Gerontocracies of affect: how the 'geographies of austerity' have reshaped elder environmental radicalism

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Think for a moment of your own perspective on ageing. Are elders, in your eyes, from your experience, venerable, wise, connected and connecting? Or are they insular, out of touch, myopic? Are the elderly the ones who got us into our current global environmental mess; or have these elders too been enmeshed within processes which have restricted their ability to self-determine – to choose a different way to form communities, to utilise resources or to develop economies? We need to pause for a moment to question why age in these neoliberalised times increasingly bears a stigma throughout the global North.

Our ability to imagine environmental radicals is connected intimately with age; the presumption being that the radical young are doers – and that the radical old are thinkers. Within this chapter I ask you to consider why our older community members are often excluded from scholarship concerning environmental activism. Moving from a reflection on our responses to the possibility of elder environmental activism to a focus on empirical research on this subject undertaken within the River Adur valley in West Sussex in the UK, this chapter invites you to appreciate the radical environmental interventions, actions and performances of our community elders currently being undertaken.

It is suggested in this chapter that it is central government funding cuts to local authority spending which has prompted a new wave in radical elder activism. Kitson et al have described the widespread public spending contraction in many developed economies in response to the 2007 global financial crisis as exhibiting 'geographies of austerity' (2011:292) with negative impacts felt more keenly in certain geographic hotspots. Invariably these hotspots are those spaces where economic 'productivity' was already low, making investment less rewarding. This is especially true for rural communities with older populations. Less public money for road maintenance, education, social housing, waterways management and environmental stewardship has had a negative impacts on people's everyday lives. As explored below, the fieldwork reveals the different inventive, collaborative and unexpected ways that community elders have worked together to champion the needs of their local environment; and in particular their natural spaces. What they have created can be described as 'gerontocracies of affect' – freeform elder lead consortia based around an appreciation for a 'right to nature' and custodianship of the environment.

Deep ecology, Eco-Socialism, Eco feminism and the rise of the elder environmentalists.

The adverse position of elders within societies heavily influenced by neoliberal regimes is explored within a range of literatures (Heller 2003; Goerres 2009, EC 2007, Segal 2013, Whelehan and Gwynne 2014). To age is to decline, to become unproductive, to lessen valuable contributions to societies which are increasingly pivoted on speed, dexterity and adaptability. Zygmunt Bauman's work captures this mobility by describing it as 'liquid modernity' (2013); everything is in flux, moving, changing – our economies, our

environment, our connections with others, our embodied selves. As a result, the tropes of the young – flexibility, responsiveness, vigour – are elevated, whereas the connotations of ageing are negative. Age classifies, and as it does so it limits and proscribes who can and who should not or cannot, participate in modern society and in what ways.

Yet like all blanket categorisations, 'age' as a generic descriptor fails to capture the subtleties of individual life experiences. Indeed radical democratic theory is concerned with exploring the agent as a corporeal entity (Mouffe 2005; Laclau, 2001, 2005). We are all immanent radicals, with multiple identities and multiple capacities to act, both inhibited and enabled by the bodies that frame us. The radical agent is embodied; perceives, senses, considers, acts through the body – we cannot separate mind and body. That mind and body ages over time consequently reshapes how the radical subject may act. This concept of the corporeal is laboured here, because the reality of the ageing body as a fundamental aspect of political processes, constructing and determining the efficacy of the radical agent appears overlooked in most literature.

As embodied selves we all age differently and this process is responsive to our environment. Not everyone has the luxury of ageing well; the global North enjoys asymmetrical opportunities than the global South, and even within this categorisation there are stark differences of health and well-being strongly associated with income and class (Dorling 2015). How we age reflects our socio-economic status. Further, neoliberal ideology embeds the notion that those with poor health or with no financial resources in retirement are negligent; they have failed to live well, to prepare themselves for later life. Lynne Segal (2013) reflects in her recent work on age and ageing thatas an older feminist she is able to

critically review that we become shoe-horned into participating in civic and economic life in particular ways as we grow older. Over forty years ago Simone de Beauvoir (2006) first noted how ‘age’ was not viewed as a suitable academic subject area and persuaded to change her research’s focus from ‘old age’ to ‘the coming of age’. Ageing is a process that sits firmly within neoliberal discourses of power and agency. Taken further, if how well we age is connected to the quality of our lived environments, and to our socio-economic status, we begin to clearly see how elder environmental radicalism is resonant across generations in the pursuit of alternative political futures.

Some of the most radical environmentalists of our time are now elders, still writing, still campaigning, still fighting to raise awareness of our ecological precarity -Wangari Maathai (2010) , James Lovelock (1995), Jonathan Porritt (1986), Gro Harlem Brundtland (1987) and Vandana Shiva (2016), Gary Synder (1995, 2004). Their work is foundational to the ‘Rights to nature’ enquiry, considering social justice issues and sustainable futures in relationships of mutual correspondence. These authors were amongst the first to develop political ecology theories and methodologies.

Their work continues. Operating below the radar are a cohort of elders who care very deeply about a range of environmental issues they view as calamitous. The origins of the empirical work discussed below reveals the way age is renders activists near-invisible, as the participants who were involved in the study only emerged as radical elders as the data collection stage progressed. They were not a target group for this research – they rather emerged through the various pieces of activism that they were engaged with, but which had not been previously identified.

Making themselves known: the undercover activists

During 2015 I undertook a piece of empirical research along the River Adur valley in West Sussex in the UK. The overall objective of the research was to understand in what ways climate change science research dissemination has been successful in communicating the scale and scope of emergent environmental impacts to non-scientific communities. To enable this, the research sought to interrogate at a micro level how environmental changes are perceived by non-scientific communities. It also sought to establish if these experiences are framed within the discourse of climate change. To achieve this end the research focused on changes to local water environments; alterations to rainfall regimes, incidences of flooding or drought events, alterations in water quality. The research also examined how all these factors may positively or negatively impact on local biodiversity. One river catchment was selected, the River Adur, and interviews with people living and working in three waterside villages were undertaken. The research utilised qualitative fieldwork interviews, participant observation and 'walking and talking' ethnographic practises. These methods sought to capture the range of practices, opinions and behaviours expressed by respondents when asked to reflect on 'changing local water environments'. By encouraging local residents to define the specific issues regarding changes in their local water environments that they wanted to discuss, the respondents lead the topic range of discussions, not the researcher. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, which was undertaken to access respondents who were deemed likely to have insights into water resources management due to their professional, recreational or civic water related interests, or those whose domestic residences situated them close to local water resources. To structure the

conversations respondents were invited to talk widely about their memories, interventions and actions towards changing local water environments in whatever context appealed to them.

The results were fascinating and took the research into a completely new direction; highlighting how political austerity has adversely impacted on elders, and the activism they have undertaken in direct response. Although the research did not actively set out to engage mainly with elders, and despite approaching a wide age range of potential respondents at the recruitment stage, it was an older cohort that agreed to participate, with most respondents over retirement age. Elders that I spoke to framed their activism both in terms of storytelling and through relationships of affect; their actions had a physical and emotional imprint on the world around them.

Through exploring both the range of local knowledges evident within a specific geography of place connected with water resources, together with experiences of lived time, memories and future prospects, it was possible to establish respondents' narrative sense of their world (Newton and Parfitt 2013). Within the UK some work has been undertaken to explore the connectivity between people and their local waterscapes (Strang 2004), though this is generally framed within a specific context such as flooding (Lane et al 2011, McEwan et al 2017), drought (Dessai and Simms 2010) or water quality (Faulkner et al 2001). To capture the intimacy of the stories of people who live and reside alongside their local water resources the research approach was to select three interconnected riparian villages, all sharing one riverside, but with their own distinct array of springs, ponds, sewers, drains,

streams, ditches and brooks (see Figure 1 below) which collectively make up their local water resources.

Figure 1: The three riparian villages of Steyning, Bramber and Upper Beeding, West Sussex, UK.

The following section of the chapter outlines three respondent stories that are exemplary of

the range of insights regarding water resources sustainability in the face of austerity, shared with the author. The stories, and an interrogation of their usefulness in exploring the concept of 'gerontocracies of affect' is offered in the next section.

It's a house; but it isn't a home

Talking to people who have experienced flooding in their homes is always painful. The primal fear that fast moving water engenders means that though the trauma subsides, it never leaves. Jan and David had built their home in 1987, on the grounds of a property they had moved into in 1976. With their children now having left home, the new property was designed to be future-proofed; to still be accessible as they aged. In other words, a home for life. In winter 2000/2001 a period of heavy rainfall within the region lead to the water table rising quickly, but unseen, under the ground. Over the two decades in which they had lived on their property they had never experienced any flooding of their home until the night of January 18th 2001. In just a few short hours their entire downstairs floor was flooded – but not from a burst river bank or the stream, but from a rising water table which leads to the water 'bubbling' up through the ground and into their home.

When they called the emergency services they were told that no help was coming on the basis that 'there's nowhere to pump the water to'. They asked what they should do and were told to go and stay with friends, wait for the water to recede and then call their home insurers. In other words, the state is no longer there to assist. As a homeowner you should have the requisite provisions in place to protect yourself. As Jan and David put it, this was the first moment they realised that they were 'on their own'. This feeling grew as they pursued both recovery of losses from their insurance company and as their next premium

arrived. Their insurance company dragged their heels, did not employ reputable builders and then quadrupled the couple's insurance premium. This is financially difficult for those on a fixed income. Months of hard negotiations, faulty repairs and sleepless nights followed.

This is the sharp end of neoliberalism. In many ways this couple are quintessential middle Englanders. They have run their local business together, raised three children, remained self-sufficient in terms of contributing to the welfare state system but never taking benefits, building their own home to use as financial collateral for later years. Yet the flood, and the realisation that there was no state to support them created a rupture in their personal and political vision. They realised that the mantra of the 'resilient' subject was nothing more than a call to be self-sufficient, even when the scale of response needed was beyond that of the individual.

Jan and David's response was to get political. They joined the local Flood Action Defence Group (FADG), which monitors river, drain and water levels in the local area, as well as trains residents to respond to flood events; they now network with local community members to petition the next tier of local governance, the District Council, to undertake infrastructural works to keep water flowing off the land to lessen the risk of flooding, and they both participate in their local parish council to discuss widely changes in local building development in their community and further along the catchment to prevent exacerbating potential flooding. They have also begun to think widely about climate change and how the ways that they, and their children, live impacts on the environment.

Although in their early 70s, Jan and David's experience has lead them to view life very differently. There is some regret that their community engagement activities had to wait until they had retired. Their house has lost significant value since the flood and they question what the hard work 'was all for'. They are angry that the current political landscape is immune to the different needs of the elderly, particularly the rural elderly. But rather than feel vulnerable, this recognition has enabled them to take action – to use their time to argue against the 'resilience' agenda so beloved of neoliberal perspectives. Instead they are more engaged with their neighbours – knocking on doors as part of the FADG has lead them to mix with neighbours from different social classes they would never have otherwise met, and to have a different outlook regarding other lifestyles and approaches. The 'eco-warriors' that they felt hallmarked the 1980s as trouble makers are now viewed as prescient scryers of things to come.

What's clear is the importance of home, of building an identity in a locality, and how easily that can be shaken. The austerity politics that have removed the support structures for householders in the UK, and left them reliant on profit seeking insurance companies and their own self-reliance has, at least for some, sparked the genesis of activism. Even the introduction of a government backed flood insurance scheme, named 'Flood Re', initiated in April 2016, is only partially helpful for householders such as Jan and David as there is a strict criteria concerning which properties are defined as at a 'high risk' of flooding. Jan and David are now networked with other FADG volunteers across the region; they are now embedded within the fabric of their local community and their political awareness is burgeoning as they begin to connect their life choices with wider environmental changes.

This elder radicalism is rooted in an appreciation of time. Both present time, making the best of good health and a sound financial retirement provision, and past time – reflecting back on what makes a 'good life'. There is also the issue of legacy – of not so much handing on to your own family, but to future generations, your role in what Jason Moore has described as 'the web of life' (2015:178). It is possible to say that this deliberation on time refines our understanding of the ways in which neoliberalism impacts on the natural world and on our own lives, as we reflect on human life spans and ecological life cycles working independently and together, in relationships of co-construction.

Jan and David are just one couple who have re-orientated their perspectives towards environmental activism. I met others too during the fieldwork who have become involved with local politics because of changes in their local environment, and an acute sense of how modern lives have pushed them away from themselves, their families and their communities. This next story builds upon this critique of the impacts of neoliberalism on local communities; and their fight back.

We won't stop until they listen to us

Cary and Philip moved to Trinton Lane seven years ago when they retired and wanted to downsize to a pretty cottage nestled under the chalklands of the South Downs National Park. They looked forward to dog walking and gardening during their retirement in their new home. Not any more. They are now leading a resident's campaigning group, involved in petitions and direct action, crowdfunding to raise money to pay for engineering reports and to create signage on their local highways.

Cary and Philip moved to the lane in part because of its natural spring, running downhill alongside the road. Traditionally village children would sail home-made paper boats here. Over the last few years however during autumn and winter the spring morphs into a debris laden cascade, heavy with soil sediments and lose road surface aggregate. Local residents blame the changes on local government spending cuts. Now, there is less money to pay for highways maintenance and drainage clearance, leading to water billowing across the road and deteriorating the lower grade, ageing tarmac. Added to this, residents claim that it is poor land management by the farming estate at the top of the lane that also contributes to soil run off during rainy periods. Local homeowners also assert that large delivery vehicles servicing the estate use the lane as a 'rat run' further compound road surface deterioration, leading to tarmac chippings smashing car windows and pools of water washing away the mortar in garden walls. The 6000 acre farming estate is owned by one ancestral landowner who denies singular responsibility for the lane's decrepitude. Postal workers refuse to deliver mail here and other service providers refuse to service the lane's residents whilst stagnant water remains on the lane.

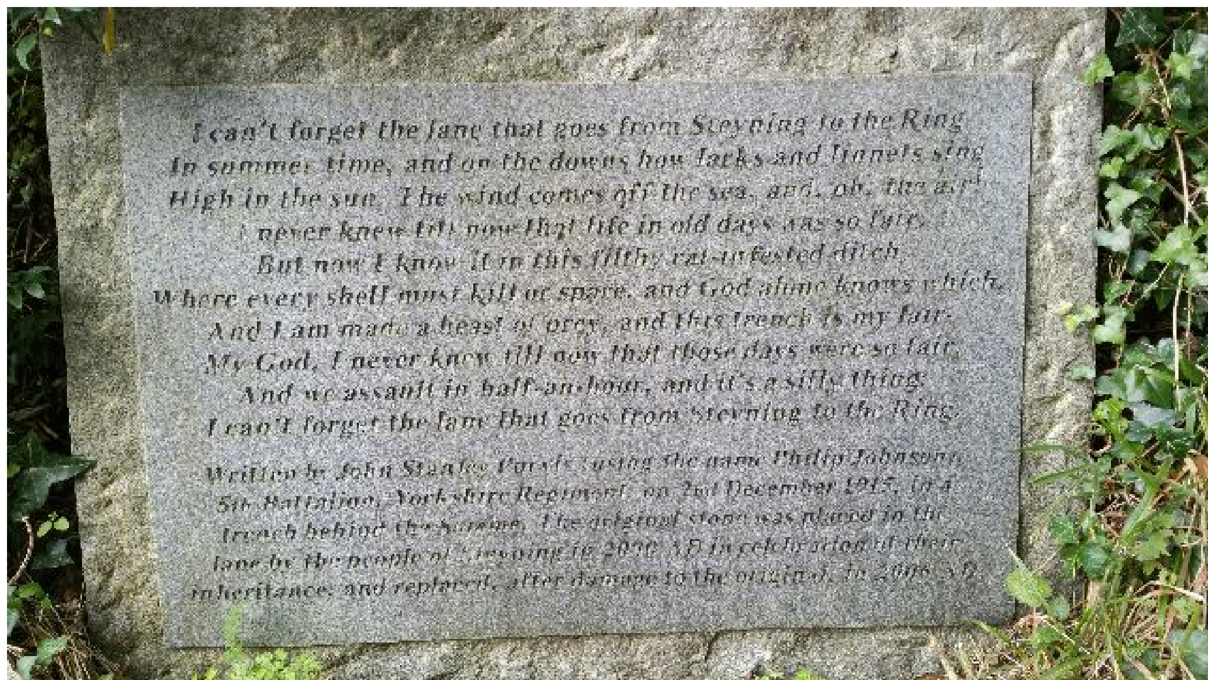
The lane's residents are angry. They pay their taxes, they support local business yet no-one is helping them pay for their broken car windows, their falling garden walls, the noise and worry of large trucks ploughing along this quiet country road. Having banded together to petition the local council, the residents have recognised the need to unite and take action amongst themselves. They invited local newspapers to document the debris they sweep up in huge piles on the roadside and to photograph the damage caused by the pooling water

and heavy machinery traffic. They present talks and information campaigns at local events to persuade other residents to take action about the ways their own domestic lives are impacted by government cuts. Reflecting on their own experiences has broadened the residents' own understanding of the structural nature of their issues. For many this has led to a late onset political awakening. Their experiences highlight that government funding cuts impacts rural spaces differentially. They now perceive an asymmetry between rural and urban economies. Rural spaces receive less investment than their urban counterparts – and this is identified by residents as due to ageing rural populations being deemed economically unproductive and, hence, politically unimportant.

The water becomes a metaphor for things drifting apart – all the assurances they worked and paid their taxes for, no longer reflect their lived reality. These elder residents, the majority from the campaign group that I met were in their mid to late 60s and early 70s, see at close hand the way the environment has been devalued. These insights have crystallised for many the problems that the younger generation now inherit. Rather than an acceptance there is an anger. The environmental campaigning which brought the residents together is now also a political campaign. Cary and Philip now connect financial austerity with a wider 'politics of austerity' whereby the state is retracting responsibility for a range of tasks, using public spending cuts to justify further implementing neoliberal policies.

'Think local, act global' could summarise their approach. I was struck by the multiple ways they were trying to galvanise support – blog writing, crowd funding, presenting and petitioning the parish and local councils – to change land management practices and return the lane to a quiet country path leading up to the downland. A reminder of the longstanding

character of the lane, and the range of biodiversity it used to hold, is captured half way up the lane, within a poem inscribed on a stone tablet embedded in the wall:



The poem, written by a British soldier, John Stanley Parvis, in the trenches during the First World War reads:

I can't forget the lane that goes from Steyning to the Ring

In summer time and on the downs how larks and linnets sing

High in the sun. The wind comes off the sea, and oh the air!

I never knew till now that life in old days was so fair.

But now I know it in this filthy rat-infested ditch,

Where every shell must kill or spare, and God alone knows which,

And I am made a beast of prey, and this is my lair -

My God, I never knew till now that those days were so fair,

And we assault in half-an-hour and it's a silly thing:

I can't forget the lane that goes from Steyning to the Ring.

If you get it right for the fish you get it right for everything else

The final story developed from unexpected sources. In this case study three disparate community groups - conservationists, anglers and a social food growing network -have collaborated even though they are not usually co-workers. Their collaboration is directed towards protecting fish species. The three usually work not so much in opposition but with some discordance. Conservationists wish to protect ecosystems, and the biodiversity within, and see angling as oppositional to this aim. Anglers want open access to river courses and adjacent land; the community orchard scheme desires regulated access to their site and specific planting schemes. Conservationists opt for indigenous planting and forms of rewilding, antithetical to some types of food production.

Normally these three organizations would work in separate spheres, often with antagonistic interaction. Yet in this case study story developing trout breeding sites are the unifying factor as all three groups have been persuaded of the need to protect biodiversity over the long term. This radical affiliation was seeded by the local rivers trust who mediated between the three community groups. As one conservationists stated: ‘if you get it right for the fish you get it right for everything else’.

As a result all three have worked together – physically by adding aggregate to the river and

planting trees for shade, financially by collaborative fundraising initiatives and politically by uniting for a long term goal. The key players in all four organizations have been group elders.

Whilst the activity of river restoration was motivated from various sustainability perspectives around enhancing natural environments the communal outcome was to create a thriving river, with enhanced water quality, improved conditions for spawning fish and strengthened riverbanks to slow water progress and deter flooding events. Of great interest is that these community groups do not publicise their work: their stories needed to remain secret. This invisibility is linked to poaching, and in particular to the action of renegade anglers.

From a community perspective the three groups, over the course of the restoration work, have developed mutual respect. Their 'story' of affect is orientated around the fish, and this enables a side stepping of difficult conversations about group motivation and goals. But there is more to it than this. Each interlocutor talked of the importance of the riverside as a special place. This returns us to the importance of time, of temporality, when we consider elder environmental radicalism. Within this research site many respondents had moved to the area upon retirement. Interactions with their new environments have a dual function. Firstly to enable them to embed themselves within their new locale through making social contacts and keeping physically and mentally active. Secondly these landscapes have a symbolic resonance – they represent care for all environments; past, present and future. To a great extent the work undertaken by these community elders is a legacy for future generations and a reaffirmation of the value of their own lives in the present.

Gerontocracies of affect

Each of these stories reveals in their own way how the 'geographies of austerity' as Kitson et al describe (2011: 292), have impacted on elders, and rural elders in particular. For many it has led to an abrupt change in their personal politics the way they relate to others in their community from different life paths, world views and approaches. This stage of their lives has changed dramatically, away from the idealized idle indolence of retirement to a vigorous, engaged and vocal participation with others in their community to demand their rights as citizens and protect their local environment.

It would be too simplistic to see their actions as merely self-seeking protectionism. For that to be the case there would have been no self-development, no wider awareness of the impacts of a neoliberal framing of the world which they have seen, through lived experiences, divided and degraded communities and environments. Theirs is a righteous anger, forged with a desire to change things, even if that change is small, incremental and local.

I end this chapter by considering how these gerontocracies of affect can contribute to, and help shape, other responses which build towards a 'rights to nature'. These relationships of affect, concern care for ourselves and our local environment. They stem from our embodied identities and are closely linked with the landscapes in which we live directly impacting on the creation of radical responses (Ingold 1993, Massey 2013). Many of the elder respondents whose stories are detailed here, have found that the life they anticipated for

themselves has evaporated as neoliberalism has embedded itself within the fabric of their lives. As incremental and creeping as the root ball of a plant, over time the democratic civic structures which these elders have paid for over their working lifetime have withered. The elders' stories presented in this chapter may seem, at some level, almost whimsical – no Amazonian forest saving nor campaigns for universal access to water and sanitation or clean air. However, we must pay attention to the fieldwork findings. Even in this relatively affluent research site citizens are experiencing the impacts of political and financial austerity on their immediate and everyday lives. Given the breadth of their life experiences, elders are able to contextualize these negative environmental consequences of public spending cuts. They appreciate that these are not short term UK policy response to budget deficits but lie within a broader context of transnational neoliberal strategies which privilege economic development over environmental sustainability. The radical actions of the elders in these communities are necessary acts which demand a 'right to nature' and affirm that we all play a part in creating alternative sustainable futures.

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