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Prosaic state governance of community low carbon transitions

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ABSTRACT

This paper unpacks the complex relations between community low carbon transitions, the prosaic state, neoliberal modes of governing, and the role of numbers therein. It aims to outline the ways in which the prosaic state can, through everyday tasks, decisions, measurements and demonstration requirements, force a calculative logic onto and into community based movements and groups in ways that can be counterproductive. It centrally argues that the will to quantify, in particular the accompanying demonstration requirements (most often a number), enacts three fundamental shifts in the collective subjectivity integral to community groups and movements. First, the preferred form of knowledge becomes abstract, disembodied and fungible (*episteme*) over and against relational ways to understand and conceive togetherness (*mētis*), including ecological relationships. Second, the vision of community shifts from a search to belong, an intrinsic end in itself, towards an instrumental means to achieve specific targets. Finally, third, the splitting of means from ends. These can all be traced from the demonstration requirements, and numbers, accompanying neoliberal prosaic state engagement with community groups.

Introduction

> "It's not the voting that's democracy, it's the counting." (Dotty, in Jumpers. Stoppard, 1972: Act I)

Within the wide array of literature on low carbon transitions one potential solution emerges: community. The transition to low carbon futures can be seen as a technical and policy challenge for governments to control carbon or a more-than-environmental social challenge and opportunity. Community bridges both these approaches. Quintessentially, Jackson (2005, 2011) merges a governmental, counting-carbon perspective with a quality of life vision. He identifies community and green as synonyms, where people are assumed to lead lower carbon—and also happier, more wholesome—lives. Within low carbon transitions, community—regularly polysemic—fulfils semantic overlap. Identifying a pattern in this plurality, Walker (2011) clusters the various communities invoked in carbon governance as synonymous to either place, network, process, identity, actor or scale. Community-based environmental social movements such as Transition Towns, Carbon Conversations, or Carbon Reduction Action Groups (CRAGs) (Howell, 2012, 2013; Taylor Aiken, 2015a,b) have proliferated in the Western world recently. Empirically, however, the 'community' of low carbon transitions not only matches but also transcends Walker's categories. The Transition movement comprises a Transition *Network* of particular small-*scale*, locally rooted communities in defined *places* as the *agent* of transition. Carbon Conversations works not only by virtue of its *scale* but also *network* and *identity* aspects. CRAGs require taking participants through a collective *process* of lowering carbon emissions.

Walker's categorisation also serves as a useful heuristic for understanding the various readings of community within academic literature. For instance citizens are claimed to more readily shift their individual behaviours when in community (Middlemiss, 2011; Moloney, Horne, & Fien, 2010; Mulugetta, Jackson, & van der Horst, 2010), partly due to peer-support. Place-based, small-scale understandings of community see it as a site of eco-localisation (North, 2010) or ethical place-making (Mason & Whitehead, 2012). Grassroots innovation literature also identifies community as small-scale; here reading scale as level—a level below the mainstream—rather than size. Thus community is a grassroots innovation readying itself for the mainstream (Middlemiss & Parrish, 2010; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012). Community as a form of identity is also associated with a more sustainable, just and enriched life (Agyeman, 2005; Bulkeley & Fuller, 2012). More critically, community's norming aspects are identified as coercive technologies of the self as much as pursing the good life.

Understanding community's great potential in meeting so large a challenge, it makes sense then that governments are interested in using this community to meet their legal—and possibly moral—low carbon obligations. Here, community is a technology of governance: a way of grasping and conceiving the world, where

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belonging to a community engenders behaving citizens (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999, pp. 167–96), in this case targeting carbon deviance. Of course, this also sits against a backdrop of government in an age of austerity. Here late neoliberalism (akin to Jameson's 'late capitalism', meaning *of late*, how neoliberalism has lately been configured, not necessarily implying its imminent demise or extinction) is characterised by a rollback of direct state service provision and a rollout of market-mediated preferences in its place. Middlemiss (2014, p. 10) emphasises how community low carbon transition encompasses neoliberal, or libertarian, belief in a smaller state complementing grassroots activist, even anarchic, emphasis on bottom-up change. Community emerges as a favoured government response to climate change because 'it works,'—so it is said. At least superficially, community marries grassroots desires with hegemonic neoliberal values, but also, crucially, because it is cheaper than centralised state responsibility.

The remainder of the article is organised into six sections. The first critically reviews the core concepts of this paper and their interrelationships: neoliberalism, prosaic state governance, carbon governmentalities, the will to quantify, numbers, and importantly the ways that community holds these together in pursuit of low carbon transitions. The second introduces one particular case study, where these aspects converge and are charted. The third outlines the methods used and adopted into order to understand this community from both inside and outside. The fourth section traces three effects that the introduction of 'prosaic logics' had on grassroots volunteers. The term top-down is avoided here, as prosaics assumes no directed, purposive or foisted corralling of community groups from a central node of power. Yet state logic—neoliberal in character, prosaic in impact—fundamentally transformed the collective subjectivities within this community group. This was due to a broad 'will to quantify'. Fifth, within this three broad tracings are outlined: forms of knowledge; visions of community; and the relationship of means to ends. The sixth section attempts to understand why communities choose to go through this process. The conclusion recalls this article's contributions.

Community transitions within neoliberal prosaic states

Neoliberalism involves complex, multiple processes, unevenly spread and certainly not all pervasive. Key to contemporary neoliberal state activities though is competition, understood and promoted as "a primary virtue" (Harvey, 2005, p. 65). Central is the focus on market principles as the best or natural way to govern and achieve desired outcomes. Markets imply trade, and nothing is more fungible, more perfectly substitutable and market-compatible than numbers. Harvey outlines how "the neoliberal state has become hegemonic" (2005, p. 78) as civil society, NGO's and grassroots community proliferates. This paper outlines the effects of neoliberalism on community and individual relationships. Addressing communities within neoliberal state processes highlights how they are nested within the same larger and uneven processes: a grassroots neoliberalism of market-mediated numbers.

Felli and Castree claim UK climate change adaption strategies under neoliberalism "entails the belief that the individual (and his or her 'community' and/or territory) must somehow deal with environmental change" (2012, p 2). This helps give background context to the rise of community groups like Transition Towns where climate responsibility or 'capacity to adapt' is also held to be local. Here "responses to environmental degradation … are located at the individual/community level and essentially amount to increasing the 'resilience' of the affected populations to 'external' shocks" (*ibid.*, 2012, p. 2). These neoliberal state responses to climate change seek "to produce more 'autonomous' civil societies which rely on individual actions and market mechanisms … in the (re)production of their social lives, notably in relation to the biophysical world" (Felli & Castree, 2012, p 3). Civil society groups like Transition Towns are not separate or oppositional to states, neoliberal or otherwise. Rather, following a Gramscian understanding of the state as political and civic society together, 'autonomous' communities emerge from within: state and community iteratively reproduced.

Building on Mikhail Bakhtin, Painter (2006) outlines how state actions or state effects go beyond spectacular, traditional, or commonly understood state locus and limits—border checkpoints, police stations, courts of law—towards the stateness everyday life. Painter calls these uncertain, fallible and quotidian effects of state actions the prosaic geographies of stateness. Seeing the state as prosaic challenges reified conceptions of state as a separate sphere purposively intervening (or interfering) in autonomous civil society movements. The dividing line between civil society and the state is difficult, if not impossible, to draw. "Understanding states in terms of prosaic practices reveals their heterogeneous, constructed, porous, uneven, processual and relational character" (Painter, 2006, p. 754). Here, neoliberal state production of 'market mechanisms' is not a directed state intervention, but a process of centrifugal 'stateness' operating in informal and multiple ways, affecting internal community dynamics and external group relations.

Understanding state actions and effects as prosaic, it follows that when neoliberal principles strengthen at the (inter)national level, grassroots community action becomes increasing neoliberalised, both rollback and rollout. Rollback neoliberalism expects community groups to take up the slack from a withdrawal of state provision—for example in the 'Big Society' (North, 2011). Rollout neoliberalism furthers and entrenches market principles within communities.

The argument here is that numbers and the 'will to quantify' is one crucial way in which neoliberal principles of marketisation project responsibility towards individuals and local communities. Seeing the stateness of autonomous civil society organisations as prosaic 'statification' has a number of advantages. Primarily, it avoids blaming individuals or community groups for voluntarily subjugating themselves. It provides a language to describe the creeping neoliberal stateness of grassroots community movements, without overplaying the coercive agency of state interventions, funding schemes, or volunteers 'selling-out'. "Prosaics highlights the unsystemic, the indeterminate and the unintended" (Painter, 2006, p. 763). The number-governance outlined here is not a specific technology of governance, deliberately deployed to corral and control community-based organising. Rather, positing a prosaic stateness of such movements acknowledges the state's importance in rolling-out grassroots neoliberalism, the impact this has on grassroots community environmentalism, but importantly remains critical of such movements without adopting language which can blame or project more responsibility onto what are often well-meaning, hard-pressed volunteers.

In a similar move, Swyngedouw charts the shift from government to governance where state's formerly "hierarchical and top-down" (2005, pp. 1994–1995) rules and exercising of power become superseded by governance-beyond-the-state: "horizontal, networked and based on interactive relations between independent and interdependent actors who share a high degree of trust, despite internal conflict and oppositional agendas, within inclusive participatory institutional or organisational associations. The mobilised technologies of governance revolve around reflexive risk-calculation (self-assessment), accountancy rules and accountancy-based disciplining, quantification and benchmarking of performance" (2005, pp. 1994–1995). Crucial here is the invocation of accountancy and quantification: neoliberal number governance of both nation-state and prosaic state.

Governing community low carbon transitions today must always be seen in its neoliberal context. Specifically, a backdrop of trust in markets and calculative practices in meeting numerically defined targets. In Rose's groundbreaking book on techniques of power,