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Hopefulness for transformative grassroots change

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The potential of community collective action to respond to the multiple, intersecting, crises we face has long been a space of hope and inspiration. Geographers have purposefully sought to introduce spatiality and the specificness of place as central elements into debates that otherwise have, at times, risked being considered universal. I am thinking here particularly of early work in social movements studies and understandings of collective action in activism that for too long was implicitly routed in Anglo contexts (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006).

Now, as demonstrated by this volume, the implications of spatiality and the diversity of places in which these community initiatives manifest are central to understanding their possibilities. In this short coda I highlight the many strengths of this field as it now stands, and then identify three areas where further research would be beneficial.

Community as interdependent relations of hopefulness

Empirical and theoretical research into community initiatives has evolved significantly in the last two decades. The concept of community itself has been interrogated and broadened. Although always recognised in essence as grassroots collective efforts of emancipatory action, a sense of 'togetherness' in efforts towards transformation, there is now a much more nuanced engagement with the concept as an open and interdependent relation, not necessarily bounded to a place nor delineated by clear criteria of belonging.

The ways in which communities are generated, operationalised, emplaced or de-placed, challenged, include or exclude, and also ultimately fragment and disperse is now central to contemporary geographical research (Aiken, 2016). It is this understanding of the *processes* of community initiatives - internally (how they function), and how their broader situational context facilitates or delimits what they achieve – that has been significantly advanced in the last decades. Understanding what holds people together and also pulls them apart has been vital here to exploring their potential and provides us with multiple examples through which the complexity, but also practical utility, of acting together can be examined.

Crucially, there is no mega-definition of community that works; it is deliberately an open, fluid, polyvalent term, and the need to continue to expand and contrast examples across space and place remains. There is also a need to continue to critically reflect on how certain definitions get employed and to what ends, when in practice communities remain fluid and emergent (Kumar and Aiken, 2020). While there is plenty of work yet to be done – through research, in practice and through praxis – it is now unquestionable that community initiatives are central to the possibilities of transformation. Indeed this volume is testament to the variety of opportunities and signifies how everyday life can and should remain hope-full.

In this burgeoning field of research into global initiatives there are several elements which are particularly useful in advocating the value of grassroots change; discussions about scale, the centrality of structural systems, and the need for openness and acknowledgement of interstitiality.

The question of scale, as in can community initiatives operate at a scale which facilitates broad regional or even national level change, is long running. Grounded in arguments now decades old about the utility and pitfalls of localisation as a strategy, it is finally being acknowledged that the question of whether projects can be 'scaled-up' linearly misunderstands social change. There is now greater recognition that this scalar approach can limit our understanding of the possibilities of community initiatives and unnecessarily consigns such projects to notions of being marginal or niche. Rather scale is not linear (Leitner, *et al.,* 2008), place relations are not bounded (but interdependent and emergent), horizontal connections between places and initiatives abound, solidarity networks are transnational (Kumar and Aiken, 2020), and inspiring ideas and practices travel. All of which de-emphasise scalar differences, though further work is still required on relations to constraining factors such as state hierarchies (more below on this) and the messiness and compromise this can entail. Social change is, therefore, not a linear process but one which can have a myriad of implications, some more discernible than others. Recent work bringing social practice perspectives into understandings of transformative geographies further strengthens our ability to critically interrogate simple linear notions of scale (Schmid and Smith, 2020).

The second element of research into community initiatives which is proving useful and productive is the focus on the structural causes of socio-environmental problems. Continuing to exemplify how and why existing approaches which prioritise neoliberal systems only advantage the few, impoverish the majority, and require the ongoing destruction of the environment, is crucial in continuing to reject a focus on tokenistic individual change, and therefore the need for more systematic collective action (Argüelles *et al.,* 2017). This focus reduces the risk of believing that individual 'lifestyle' changes or green consumption will be adequate. It also retains the need to critically interrogate market-based alternatives, and to question who are included and excluded from initiatives.

Finally, community initiatives are known to be open, ongoing, unfinished spaces of experimentation (Kullman, 2013; Last, 2012). They are practices of prefiguration that seek to act in the present how they intend the future to be. This enables community efforts to be valued for what they achieve, not what is lacking, and avoids assuming that they are fully formed blueprints or even that they need to be. This approach not only creates a space in which to be experimental, learning from actions and then trying something different, but as Veron argues, this openness creates a space in which politics are "built *on the way*" (2020). By focusing on being open practical initiatives, which might be born out of necessity, they might not start from a particular radical politics, but instead through the process of becoming and making a radical politics emerge (also see Richardson-Ngwenga, this volume). In addition, while this unfinished nature always leaves open possibilities of social change there remains a need to carefully examine when and why some initiatives fail. Failure still needs further research, as a necessary point of reflection that can be productive (Harrowell *et al.,* 2017). Failure is integral to the process of learning, reflecting and improving.

While significant work in the last two decades has advanced and nuanced our understandings the possibilities and the spatialities of community initiatives, I next identify three areas which still require further attention; the importance of historical context, the risks of authoritarianism, and the tensions of privilege when seeking social justice.

Know your history

In academic analysis of community initiatives of transformation there has been a tendency to celebrate the seemingly new and innovative. This is problematic in two important ways – it erases a history of place, and risks wasting time and energy reinventing existing practices. While recent work has become much more cognisant of transformative geographies of the Global South (Letelier *et al.,* this issue) and the interdependence of relations between places in building alternative futures, there remains a need to more critically reflect on how the history of places shapes (or is ignored by) community initiatives. Not only do places have different histories of neoliberalism, but we also need to acknowledge the ongoing implications of dynamics such as settler colonialism (Battell Lowman and Barker, 2014) , which once recognised calls for radical rethinking of questions of land rights, notions of community, and self-determination. Initiatives that avoid these questions contribute, albeit maybe unintentionally, to the continuing oppression of Indigenous peoples and the complex historical occupation of places.

Second, as demonstrated by Thomas Smith's recent film *Nowtopia*, careful reflection on our histories can reveal practices and hope in the past that can both inspire contemporary initiatives and also be repurposed for the present. These are not nostalgic acts, but rather acknowledging what has come before and not seeking to reinvent anew. This also helps root community initiatives in place as having always existed and being central to how it has evolved, which in itself can counter the proposition that seeking transformation together is somehow radical and novel.

Risks of authoritarianism

The rise of the far right, of reactionary and identarian politics, is an external and worrying threat to the effectiveness of many community initiatives. As we have seen in the USA, UK, Australia and Hungary, to name just a few, this politics is not just devoid of any concern for social justice or ecological sustainability, but appears, as Lauren Berlant argues, to actively revel in an enjoyment of cruelty and a freedom from the burdens of tenderness for others, summed up by the retort 'fuck your feelings'.

But authoritarianism is also an internal threat to community action. Environmentalism is haunted by the spectre of eco-fascism, visible in discussions about population growth, land rights and paternalistic approaches to conservation (van Holstein and Head, 2018; Bacon, 2019). The ways that exclusion, discrimination and unequal power relations persist in apparently progressive spaces speaks of the need to be constantly vigilant of problematic social relations inside community activism.

The work of geographers, able to examine and position global geo-politics alongside everyday embodied practices is vital in unpacking and challenging this. But we also need to respond to this threat with more than solidarity, care and generosity. While these are no doubt important acts, they also need to be extended to incorporate clearer understandings of how community initiatives relate to the state, and how the state (de)values them (Petrescu *et al.,* this volume). There is now excellent acknowledgement of how many community initiatives work within, beyond and against the state, often simultaneously, and which of the interstitial spaces of transformation can be the most productive (Angel, 2017). Thompson's (2020) work on new urban municipalist approaches demonstrates the importance of understandings of relations to the state, but it remains necessary to further

unpack how the far the state enables, co-opts or hinders grassroots community activism in different places. Moreover, this greater attention being paid to relations between community activism and the state further opens up the need to examine a wider variety of spaces for transformative possibilities – far beyond some of the early work in this field which focused on radical activist spaces or community gardens.

Social justice and privilege

Questions remain in work on community initiatives about troubling exclusions and, at times, for example the prioritisation of environmental goals over concerns for social justice. Despite a continued emphasis on place and the everyday, and that place-based collaborations enable pragmatic coalitions across difference, there are tensions about belonging and identity in many community social change projects (Transformative pragmatism [authors?], this volume). These tensions have tended to be tackled by questioning how social justice is understood, practiced and achieved. Unfortunately, it is relatively easy to identify examples where discourses of social justice do not match actual manifestations - there is often a disjuncture between imagined projects and their realisation (Chitewere, 2018). Less work has been done on how privilege operates and is rarely acknowledged.

Privilege is a structural advantage that benefits those of particular race, class, gender, or identity categories (Bhopal, 2018). It is systematically produced through *ongoing* processes of dominance, particularly for example in how whiteness remains an invisible normative category that "takes precedence over all other forms of identity" (Bhopal, 2018, 27), and how "the identity of whiteness is … the first determinant of how groups are positioned" (ibid). Although there are limitations of privilege as a concept – it can be homogenising (and mask white poverty), can be used to claim an innocence and does not resolve structures of oppression – it is necessary to help us untangle what social justice actually is and requires. In other words, we need to explore how the denial of privilege in some community initiatives prevents some projects adequately advancing their social justice aspirations and potential (Pickerill, *forthcoming*).

Hope-fullness

Despite being in the midst of multiple global crises there is reason to be hopeful. There are many examples of transformative grassroots change that are generative, inclusive, radical, political, creative and making a difference to people's everyday lives. Propelled by an openness, an experimental spirit and a belief that working together enables greater change, the many initiatives discussed in this volume demonstrate that whatever histories, state relations, reactionary far right politics and problematic privileges complicate community efforts, many possibilities still thrive. Even in the darkest of times, such as the Covid pandemic, the togetherness of community responses means we should remain full of hope that, at whatever scale and wherever they happen, community initiatives can help facilitate ongoing socio-ecological transformations to create a more equitable, ecologically sensitive and just world.

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