstances, most people, at least in the overconsuming, 'developed' world, are far from the land. This could change in crisis conditions though, as it did in the UK in wartime and in Cuba during the 'special period'.

This brings me to Lie's paper, which in contrast to the others concerns conceptual matters, rather than the possibility of or narratives concerning transformation. There is at least one point of connection, however. In articulating an environmental viewpoint, one typically helps oneself to the concept of nature, distinguishing it from the human or artificial. Yet attempts to articulate this distinction have been problematic and are further confounded by the 'Anthropocene' era. Whilst the paper focusses on Vogel's recent constructivist attempt to overcome the human/natural dualism, it also contains a discussion of Mill's (1863) famous critique of it, which Vogel draws upon. Mill argued that if people are part of 'nature' it should be impossible to act against nature, whereas if the term excludes us, we cannot but act unnaturally. This reasoning would undermine our ability to refer to the natural as required. Part of Lie's critique draws on the observation that we can distinguish between congruent and incongruent parts of something. From this point of view for human beings to act against nature is to form a part of it that is out of keeping or in conflict with the other parts. This contrasts in interesting ways with Deckers' (2021) attempt in this journal to determine unnaturalness by contrasting human interventions with counterfactual examples of spontaneous occurrence. It seems a short step from Lie's position to a view that our place in nature can be understood in terms of a certain form of reciprocal relationship, and one that requires social transformation to be nurtured and redressed.

NICHOLAS BARDSLEY
University of Reading

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