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LEARNING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE THROUGH DIALOGUE

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Introduction

In Scotland, in 2002, Jack McConnell, the First Minister of the recently devolved Scottish Executive announced commitment to the concept of environmental justice.

"I want the lasting impact of the Scottish Parliament to be fewer opportunity gaps between those with the most and those who have the least. But I am also clear that this gap between the haves and the have-nots is not just an economic issue. For quality of life, closing the gap demands environmental justice too." (McConnell, 2002a)

McConnell's use of the term in 2002 recognised the location of environmentally damaging activities in places where the local communities also suffer social and economic disadvantage – a continuation therefore of the theme of social justice into the geographical distribution of environmentally mediated risk. Recent research commissioned by the Scottish Executive has identified that indices of social and economic deprivation correlate positively with environmental risks and negatively with environmental benefits (Fairburn, 2005).

But McConnell's understanding of environmental justice went further than an acknowledgement of the social injustice of such correlations within Scotland. At a speech at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, later in 2002, he acknowledged the international dimension of environmental justice:

"I am clear that environmental injustice is at its most shocking when you consider the situation of the developing world. ... the greatest environmental injustices are between the developed and the developing world." (McConnell 2002b)

Since McConnell's speeches, the term environmental justice has recurred in the literature of the Executive and their agencies. However, despite such promising beginnings, the understanding of the term has evolved away from its focus on national and global inequalities between those who cause, and those who suffer from pollution, towards a more general interest in the quality of location occupied by the poorest within Scotland, linking environmental justice to issues of location and neighbourhood regeneration, rather than underlying causes in economic relations. Leaving aside the lack of implementation of environmental justice policy, there are concerns about the spatial emphasis diverting attention away from the sources of acute environmental damage.

Arguably, the Scottish Executive's interest in environmental justice has arisen directly from the campaigning of Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES), and specifically from the group's then Chief Executive, Kevin Dunion who advised Jack McConnell. FoES adopted environmental justice as its priority campaign in 1998, the date of the formation of the Scottish Parliament, and explicitly linked local inequalities with global and intergenerational justice (the campaign slogan was 'no less than a decent environment for all, no more than a fair share of the earth's resources') (Dunion 2003; Dunion & Scandrett 2003). FoES's understanding of environmental justice has also evolved, largely through the experiences of communities involved in struggling against environmental damage in their localities. Such communities do not typically identify with environmentalism, and FoES has employed popular education methodology to encourage a reflexive dialogue between community activists and professional and academic knowledge. This involves an aspect of local governance and attempts to resolve problems of locality through the regulatory authorities. However, it has also included a focus on the common issues amongst

diverse localities and attempted to develop generalised resistance to environmental injustice as a global phenomenon

This article describes two areas of Friends of the Earth's work, along with the theoretical justification and implications for using this dispersed, community-based, popular education approach. It is argued that this approach to lifelong learning has a stronger theoretical legitimacy than either entirely locality-based or macroeconomic policy. The two projects are titled 'Agents for Environmental Justice' and 'Global Communities', and were initiated in 2001, before Jack McConnell's environmental justice speech and his address at the Johannesburg conference.

'Agents for Environmental Justice' is a project for supporting local community activists engaged in diverse environmental justice struggles in local, minority ethnic and workplace communities in different parts of Scotland. The project draws on the tradition of 'community agents' who, in the Indian subcontinent, and increasingly in rural Scotland, are local activists, supported by agencies to mobilise community action in their own localities (Brown and Downie 1999). In this case agents were recruited from urban, rural, semi-urban, minority ethnic and workplace communities on the basis of their involvement in environmental justice struggles. They were provided with assistance in their local action, financial support, printed resources, opportunities for networking and, centrally, a Higher Education Certificate in Environmental Justice through popular education methods, validated and accredited by Queen Margaret University College (Wilkinson & Scandrett 2003).

'Global Communities' is a programme of education with community groups in Scotland about global issues, through stories of similar community groups throughout the world. Direct relationships of solidarity have been built with communities suffering environmental injustices in the South. This has stimulated visits to Scottish communities by activists against oil companies in Ecuador.

This paper explores how this method of dialogue through popular education between these communities affected by environmental injustice, and with NGO professionals and academics, has resourced local struggles and contributed to understanding of the social meaning of environmental justice. However, first an explanation is given of the context of discourse on environmental justice and how FoES's understanding of these relations has developed.

Environmental justice & ecological debt

Environmental justice starts from the recognition that environmental damage is socially distributed along similar gradients to other social and economic disadvantages. The injustice of such distributions has stimulated in some places significant social movements of resistance. Most influential of these movements, both in terms of legislative impact and academic interest is the environmental justice movement in the USA.

The US environmental justice movement emerged from the civil rights movement, and mobilised in the 1980s and 90s against environmental racism: the disproportionate siting of environmentally damaging developments in localities beside African American and Latino communities and in Native American reservations. Under the Clinton presidency, legislative and administrative reforms were enacted to prevent further discrimination in the siting of locally unwanted land uses in terms of race and income. The success of these reforms appears to have been modest and reversed during the early years of the Bush presidency.

Academic analysis of the movement has been diverse. Schlosberg (2002), for example, has described the movement as reflecting a demand from the communities of 'people of colour' for recognition of their distinct social construction of environment. The construction of environment has been defined by the mainstream discourses in terms of nature preservation, rural issues and resource conservation. The experience of communities of colour is quite different, whether from the experience of the urban ghetto, the Chicano farm or the Amerindian traditions.

Drawing on Nancy Fraser (1997, but see also Fraser, 2000), Schlosberg argues that the environmental justice movement should be seen as a demand for justice both as the redistribution of resources and also as recognition of difference. In his view, a more open participatory democratic process – a new pluralism – serves to combine these demands for justice.

“Through public participation, activists and communities may accomplish both more equitable distribution of environmental risks (or more ideally, a decrease in toxic exposure and environmental risks for all) and the recognition of various communities, cultures, and understandings of environmental health and sustainability. So the demand for a more open, communicative and participatory political process is how the environmental justice movement brings together – and attempts to address – the issues of distribution and recognition” (Schlosberg, 2002 p11).

By contrast, Martinez-Alier (2002) has argued that the issue of ‘race’ (and therefore of recognition) in the environmental justice movement is a tactically selected social category of mobilisation around a particular form of ‘environmentalism of the poor’. In the US context, ‘race’ is a language of valuation identified by the categories of people most subject to the ecological damage caused

“ecological distribution conflicts are fought with different vocabularies; the language of ‘environmental racism’ is powerful, it can be used in many cases of environmental injustice, though not in all... By emphasising ‘racism’, environmental justice emphasises incommensurability of values. This is its greatest achievement ... Money and human dignity are not commensurate.” (Martinez-Alier, 2002 pp 172-3)

The environmentalism of the poor occurs primarily in the global South, where movements of the poorest in societies react against development which threatens the social and ecological resources on which they depend. Martinez-Alier documents movements against copper mining in Japan and Peru, oil exploration in Nigeria and Ecuador, shrimp farming in Bangladesh and Chile, forest destruction in Indonesia and India, toxic pollution in USA and South Africa and so on. The movements moreover defend their resources in diverse terms, including race, indigenous traditions, human rights, health, biodiversity or sacred places. The languages of resistance of environmentalism of the poor are diverse, representing the multiple ways in which ecological resources are valued *differently* from the financial valuation required for cost benefit analysis.

Key to this analysis is that environmentalism of the poor, or environmental justice, occurs in different ways in different contexts, employs multiple languages of valuation and indeed may produce contrasting local management responses from place to place. However it is recognisable as a common phenomenon when understood as a form of social conflict emerging in places where capitalist expansion reaches limits in the social and ecological environment. In this sense, environmental justice struggles are social responses to economic externalities.

Much emphasis on the management of externalities is through their internalisation, ie defining property rights and allocating prices to natural resources in order that they might be valued within a market system. This macroeconomic approach takes seriously the common causes of environmental injustices and seeks a solution through incorporation into the market through common valuation (Pearce et al. 1989, Pearce 1991).

However, as Martinez Alier points out, the interests of capital in a market provide a logic in which externalities, rather than being incorporated, are sought as a means of increasing productivity. Thus, policy mechanisms which attempt to internalise externalities, lead to further external effects elsewhere.

“Whilst conventional economics looks at environmental impacts in terms of externalities which should be internalised into the price system, one can see externalities not as market failures but as cost-shifting successes which nevertheless might give rise to environmental movements. Such movements will legitimately employ a variety of vocabularies and strategies of resistance, and they cannot be gagged by cost-benefit analysis or by environmental impact assessments.” (Martinez-Alier, 2003 p 257)

Such externalities occur in diverse contexts. The trades unions’ campaigns against workplace hazards and for better working conditions are examples of environmental externalities at the point of production. However, in a globalising capitalist economy, the places where externalities are experienced most significantly are in the global South, where there is least leverage on the market, wages and environmental regulations are lowest and least enforced, where the poor must sell cheap. As Lawrence Summers at the World Bank exposed in 1992 (quoted in Bellamy Foster, 2002), the locating of dirty and dangerous processes in the poorest parts of the world is a matter of economic logic because human life and health is cheaper. Finding new ways to externalise costs is impeccable economic logic.

In recent years, environmental movements in the global South have been drawing attention to the benefit which the rich countries obtain from the legacy of ecological destruction and the expropriation of the world’s natural resources. The Southern Peoples Ecological Debt Creditors Alliance (SPEDCA) has highlighted this ecological debt owed by the North to the South as a result of the historical and continuing direct exploitation of resources in the South, and overuse of global commons such as the atmosphere and water systems:

“ Ecological debt is the accumulated, historical and current debt which industrialized Northern countries, their institutions and corporations owe to the peoples and countries of the South for having plundered and used of their natural resources, exploited and impoverished their peoples, and systematically destroyed, devastated and contaminated their natural heritage and sources of sustenance. Industrialized counties are also responsible for the gradual destruction of the planet as a result of their patterns of production and consumption, and environmental pollution that generates the greenhouse effect” (Donoso, 2003)

It is not possible to calculate the ecological debt, not least because the value of what is lost is often incommensurable with monetary values. However, the language of ecological debt shifts international power relationships: it is an obligation for reparation due collectively to the sufferers. From a Northern perspective, our continued overuse of global resources contributes to the debt so adds urgency to our need to reform. Debt repayment therefore involves cessation of the exploitation, financial compensation, and a shift in the relationship between North and South. It requires an ecological structural adjustment programme in the North. Ecological debt is a challenge made by the movements of the environmentalism of the poor. It is, moreover, a language for describing the historical legacy of global externalities.

Popular education

FoES’s approach tends to interpret environmental justice as a site of social conflict arising from the environmental limits of capital expansion in a market. This has led to a range of activities which focuses not on problems of location management, nor on internalisation of externalities, but on resourcing the places where environmental justice struggles have emerged. Understanding environmental justice in this way has led to approaches to lifelong learning which both strengthen local resistance and make connections across issues to underlying causes.

Ettore Gelpi’s (1979) work has been a useful point of analysis for lifelong learning / education. Gelpi’s insight is that lifelong education occurs where people struggle for dignity and liberation when socio-economic contradictions which deny their dignity are exposed. Conflict in various

forms is therefore the primary source of curriculum. Gelpi's focus was on the global division of labour and the forms of oppression which this brings. His interest is in the range of ways which people find to learn what is personally and collectively liberating, in the context of conflict and oppression. The role of educators is to be alert for opportunities to respond to these learning needs, including exposing these conflicts when they are hidden. Griffin (1984) has described Gelpi's vision of lifelong education as "an idea of intrinsic adult learning situations whose knowledge-content is much more a function of the social relations of production than of the curriculum categories of schooling" (Griffin 1984 p. 195).

Gelpi's approach to lifelong education is useful in resourcing communities and movements engaged in environmental justice conflicts which expose the tendency of capital expansion to reach environmental limits. Moreover the curriculum is by necessity negotiated in this learning. The social needs of communities facing local environmental problems are addressed through access to the relevant specialist knowledges of the educators in the NGO or the academy. But the process of knowledge generation – and therefore policy formation – is embedded in the dialogue with the activists engaged in struggle.

The educator whose methods have been most influential in creating dialogue between educator and learners is of course Paulo Freire. Dialogue is the fundamental theme of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). For Freire, dialogue is a process through which both learner and teacher bring their knowledge, understanding and experience together, and both are challenged and changed by the experience. By taking seriously the political context, and by the teacher explicitly taking sides with the learners in their struggles, political change is made possible through action and reflection.

"As we attempt to analyse dialogue as a human phenomenon, we discover something which is the essence of dialogue itself: *the word*. But the word is more than just an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constituent elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus to speak a true word is to transform the world." (Freire 1972 p 60)

'Popular education', in this sense, is drawn from the Portuguese *educação popular* which translates more closely to peoples' education or education of the poor (Kane 2003). It has inspired a movement of politicised educators throughout the world, for example those associated with the Popular Education Network, who describe this approach as:

"Popular education is based on a clear analysis of the nature of inequality, exploitation and oppression, and is informed by an equally clear political purpose. It has nothing to do with helping the 'disadvantaged' or the management of poverty; it has everything to do with the struggle for a more just and egalitarian social order

"The process of popular education has the following general characteristics:

- its curriculum comes out of the concrete experience and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle
- its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development
- it attempts, wherever possible, to forge a direct link between education and social action." (Crowther *et al.* 2005 p. 2)

This has been central to the popular educational approach of FoES as exemplified in 'Agents for Environmental Justice' and 'Global Communities'. In practice, this has included activities such as collective investigations, joining in and reflecting on campaigns, problem posing, identifying generative themes, progressively analytical series of questions, sharing tactics, the interrogation

of experts and participatory exercises in addition to the more traditional book study, writing and tutorial type discussion.

Agents for environmental justice

The 'Agents for environmental justice' project provided popular education to community activists fighting for environmental justice. The agents themselves are fighting diverse issues: against opencast mines, road developments, quarries, fishfarms, GM crops and substandard housing; on Black and refugee issues, alternative economic development and sustainable waste management. The course, seeks to be relevant to these local issues and develop a curriculum which seeks to understand not only how to change the specific issues in the agents' locality, but also a wider process of political change for global and intergenerational environmental justice.

This project took a self-consciously popular education approach to making academic and other knowledge relevant to the struggles of communities involved in promoting environmental justice. This is a distinctively dialogical epistemology. The knowledge content of the learning is derived from the body of academic knowledge embodied in the University College; the campaigning of FoES and the diverse skills and experience of people and their communities and organisations living with environmental injustice and engaged in struggles to overcome it. It is on the basis of this curriculum that the validation of the course is approved. The negotiation occurs between these forms of knowledge (and indeed others) in the educational process, which ensures that the learning is relevant to social action.

In this process the main objective is that the community's reality is changed by the social action leading to an improved local environment for the community, and also that the common sources of environmental injustice are progressively exposed. The stories of the agents in the context of the developing collective understanding of environmental justice are documented in *Agents for Environmental Justice & Scandrett*, (2003)

Global communities

Popular education has also been adopted in FoES's work on global environmental injustices, through building alliances with colleagues in the global South. FoES's approach links communities living in poverty in Scotland with ecological 'creditors' in the Global South. The aim is to unpick, through a process of investigation and questioning, the common structural threads in global patterns of injustice.

The concept of ecological debt has brought FoES into contact with the Ecuadorian environmental campaign group *Acción Ecológica*. The response to ecological debt using popular education has led to an exchange between Scottish communities struggling for environmental justice, and two communities in Ecuador. Esmeraldas is a coastal city which incorporates a major oil refinery and petrochemical plant. A series of oil leaks into the local streams have led to explosions and fires which have damaged significant part of the adjacent community. A legal struggle continues over the payment, by Petroecuador (which took ownership of the refinery from Texaco) of compensation to the community.

The function of the Esmeraldas refinery is to process oil extracted from inland and export petrochemical products. Oil is pumped to Esmeraldas along the trans-Andean pipeline, from the north-east of Ecuador where it is extracted. This is the Amazonian region, home to the Cofan nation of indigenous peoples. The Cofan nation has lost 90% of its ancestral land to the activities of oil companies; seen large areas of forest destroyed by extraction infrastructure, spillages and pollution and its spiritual traditions desecrated. The Cofan have a Shamanic spiritual tradition which includes communication with the subterranean Coan Coan being, whose life is threatened by oil extraction. Cofan activists had succeeded in closing an oil well by encircling it in traditional costume and using ritual and humour to confront the army which was sent to 'defend' it.

In 2003, two Ecuadorian activists from Esmeraldas and the Cofan nation, visited communities fighting environmental injustice in Scotland. This was followed by a visit from Cofan young people in 2005, prior to the Gleneagles G8 summit, and during which non-violent tactics were debated with Scottish activists preparing for the summit. Leading up to and between these visits, popular education work in Scotland introduced the concept of ecological debt and started developing a critique of globalisation by linking with local struggles.

Popular education and lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is portrayed as the flexible and reflexive response of adult education to postmodernity, an approach which overcomes the problems of linear progress and disciplinary and professional boundaries implicit in the modernist grand tradition of liberal adult education (eg Edwards, 1997). The economic role of lifelong learning tends to focus around producing a reflexive and flexible workforce able to respond to the unpredictable changes in the post-Fordist economy.

“In the post-Fordist problematic, education is to contribute to flexible specialisation by focusing on vocational training. Education systems, it is argued, should concentrate on developing people’s competencies – their skills, knowledge and values - to enable them to move across jobs, from one sector of the economy to the other, and even from one country to another” .” (Foley, 1999 p68)

Environmental lifelong learning has tended to occupy a niche within this, improving the skills and competencies required for environmental consumerism. Responsibility for reducing the environmental damage which the economy causes becomes that of the individual who should adapt their lifestyle, drive less, recycle more, buy responsibly. Environmental lifelong learning becomes environmental awareness raising, which fulfils the function of privatising the externalities to the individual.

More directly, at the supply side of the economy, environmental lifelong learning is orientated towards competence in environmental management systems, voluntary self-regulation and worker responsibility, in other words adapting the smooth functioning of the economy to the inconvenience of the ecological crisis. However, as we have argued, the smooth running of the economy in a competitive market involves looking for opportunities to externalise costs.

A more sophisticated critique is provided by Sterling (2001), whose sustainable education approach (aimed primarily at the formal sector) involves developing a process of individual consciousness change towards an ‘ecological paradigm’. Here is not the place to critique Sterling’s work in detail, although as an idealistic philosophy with universal application, it approaches political change through the power of ideas – the ecological paradigm shift. As explored earlier, we would argue that it is the material weaknesses in the economy which cause unsustainability and therefore the conflicts in this system which is the primary source of curriculum. Sterling’s approach seems to rely on powerful vested interests simply being convinced by the argument, and by becoming wise, understanding and empathic thereby giving up their privilege. Unfortunately, there is little evidence in history to support this.

The work of FoES draws on a reflexive tradition within adult education, which avoids the disciplinary boundaries, professional control and monolithic version of progress which came with modernity, but without falling into the trap of relativism, market control and directionlessness of postmodernity. Edwards (1997) has argued that it is impossible to “evaluate which visions of lifelong learning ... describe the situation most accurately and / or are normatively more appealing” . Accuracy and normative judgement are best tested against the material reality of ‘actual harm’ experienced by victims of environmental injustice, whether it be resource loss, illness or even death, where economic activities are creating externalities. They are tested through the collective struggle of people against this reality, and the diverse ways in which they are reframing the externalities with alternative languages of valuation.

Conclusion

Environmental justice, in the approach taken by FoES, is an evolving process of understanding, tested through dialogue with the reality of communities struggling against local environmental problems. This uses the methodology of popular education, located at the points where social conflict arises from environmental limits to the economy, which are found in community, workplace and ethnicity struggles in Scotland and in the ecological creditor countries of the South.

This approach differs from the apparent direction of the Scottish Executive towards a more universal, location-based environmental quality, which is more amenable to management without challenging vested economic interests. It also differs from mainstream macroeconomic approaches which attempt to internalise externalities.

FoES's approach therefore attempts to take locality seriously but does not focus down on particular localities for management. It takes macroeconomics seriously but does not reduce this to internalising of externalities. Essentially it is an approach which uses popular education to create a dialogue between the macroeconomic and the local.

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