

Social Ecological Transformation and the Individual

Western society and its conceptualisation of modern democracy has placed a heavy emphasis on autonomy of the individual. Yet curtailing autonomy is a standard necessity for any collective to operate. There is then an inevitable tension between the idea that individuals have freedom to do as they please and the recognition that, as social animals, humans create institutions that impose constraints on such freedom in order to achieve communal goals and coordinated action.

Modern market systems, as social structures, are no different and operate through institutions that control and regulate behaviour. For example, they create norms that engender the trust necessary for money to act as a medium of exchange. Power relationships are established along with rights to property and rules for transferring those rights. Norms for the commodification of labour and Nature are established. Political liberals claim consent is given to such social structuring and can be withdrawn, but in practice people are born into societies, form within them and are not easily able to act as judges external to them. People may then be prone to conformity and seeking ways to justify the world around them.

Conformity to a system that is slowly but surely destroying the environmental functions upon which humanity depends is then highly problematic. Individuals as part of the system need to change their behaviour but how that is meant to be achieved is highly contested. This issue of *Environmental Values* contains a set of papers that take different positions on what is necessary to redirect destructive human behaviour. All agree that things need to change if environmental degradation and unsustainable practices are to be addressed. All have a strong focus on individuals and their role, although there are divergent positions on the understanding of individual psychology and behaviour that impact the recommendations as to what needs to be done.

Marcus presents a critical review of behavioural models largely based on theories from social psychology. This approach fits well with the methodological individualism of mainstream economics and its preference utilitarianism. In that context, addressing environmental problems is a matter of how to get the civic body of autonomous self-interested *homo oeconomicus* to cooperate for the common good. The new institutional economists engage in mathematical models, set up games and perform social ‘experiments’ to show how carrots (benefits) and sticks (costs) can work to counter free-riders and rule breakers. They extend preferences to the social, and squeeze in concepts such as fairness in the guise of utility-providing commodities. Preferences are also extended to include ‘other-regarding behaviour’. Under such assumptions, a better, more caring, society requires education, creating empathy for others and making people feel others are part of their ‘in-group’, so that they gain more benefits from helping others.

Yet, creating formal and informal institutions to achieve these ends conflicts with a model where preferences are assumed fixed a priori and sacrosanct. Thus, Marcus asks 'whether the implementation of policies that deliberately aim at shaping people's preferences is desirable'. Where the aim is societal transformation to pro-environmental behaviour the question becomes merely rhetorical. In the standard behavioural model there is no option but to change what motivates choice (e.g., attitudes, norms). However, despite supporting the basic tenets and assumptions of the approach, what Marcus argues is that a fundamental prerequisite for successful intervention, and better natural resource management, is trust – and that trust is both neglected in the model and lacking in society.

Others (e.g., Loughheed et al., Groves et al.) are more sceptical of how such behavioural models understand the human predicament and the policy recommendations that follow. Groves et al. criticise attitude-behaviour-choice models with their reliance on achieving transition through communication of costs and benefits. Basically the approach enforces a set of 'punish and reward' institutions based upon a Pavlovian carrot and stick approach to human motivation. Indeed trying to understand society on the basis of a methodology that atomistically reduces society to nothing more than a collection of individuals is a core fallacy of the behavioural economic and social psychology approaches. What is absent is the structure of society and how its properties emerge. For example, while norms are included as a type of institutional arrangement, there is no idea as to how norms are created, as Marcus recognises at one point.

Despite such inadequacies the behavioural approach is actively being employed in policy, as Loughheed et al. exemplify for waste management in Kingston, Ontario. They argue that the structure this approach implicitly supports is one of neoliberal governance. Their contention is that a focus on individual pro-environmental behaviour aims to foster a specific form of personal identity framed as environmental citizenship. Transformation is regarded as a matter of making the right choices, which are presented as specific acts (e.g., recycling), within the context of a market economy and consumer society that goes unquestioned. The basic assumption of the behavioural model is that volitional acts will address environmental problems and people undertake the wrong acts due to a lack of the right motivators (carrots and sticks), information and education. Attitudes and norms are then often regarded as key variables in determining individual choice.

Loughheed et al. are sceptical of trying to create new norms which they describe in terms of top-down imposition, and they have a general concern for paternalistic and expert driven approaches to environmental policy and the neoliberal push for corporate engagement in designing that policy. The recommendations arising from the behavioural model are then seen as a pernicious means for avoiding 'alternatives to profligate economic growth'. At the same time they want significant lifestyle changes and see these as necessary to

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challenge the culture of mass consumption that creates the waste management problem in the first place. Yet the question remains as to how that transformation is to be achieved in a democratic society?

Fear of the paternalistic State has also led to criticism of policies based on 'unconscious behavioural influence', otherwise popularised by American neoclassical behavioural economists as 'nudging'. Hukkinen argues that such 'nudging' is not only legitimate but necessary and indeed unavoidable. The claim is that humans are motivated to act both by conscious rationalisation and by unconscious automated cognitive processes. Rather than a dichotomous choice as to which is employed Hukkinen describes a scale of influence from full control of others to no control at all. Yet, determining what is a controlling influence, and what is not, remains problematic. It requires defining the ability to resist what is being pushed as the desired action/choice/practice, in order to make claims that freedom and autonomy remain despite the 'choice architectures' being specifically designed to produce behavioural acts that achieve a certain end.

Nudging appears to have the attributes that concern Lougheed et al. because it is embedded in neoliberal terminology of the market and choice. The aim is to reduce the costs of compliance and be efficient in implementation of policy while assuming this can be achieved leaving preferences untouched and unquestioned. The justification for intervention then becomes one of defining 'goods' where government must correct market failures. Thus a definition of public and private goods arises to which can be added 'common pool resources' and 'toll goods'. These various goods are meant to have inherent properties that create their classifications, although whether something is treated as public or private more often seems cultural, historical and contextual, as well as subject to change due to technology.

In this case what Hukkinen terms 'unconscious behavioural influences' are in large part what others call informal institutions, the accepted norms and conventions of a society. The issue is not then whether to 'nudge', or not, but rather the degree of control over others that is accepted in society within given contexts. That would seem to require a theory of power and institutions that makes explicit the requirements for democratic process. Instead, the individualistic model seems to relegate social ecological transformation to neurology, cognition and behavioural acts.

The appeal of 'nudging' for the neoclassical economist, neoliberals and classic liberals is that coercion is supposedly avoided in the attempt to get people to do what is wanted. The fear that coercion might take place is directed at government intervention, although 'nudging' is in fact most prevalent in society today due to corporate advertising and marketing. What corporations do is not generally seen as problematic amongst such individuals, whilst they are highly suspicious of and hostile to government doing exactly the same, and term this abuse of power and paternalism. Corporate nudging of people

is pervasive and occurs through social media, creating norms of computer and phone use, changing language to corporate-speak (e.g., through branding), subliminal placement of products in films and on television and so on. What the social and psychological literatures around consumerism have revealed over the last decades is how people themselves buy into consumerism and unsustainable practices. In part this is the great success of the marketing departments and their expert psychologist who have targeted self-image, identity formation and in-group selection and done so at ever earlier ages.

Trying to learn from this is what encourages some to argue for extending the in-group (as discussed by Marcus), but Kasperbauer argues that targeting individuals like this will not work for anything substantive in terms of environmental action. The consequentialist reasoning he employs to make this argument (in the context of climate change) requires claiming that individual action fails to be really effective and if this is the case then there is no moral obligation to undertake action. Kasperbauer believes things like 'nudging' achieve only minor behavioural changes that are inconsequential and the emphasis on individual motivation is misplaced. Instead, he believes, transformation should target change in infrastructure and government policy. At the same time this is also seen as problematic because of the competing goals amongst social groups in society and how they emphasise the importance of different 'risks' (e.g., terrorism vs. climate change). The appeal by Kasperbauer to the mythical 'policy maker' to solve such problems offers no substance as to political or institutional mechanisms for change; although neither is there any reason to regard targeting individual responsibility to act on moral grounds, and the need for structural change and policy reform, as being mutually exclusive.

Indeed individuals and their practices are embedded in societal structures and institutions, so both must change together to achieve social ecological transformation. This leads to another aspect of the discussion which concerns the practices that people adopt and maintain (Groves et al., Hukkinen). Practice theory regards change as occurring due to individuals defecting from or engaging in practices on the basis of internal rewards from doing so. Groves et al. dismiss simplistic formulations of individual psychology in practice theory. They demonstrate that participation in particular practices is not simply about instrumental outcomes. They reject regarding practices as third-person explanatory variables and explain how practices matter to subjects. They emphasise that the relationships humans form during their lifetimes create associations that are constitutive of their identity. Through a set of examples, taken from interviews, Groves et al. go on to explain how unsustainable practices are maintained because of a person's psychosocial biography. Attachment is described as helping individuals live with vulnerability and uncertainty, but this also means that removing practices can break attachments and (re)create vulnerability. Agents are formed in part by their approaches to handling

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attachment and this shapes their perspectives on what is desirable and rational. The implications for social ecological transformation are that any policy intervention will involve changing practices that are part of a person's identity. Successful intervention will need to recognise why people are attached to manifestly unsustainable practices.

In the consumer society, where freedom is recast as choice over products, the consumer is supposedly sovereign and intervention in their choices by government is deemed unacceptable by the dominant neoliberal ideology. At the same time corporations construct a hedonic world of material attachment to their products. Social ecological transformation is then a challenge to those attachments and the institutions that reinforce them on a daily basis. Neoliberals and classic liberals claim that all change is supposed to come from well-informed citizens so that intervention is limited to 'education' and information. Yet when the identity of individuals has been formed and captured in a world of corporate associations the hope for independently inspired transformation seems misguided.

Mild reformists who suspect this is the case have advocated 'nudging' people in the right direction. This still makes the claim to being an individualistic and voluntary action approach. Whether the concern for the unconscious manipulation of individuals is legitimate or not in government programmes seems almost beside the point given the extent of corporate nudging that is so prevalent. Certainly in the environmental context the policy seems to be a minimalist government agenda hardly able to address the environmental crisis, and one that is suited to (neo)liberals, although they must then paradoxically admit the necessity of some form of top-down imposition of institutions and norms.

In contrast, those demanding systemic change, who reject the emphasis on the individual volitional actor in a market setting, want major interventions that would require fundamental policy reform and transformation of social and economic institutions. This would have major impacts on the majority of practices in the modern consumerist society. There are then issues as to how constraints are ethically justified and implemented while allowing for human flourishing (Peters et al., 2015). Some are concerned that this will lead to eco-authoritarianism and want to maintain market liberal democracy (Shahar, 2015). However, the choice is not so dichotomous and neither should the reformist position be painted into a caricature. Radical reformists often appeal to bottom-up political action to create the required conditions for transformation. This implies they are also concerned with what motivates individuals and why they fail to act, and even more so because they expect self-transformative action from those embedded within a system that provides them with reassuring messages of security and comfort on the basis of which they create associations that constitute their identity.

In part this reveals the ongoing tension between theories devoted to either structure or agency rather than their interconnection. Environmentalists see

the need for structural reform of the system but require agents to achieve that reform. An agent's identity develops in the context of social and ecological relationships. Thus, Hannis (2015) argues that acknowledging this dependency is a requirement of autonomous flourishing (rather than a constraint upon it). What becomes clear from the selection of papers in this issue of *Environmental Values* is that a set of social relationships (e.g., the role of the State, corporations and social movements) are largely neglected in the literature focused on behavioural change, and that social ecological transformation will require linking all such relationships to a social-psychological understanding of individuals, their practices and attachments.

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