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Quiet Activism

Climate Action at the Local Scale

Wendy Steele
Jean Hillier
Diana MacCallum
Jason Byrne
Donna Houston

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“Alongside the depressing reports of climate breakdown, *Quiet Activism* is a book you must read. It is an essential reminder that we need to approach each other with compassion, use local knowledge and build an ethics of care if we are to build meaningful and transformative climate action in these troubling times”.

—Paul Chatterton, *Professor of Urban Futures, School of Geography, University of Leeds, UK*

“At last, a book that carefully explores everyday practices and the local as spaces of transformative potential in climate activism. The focus on quiet forms of change, creative disruption, generative acts, small scale collectivity and attention to care is inspiring and yet also pragmatic. This book is full of hopeful possibilities and examples of people responding to the climate emergency”.

—Jenny Pickerill, *Professor of Environmental Geography, Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, UK*

“This is an important book with a vital and persuasive argument. It makes the case for the power of collective local action, providing compelling examples of a climate activism that is modest, caring and socially innovative, building enduring commitments and pathways for transformation that transcend the individual. Quiet activism is not enough on its own, but this book makes absolutely clear why it should not be dismissed or undervalued”.

—Gordon Walker, *Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK*

“The authors do a great job of highlighting the critical need for *Quiet Activism*: the intimate, embodied acts of collective disruption, subversion, creativity and care that individuals and groups are practicing at the local scale. In doing so, they convincingly foreground the transformative power of socially innovative activities and initiatives in response to the brutal realities of our climate crisis.”

—Professor Julian Agyeman, *Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, USA*

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*To all those working in their communities at the local scale
to involve, engage and inspire people to act “now” to address
the climate emergency
– you are not alone.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge that we live and work on the unceded lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and as uninvited guests, we pay our sincere respects to the Traditional Custodians and Elders past, present and emerging.

This project builds on work that the project team have been developing over a number of years—collectively and separately—in the fields of climate justice, environmental action, geography, urban planning, politics and policy and place-based social innovation analysis. Central to this agenda is a shared interest in how we can re-imagine our experience of, and responses to, the climate-changed city. We see action on climate change as an urgent, cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral whole-of-society agenda. Our emphasis is on climate action as the “wilful hope” and “care-full practices” of everyday activism at the local scale. This for us is quiet activism—the socially innovative, modest yet powerful acts of localized activity, care and community. We argue in this book that quiet activist practices offer up powerful pathways for local communities to act hopefully in the face of the climate emergency.

The award of an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (ARC DP150100299) on “Socially innovative adaptation to climate change at the local scale” provided an opportunity to extend and deepen our research within the Australian context. The project was led by RMIT’s Centre for Urban Research (CUR) in partnership with Macquarie University, Curtin University, The University of Tasmania and Griffith University. The research investigated the practices and framings of community groups, NGOs and local governments in the creation of local adaptation

strategies. Through case-studies, interviews and focus groups in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Perth culminating in a national stakeholder forum and public facing website (see climateadaptationaustralia.com.au), the ambition of the project was to use these understandings to direct public and policy attention towards the need for building social innovation and capacity at the local scale in response to the climate change crisis.

At the heart of the research were the many participants who generously contributed their time and experiences. As co-producers of knowledge and learning, we are deeply grateful for the passion, creativity and commitment of the participants in our online survey, interviews and focus groups from across community, government and the private sectors. This includes: all of the presenters at our national stakeholder symposium including Fiona Armstrong, Guy Abrahams, Jo Bower, Ken Baird, Robert Enker, James Duggie, Geoff Love, Dorean Erhardt, Bill Forrest, Dianna McDonald, Shani Graham, Phil Ingamells, Ryan Quinn, Greg Hunt, Joseph Kelly, Pradesh Tamiah, Griff Morris, Karl Mallon, Paul Sirant and Rory Martin; other individuals highlighted in the book including Ann Noble, Alan Pears, Cate Ware and Tim Darby and organisations across sectors and Australian states including Marrickville Council and Renew (the Alternative Technology Association), the Elwood Floods Action Group (EFLAG), RedWaste, Climate for Change, Green Cross Australia, Environment House and the *ReNew* Initiatives, GECKO, Climarte, One Planet, CANWin, the Mossvale Community Garden, Darebin Solar Saver and Ecoburbia. To everyone who participated in this research project—thank you!

Research is an extended community of entangled practices, and in this we were fortunate to have Katelyn Samson as our project manager extraordinaire, and research associates and assistants Mary O'Halloran, Tom Overton Skinner, Ryan Quinn and Jayden Holmes. We also benefited greatly from the support of our expert reference group of Professor Robyn Dowling, Doug Perdrie, Dr. Michelle Maloney, Huxley Lawler, Brendan Sydes, Campbell Watts, Melanie Bainbridge and Irina Cattalini chaired by Professor Hartmut Fuenfgeld; and the concomitant research of Dr. Lisa de Kleyn who completed her PhD offering a situated approach to environmental justice in Toolangi State Forest funded by the project.

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CHAPTER 1

Addressing the Climate Emergency at the Local Scale

Abstract *This chapter* introduces “quiet activism” and its relationship to social innovation, adaptation and other forms of activism with an embodied ethic of care. This includes an emphasis on the importance of the local scale in addressing the climate emergency and other crisis; cases of socially innovative practices and partnerships from Australia alongside international examples; and critical engagement with the role of quiet activism as a transformative conceptual frame and contemporary practice in climate change. We are interested in the diverse ways this transformative potential of quiet activism can create more equitable and sustainable futures.

Keywords Quiet activism • Social innovation • Climate emergency • Sustainability • Local

WHY QUIET?

As I write humanity stands at a fork in the road. Unless we act decisively to phase out the use of fossil fuels, global temperatures will exceed a 2 degree rise above the pre-industrial levels in a few decades, and we will risk committing every human to climatic shocks and catastrophes that will destroy our civilization and precipitate mass extinctions.¹

This book focuses on the potential and possibilities of socially innovative community responses to the climate emergency at the local scale. We

are particularly interested in co-produced forms of local climate action which we describe as “quiet activism”. The creative and collaborative ways local-scale climate action reflects the ‘extra-ordinary measures taken by ordinary people’.² Climate change has intensified the need for communities to find meaningful and transformative ways to better address the sustainability of their environments. This includes critical engagement with how and in what ways novel social practices and partnerships emerge between people, organisations, institutions, governance arrangements and ecosystems. The aim of this book is twofold: to highlight the transformative power of socially innovative activities and initiatives in response to the climate crisis; and to critically explore how different individuals and groups undertake climate action as quiet activism—the intimate and embodied acts of collective disruption, subversion, creativity and care at the local scale.

There has been a longstanding feminist critique of normative visions of activist behaviour as vocal and antagonistic forms of protest versus more modest, embodied acts of care, connection and creativity as part of everyday life, places and spaces. A range of literature in a range of contexts (although typically feminist) has sought to draw attention to the power of small, purposeful everyday practices of resistance and rebellion, the politics of making and doing, and the ways in which this produces both the means and conditions through which alternative values can be explored and shared.³ Much of the focus in this diverse body of work is on the local, informal, socially engaged nature and deployment of subversive strategies and tactics: for example women’s work at home, and work in the academy to support and advocate for women’s rights and reconfigure the nature of “work”;⁴ or creative activity and engagement with local place-making, equity and sustainability issues through guerrilla gardening, yarn bombing, counterfeit crochet, punk DIY, pop-up initiatives and tactical urbanism.⁵

From a very different perspective comes Deborah Bird Rose’s (2004) powerful description of decolonisation in *Reports from a Wild Country* set within the settler-colonial history (and present) of Australia. She describes the need for practical, localised engagement with the “here and now” as an ethical encounter and politics of entanglement with past, present and future. Rose highlights the description of the invader Captain Cook by Hobbles Danayarri, a now deceased Yarralin lawman and community leader. ‘As Hobbles liked to say, Captain Cook was the real wild one. He failed to recognize the Law, destroyed people and country, lived by damage, and promoted cruelty’.⁶ Rose offers up a situated understanding

based on her discussion with Indigenous elders. ‘*Quiet* country stands in contrast to the wild: man-made and cattle-made’.⁷

Climate change as a pathway towards reconciliation and regeneration also invites us to bear witness “here and now” to the unsustainable nature of current development trajectories and the on-going legacies that co-constitute modernity’s “developmentalities”.⁸ This depends on moving beyond the illusions of a comfortable life to being present (a witness) to the moral claims being offered without retreating to a position in which the ‘current contradictions and suffering will all be left behind justified by references to the future’.⁹ A future orientation, Rose argues within the context of settler-colonialism and climate change, ‘has been a major tool deflecting us from moral responsibility’.¹⁰ An alternative approach is a regenerative politics that seeks to re-shape the nature of relationships between people, place and environments from the ground up. The emphasis is focused instead on the localised knowledge and capabilities that lead to transformative change, without defaulting to a distant future imaginary, or an escape from everyday accountabilities and responsibilities.

This book offers conceptual and practical insights into the challenges and opportunities of quiet activism as a local-scale response to the climate emergency. In particular we critically address the tendency to frame “quiet” as being at best a precursor to political action, and at worst disempowering or conservative—reinforcing a neoliberal agenda of individualised action and responsibility. Our focus is on the transformative potential of local, socially engaged, subversive strategies and tactics, and the ways in which these can help to create new social relations and different urban imaginaries. The intention is not to privilege or polarise quiet activism above or against other forms of social movement, political protest or climate activism. Instead, our aim is to highlight the need for, and importance of, a diversity of climate *activism/s*, and reinforce the vital role of “quiet activism” within this: the co-produced nature of small-scale disruption, ingenuity, creativity and political craft-building already underway at the local scale to address the climate emergency.

WHY LOCAL?

In the trifold crisis of climate change, Coronavirus and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement the need for transformative societal change has refocused attention on the importance of the local scale. This is where many people see and feel (i.e. “live”) the multiple effects of climate change

and crisis. These everyday experiences and encounters unfold in local places that are important sites for thinking about how the bigger stories of change and disruption are experienced, lived, negotiated and responded to. The innovativeness and local appropriateness of local scale approaches to action on climate change tend to be undervalued or discounted.¹¹ Given we now live in a climate emergency, surprisingly little is known about why this occurs and what alternatives exist.

The task of addressing climate change is most acutely felt at the local scale to reduce vulnerability and build social innovation and community capacity in response. This is where international, national and state policies are translated into on-the-ground practices that help people and places better prepare for, adapt to and mitigate against the impacts of climate change (e.g. sea level rise, flooding, heatwaves, higher intensity storms, etc.). Government authorities, tasked with leading local adaptation, are often caught in an implementation trap. Responsible for issues of land use and environmental management, local governments can face daunting investor/constituent pressure and potential litigation over decisions associated with land zoning and development. Governments can become caught in an impasse where they are simultaneously both taking action on climate change and being risk-averse, seeking to avoid decisions and actions that may heighten their exposure to future liability.

Effective action on climate change is challenging governments where formal responses to climate change are dominated by technical risk management approaches.¹² There are many examples of local governments declaring “climate emergencies” and doing lots of diverse work at a very local level, not just technically but involving communities in gardens, solar power schemes and so on. These approaches can have great merit but adopting generic risk-assessment tools can lead to the development of plans that fall short of meeting local concerns and fail to effectively incorporate local knowledge and skills.¹³ For example, risk-based plans are resource intensive and fixed in technical analysis. Such plans can be expensive to implement and require specialist expertise making them difficult to apply to changing circumstances, especially if municipal budgets are strained.¹⁴ Whilst many local governments have undertaken risk assessments and know the challenges they face, they are often unable and/or unwilling to take the action needed to reduce carbon emissions quickly and implement climate mitigation and adaptation initiatives that are innovative and equitable.¹⁵

In this book we focus on local-scale stories that demonstrate how barriers to action on climate change have been broken down, and where new opportunities for collective action have been identified and developed. Effective responses to climate change involve local practices in governance, civics and science-community-industry collaborations that work to challenge the current post-political environment and highlight the different pathways and portals needed to address the climate emergency. We seek to draw critical attention to both the localised responses to the climate change emergency that seek to support and promote environmental sustainability, and the ways in which we can learn from different modes of community action and resistance to create new knowledge that supports and sustains social innovation and capacity building at the local scale.

Local practices are situated in particular contexts and circumstances, and grounded in particular places and spaces through emerging partnerships, initiatives and actions. They do not adhere to any one model or outcome. In this regard, these diverse and creative local climate actions, initiatives and experiments are contingent and open to continual, collaborative work. A common thread in this book is a focus on what people care about, and how “care-full” community practices are located within everyday practices of connected reciprocity and responsibility to address climate change. The diverse ways of interweaving climate action at the local scale raise questions such as what it means to be an activist, or “do activism”; and the implications for building greater capacity for sustainable living are foregrounded. This contrasts with other types of action on climate change such as the *Extinction Rebellion*, which seeks to deploy a very different kind of activism as part of a mass global movement.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

Given the limitations of existing technology *and* institutions to respond adequately to climate change (and other grand challenges of the twenty-first century), “innovation” has become a key buzzword in policy and academic circles.¹⁶ Contradictory pressures can lead to inertia and create gaps in meeting human needs; however, these gaps—while often exclusionary—can also constitute spaces in which innovation can thrive;¹⁷ “lines of flight”, in Deleuzian terms,¹⁸ for emergent transformational potential. More specifically, since the early 2000s we have observed a rapidly increasing interest in *social* innovation.¹⁹ While we recognise that this is a contested concept,²⁰ we use it here to acknowledge that ‘innovation in social

relations' is just as important—if not more important to confronting the threat of climate change,—as technologies and new investment opportunities.²¹

Social innovation is an alternative approach to the constraints that risk management appears to place on the scope for adaptation responses and their implementation. This type of innovative practice typically entails the creation of new organisational structures, service delivery modes, products and activities that efficiently and effectively meet social needs or provide social benefits by grounding them in the relations and experiences of excluded groups.²² In our research we see the potential of social innovation as a form of empowerment that fosters and enables new forms of cooperation to provide for previously unmet needs. The practices associated with social innovation are not only “innovative” in creating solutions to otherwise intractable problems, but also more inclusive and empowering than traditional approaches, enabling new actors to contribute to solutions.

However, the role of socially innovative practices—particularly within the context of action on climate change at the local scale—is poorly understood. Social innovation in practice does not separate institutional means from material ends. Rather, it responds to needs (whether material, cultural, ecological, etc.) unmet by state and market through the adoption of new/experimental social practices and institutional forms that provide for democratic and solidarity-based processes.²³ Socially innovative strategies thus can lead to *collective* action; and can create the conditions for broader and/or deeper social change.²⁴

In our research on climate action at the local scale within the Australian context, the participants all recognised the centrality of social relations to a liveable future in a changed climate. They are aware of the importance of inter-scalar dynamics between the local, where those relations are shaped by proximity, and the effects of crisis are most clearly manifest; and the state and the global, where the political-economic causes of the crisis reside. Their initiatives attempt to navigate these dynamics in socially innovative ways in the face of tensions and contradictions which, though quite specific to each place and organisation, have striking thematic resonances with what we describe in this book as “quiet activism”—the everyday practices undertaken by ordinary people to address the climate emergency. Our research focus was the suburban heartlands of Australia's major cities.