The varieties of 'community' in the transition to low carbon futures

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The agent of change I will talk about today is the 'community'. This paper address community as an actor seeking to manage its environment. Community can be seen as either a collective whole, or as the aggregate of a collection of individuals, or as a particular small scale or area. However it is used, in the 'situated unfolding of social relations', community holds a special place. Whenever it's used, it is more than just a group, or place and yet does contain both these two ideas. Recently community has been seen as an area of untapped research and potential for the required transition to low carbon futures. This paper then looks at community, it will attempt to introduce various schools of literature that have brought the concept of community to bear in their work, and assess how they understand community. Each of these types of literature has talked of the role 'community' can play in the transition to a low carbon future. Yet each of them understands this concept very differently. My guiding question for each of these areas is what is it that they assume (or presume) about community? So we will see 'community' as a niche, as a social innovation, as a grassroots initiative, a special context for individual behaviour change and as a Third Sector Organisation, before concluding on what, if anything, this can tell us about the term, or value of, community.

Community as niche (-innovation)

So first, seeing community as a niche, involves looking at the MLP literatures. The MLP has three levels. At the bottom, micro-level, we have niches, or "niche-innovations" (Geels and Schot 2007:399). Niches are defined as unconventional and create enterprising technologies and practices. Because of their unconventionality, they are sites of innovation, but also limited in their scope, they are by their very nature "small and unstable", "novelties" (Geels & Schot 2007:400, 402). The meso-level consists of a patchwork of regimes, these being more stable and operated on a larger scale than niches. Regimes operate at a higher level than niches and as such take in a wider section of society as part of their construction.

Seeing communities as niches, or niche innovations, then involves seeing them in the nested hierarchy, at the bottom scale. However much they are novel and innovative, they are contained within this hierarchy. It also comes with normative assumptions as to what constitutes 'success' for such niches. Success is seen here as a growing in scale, challenging directly the existing regime and seeking to take their place at the mainstream. Niches that alternatively seek to ignore, or undermine existing regime practices are not

represented in this view of community. Also, niches that retain no desire to be successful in conventional ways aren't included either.

In this conception, community here can be a collective, a progressive mobilising force. A willingness to step outside of existing relationships and orderings of life. But only so far as they then step back into the mainstream. Seeing community initiatives as niche-innovations involves seeing them as strategic entities. With a desire to grow and take their place in the mainstream. This view though removes much agency from the community initiatives, by talking of 'path dependency' (Berkhout 2002) and 'lock-in' (Unruh 2002; Foxon & Pearson 2008). The community is thus structured by landscape and regime forces, and exists towards impacting it. For this geographer though, this is a far too abstracted an analysis to ever sit well. Viewing community initiatives as niches robs them of their social particularity. Issues of space and place are not relevant for niches. (Or at least are no more than incidental factors.) How then can this be a topic for geographical analysis? Community groups, certainly bottom-up community groups, can emerge in specific contexts to serve specific needs, and when those needs are met or alter, such community groups can fragment, morph or even disappear. By seeing 'community' as devoid of context, it does violence to the singularity of such community initiatives.

Social innovation

These innovations are social as they shift the focus from end user, to a locally specific context where new forms of energy production and distribution, can be experimented with – alongside the social arrangements that make this possible. It is this experimenting with existing technology, in tweaked social settings, that alters the relationship between the infrastructure, practices and habits (Shove 2003). Social innovations then are not technologically focused, yet they do make use of emerging and existing technologies. They are concerned about reframing social habits and practices as much as in placing themselves as the 'early adopters' of new technological innovations.

Community as a grassroots initiative

Another way to characterise these initiatives is as grassroots initiatives. Grassroots innovations emerged from the literature on niches in the MLP, coming from STS. For Seyfang, grassroots initiatives are *"networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development and sustainable consumption; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved"* (2009: 64). There is the sense here of grassroots organisation coming up from below,

emerging from the shadows to take their place in civil society. Rather than waiting for the mainstream to come round to green ideas.

So with grassroots initiatives, there is more of a spatial analysis, more of a sense of each examples singularity. Yet, still the normative promise that they will grow to impact the mainstream. However, with many such grassroots examples, it can seem far-fetched to see them aim for this level of impact. It seems to me they have two options. First, they form communities of communities. Here umbrella groups may shelter emerging communities and help them to feel part of a progressive coalition. (For example the Transition Network can be understood as fulfilling this role.) Alternatively they themselves may have impact, but not directly, at least not tangibly. They could have symbolic value, leaving behind an inspirational story, or example of how someone did something differently. For example, in the same way people talk of groups such as the levelers, or the luddites as inspirational examples.

Community here is characterised by 'small-scale, local activity'. To see 'community' as a grassroots innovation is primarily, if not purely, to see it as a scalar category. Community here is also a place, a local place, where things are done differently to an 'out there' mainstream. Of course, by defining themselves against this mainstream, they are embodying it just as strongly as if they set out to copy it directly. Yet, already grassroots innovations have concern for the local particularity of each emerging community initiative.

Community as a context for behaviour change

Now I want to move away from literature centered on, or derived from STS and the MLP. Recently there have been many other writers extolling the virtues of 'community' as a way to aid the transition towards low carbon futures from both policy makers (CSE 2007; IPPR 2010; RSA 2010) but also academics (Jackson 2005, Middlemiss 2009). Within these I identify here a trend emerging where the attempt is to affect individual behaviour change, albeit through the medium of community.

So this recent spate of literature recognises the untapped potential of 'community' to help pro-environmental behaviours and practices. Community here is seen as a support network, encouraging each other to collectively help reduce the communities' environmental impact, aggregately. Here, the individuals who make up the community have common aims and values. This is centered on the long-standing assumption of community as a homogenous entity, with normative assumption of what 'being in' the community means. Some initiatives, such as a Carbon Conversations course, seek to develop explicitly pro-environmental assumption as to what being in the community means. For Carbon Conversations, the participants choose to 'opt-in' to a course designed to reduce their carbon footprint. They

stay in, with the sole aim of weaning themselves off their addiction to oil. This is the uniting factor that holds the 'community' together.

For others though, the normative assumption or homogeneity doesn't have to be an environmental one. Baldwin (2010) discusses an initiative at Ipswich Town football club where supporters, *"Saving* [their] *energy for the Blues",* tapped into the supporters common desire to see Ipswich succeed, and sought to win money for their team for new players. They did this again, by adopting individual behaviour change pledges, motivated by the thought that their self-sacrifice was doing some greater good for the whole.

Typical of this area of literature, Jackson has talked about the untapped potential for communities to be used as a vehicle for low carbon lifestyles. *"Individual efforts to live more simply are more likely to succeed in a supportive community"* (Jackson 2009: 150) and gives examples such as the Findhorn Foundation, where the aim is declared to be *"living simpler, more sustainable lives".* Again, the construction of this kind of community relies on normative assumptions and the homogenous nature of the shared goal.

There is also the non-human and more-than-human elements that make up certain communities that is left to one side in this reading of community. A less individualistic approach might take into account the technologies, infrastructures, sense of place, spirituality, and peoples memories and biographies, to name just a few. These all impact - subtly or otherwise - on the community feel, and these are all left out.

Community synonyms

Each of these different schools of literature has a different way to mobilize or envision the concept of community. There are some similarities, for example, in the link between small-scale and community exists to some extent in all the examples seen here. There are differences though, and these might be best seen if we try to search for what the most suitable synonym might be in each example. The niche is seen as being in the early stages of development, community here is fragile, embryonic and filled with potential. As a social innovation, communities are novel, experimenting, vanguard. For Grassroots innovations, community is primarily a scalar category. An apt synonym here could be 'local'. Community as a context for individual behaviour change, primarily looks to the potential for an echo chamber of homogeneous people to feed off each others' ideas, keeping in check and pushing people to beliefs and behaviours they wouldn't get to by themselves. Community here can be seen as an 'ego-corrective'.

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