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'War Stories': Morality, curiosity, enthusiasm and commitment as facilitators of SME owners' engagement in low carbon transitions

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ABSTRACT

The 'urban' has emerged as a key site for policies to reduce greenhouse gasses in order to avoid dangerous climate change, especially given concerns at a lack of action at international and national levels. In cities, the private sector, especially SME owners, are key actors central to driving through emissions reduction at the level of the firm: yet they are often seen as laggards in emissions reduction. Drawing on data collected as a result of a recent Knowledge Exchange programme in Liverpool, UK, and on cultural and diverse economies perspectives, the paper argues that those SME owners can be effective change agents through their mobilisation of what they call 'war stories', through which they 'show and tell' other perhaps less convinced business people about the changes they have made.

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> "The way in which popular control operates in contemporary cities is largely a consequence of the division of labour between state and market . . .. (which means that) ownership of productive assets in the city is largely placed in private hands. Public officials share responsibility for the level of citizen wellbeing with these private controllers, but these officials cannot command economic performance." (Elkin, 1987: 18).

1. Introduction

SMEs, businesses with fewer than 250 employees (Storey, 2000), make up 99.9% of UK enterprises, 60% of private sector employment, and 49% of private sector turnover.[1] In 2012, there were an estimated 4.8 million businesses in the UK with 23.9 million employees and a combined turnover of £3100 billion.[2] Given that SMEs are responsible for a significant (if contested) element of total UK greenhouse gas emissions (Revell and Blackburn, 2007: 494) the sector collectively represents a significant source of potential emissions reduction (Bradford and Fraser, 2008) which, the literature suggests, are not being realised. SME owners are often viewed as laggards who see climate change as an abstract issue affecting others far away in space and time for which they have little responsibility. They often firefight, and focus on profitability, not abstract issues (Bradford and Fraser, 2008; Collins et al., 2007; Gadenne et al., 2009; Parker et al., 2009; Petts et al., 1999; Tilley, 2000).

Against pessimistic conceptualisations of the potential contribution of SME owners to climate change policy this paper draws on culturally-informed economic geographies (Amin and Thrift, 2007; Thrift and Olds, 1996), including a recent academic interest in curiosity (Phillips, 2010, 2013) and 'diverse economies' perspectives (Gibson-Graham, 2006a,b, 2008), to argue that SME owners do not focus relentlessly on profitability alone. Cultural economic geography perspectives identify a diversity of motivations for participation in economic activity (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 186–189). In this reading, SME owners, as moral agents, employ curiosity, enthusiasm and a self-identification as effective change makers *as well as* an attention to the bottom line to the project of running their businesses. The paper argues that SME owners, like other more or less thoughtful human beings, can be very aware of the implications of the 'bigger picture', in this case climate change and resource crisis, for their and other people's future prosperity and happiness. Some business leaders proactively engage in ethical practices for their own sake, want to have a praiseworthy environmental record (Cairncross, 1995), and go beyond the business case for sustainable development (Pinkse and Kolk, 2009) that privileges profitability and efficiency above (secondary) social or environmental factors. These SME owners can be effective *autonomously directed* catalytic individuals or 'mavens' (Feick and Price, 1987; Fell et al., 2009) who use 'war stories' to 'show and tell' other, perhaps less convinced, business people about the pro-environmental changes they have made, and the benefits to their

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[1] http://stats.bis.gov.uk/ed/sme/Stats_Press_Release_2009.pdf.

[2] See http://www.fsb.org.uk/stats.

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business that have resulted from them. These catalytic individuals validate previously unfamiliar information, technologies and processes to other SME owners, people similar to themselves, and help diffuse processes of socio-technical change more broadly. Given that, in the UK at least, the Coalition government stresses market mechanisms to solve problems, and argues that if the state withdraws citizens will step up and address their issues autonomously (North, 2011a), the identification of new actors with the skills to solve problems associated with climate change and communicate them more widely to people 'like them' and who they respect is of interest. Further, given recent interest in the materiality of flows of resources (Rutherford, 2013), and of urban metabolisms in energy transitions (Kennedy et al., 2011) the transition to a low carbon economy needs a wider transformation of everyday systems and practices of energy and resource consumption (Shove and Walker, 2010) which will require private sector engagement.

The argument is developed as follows. After a discussion of the research methods used, the paper reviews the literature on the business case for engagement in sustainable development, with an emphasis on why SME owners do or do not engage in environmental action. The contribution of cultural and diverse economic geographies to this debate is introduced. The paper then draws on action research findings to explore our hypothesis: to what extent do cultural and diverse economies perspectives contribute to a conceptualisation of SME owners as proactive environmental actors in the context of the transition to a low carbon economy? Finally, policy suggestions are provided to facilitate further engagement of SME owners in the development of low carbon economies.

2. Methods

The paper explores these issues though a discussion of findings from an ESRC-funded knowledge exchange (KE) project based in the authors' home city, Liverpool UK[3] (North, 2013; North and Barker, 2011). This project, one of many between university researchers and other local institutions researching the urban sustainability agenda (Trencher et al., 2013), involved close working with officers from our partners Liverpool Vision (the city's local economic development company) and Liverpool Chamber of Commerce[4] to explore the extent that Liverpool has the right policies in place to combine a healthy, vibrant and socially-inclusive local economy with action to mitigate dangerous climate change. Through our partnership we collaboratively developed and refined our questions and research methodologies, developed our analysis of our findings, and worked up concrete policy proposals (North, 2013). We took part in and observed the low carbon policy making process in the city. We carried out on site in-depth interviews with twenty Liverpool Chamber of Commerce "Green Ambassadors": businesses featured in the Chamber's 'Little Green Book'[5] (which provided advice to Merseyside businesses on environmental action) who self-identified as engaging seriously with a range of actions to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and to improve their environmental performance. Businesses we spoke to were from a wide range of sectors and included a chemical company, a PR firm, a printer, an extruded plastics firm and a sign maker. We conducted focus group discussions and interviews with business advisors working for agencies such as Groundwork and Envirolink that the then UK Government funded to support businesses to enhance their environmental performance. Finally we organised a breakfast seminar in which we piloted the 'war stories' approach discussed below to an audience of Merseyside businesspeople.

Our sampling aimed to identify 'normal' SMEs rather than cutting edge innovative businesses developing the 'game changing' low carbon technologies of the future, radically re-engineering their business processes, or developing new co-operative ways of creating value (Amit and Zott, 2012; Porter and Kramer, 2011; Porter and Reinhardt, 2007). To what extent, we wanted to know, might cultural and diverse economy perspectives uncover 'normal' businesses, those the literature suggested would not be interested in the transition to a low carbon economy, that *are* taking action to improve their environmental performance through the unglamorous work of changing practices: reducing energy consumption, cutting waste, recycling more, perhaps installing low energy light bulbs, biomass heaters or solar panels? Further, we were looking at a socially disadvantaged city not known to be at the cutting edge of economic or sustainable development policy (North, 2010b). Reading our data for reasons why these businesses owners did take action rather than for barriers (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: xxxi), might we identify new actors and forms of engagement on low carbon policy? Consequently, we structured our interview guide around diverse and cultural economy conceptions, refusing to assume that these businesses were driven by the bottom line alone.

3. Low carbon transitions: state and market

The transition from a fossil fuel based economy to one in which greenhouse gas emissions have been reduced to levels which reduce the likelihood of dangerous climate change[6] and flows of energy and material resources have been reduced to levels commensurate with the capacity of ecosystems to provide necessary resources and absorb wastes given existing technologies and levels of demand for goods and services (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996) is a complex, multilevel phenomenon involving action across the public and private sectors (Elzen et al., 2004; Geels, 2005; Grin et al., 2010). It involves changes in regulation enacted by states and international bodies, facilitated by policies enacted by governments at national, regional and local levels (Bulkeley, 2005) which influence and focus practices and behaviours by economic actors, be they business owners and managers deciding what to produce and how, or individuals deciding on their consumption choices (Shove and Walker, 2010). Advocates from the political left argue for a state-led response to the dangers associated with anthropogenic climate change at the level and intensity of the Manhattan or Apollo programmes (Nordhaus and Shellenberger, 2007) in which the state is seen in an optimistic, empowering light. In countries as diverse as the social democratic Netherlands (Klein Woolthuis et al., 2013) and Chavez's Venezuela (Fernández-Viñé et al., 2013) a wide range of public administration tools are deployed in a top down manner to influence the behaviour of SMEs. Thus the New Labour administration 1997–2010 passed the Climate Change Act and promoted the UK Low Carbon Transition Plan (DECC, 2009). It funded a range of agencies to support both businesses and households to adopt low carbon measures operating at national, regional and local scales (Hodson and Marvin, 2013). In this the UK was something of a global policy leader.

Post 2010 and a change of the UK government, the austerity measures adopted in response to the crisis of neoliberalism that emerged in 2007 (Hall et al., 2013), and a growth in scepticism about the immediacy of and magnitude of the dangers posed by anthropogenic climate change (Poortinga et al., 2011; Whitmarsh, 2011), has led in the UK to a political environment that is

[3] The author wishes to thank the ESRC (Grant reference RES-185-31-0113 and ES/J010618/1) for its support.

[4] The views expressed in this paper are those of the author alone.

[5] http://www.lowcarbonliverpool.com/little_green_book.php?id=1.

[6] What is considered 'dangerous' climate change is debated. A rise in global temperature overall of 2° might be manageable in some parts of the globe, catastrophic in others.

increasingly sceptical about the value of state intervention in the transition to a low carbon economy. Despite claims to be the 'greenest government ever', from 2010 the UK coalition government slashed funding for the agencies funded to work with businesses on environmental issues. For example, Merseyside has seen the closure of Groundwork Merseyside (which delivered the 'Enworks' environmental business support programme locally) and the regional agency Envirolink Northwest. Nationally the Carbon Trust had its budget cut by 40% in 2011, while the Energy Savings Trust lost 50% of its funding, and made a third of its 300 staff redundant (Carrington, 2011). This was on top of cuts in the value of Feed In Tariffs, and delays in the introduction of both the Green Deal and the Green Investment Bank. Thus the national state is no longer driving the transition to a low carbon economy in as determined a way as it was.

Beyond fiscal imperatives, the ideological rationale for state retrenchment has been articulated very effectively by Conservative Member of Parliament and policy advisor to the Prime Minister Jesse Norman, and by a range of conservative think tanks (Pautz, 2013). Norman (2010) argues that New Labour funded a range of policies, programmes and advice agencies through what he called a commitment to the 'enterprise state' which aims to enlist the citizenry in a common, government-identified cause. This, for Norman, is overbearing. Rather, Norman, and the coalition more widely, want government to step back and facilitate individuals who have an entrepreneurial spirit and what Cameron calls some "get up and go" to take action of their own volition (North, 2011a). The coalition wants to facilitate a:

> "huge culture change where people ... don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities." (David Cameron quoted by North, 2011a: 817).

Thus, from the UK government's perspective, if the state is 'rolled back' and stops 'crowding out' individual initiative, civil society will 'roll forward' (Pautz, 2013) and the outcomes of this 'Big Society' will be better. While the ethical justifications for the Big Society concept were quickly and comprehensively derided as an enrolling societal vision (Coote, 2011), continuing austerity in the UK suggests that large scale state intervention into the transition to a low carbon economy (beyond support for nuclear power) remains off the agenda. Other actors, at a local level, are still expected to step up, such as low carbon communities and Transition Towns (North, 2011b). Similarly, for the coalition an innovative private sector is seen as a source of solutions.

The question thus arises: do ordinary citizens and/or businesspeople step up when the state does less? In the context of climate policy there is some evidence for this perspective. The Bush administration was notably sceptical about anthropogenic climate change and action to avoid dangerous climate change at an international level has been disappointing (Newell and Patterson, 2010). US and European mayors stepped into the policy vacuum and acted to facilitate the transition to a low carbon economy at a local, city level with considerable local success (Betsill, 2001), supported by a series of international networks.[7] In this perspective, cities are seen as a 'goldilocks zone' level at which to capture and reduce emissions without the need to rely on a perhaps unattainable 'quick fix' of international agreement on one hand, or on the other, on a slow process of individual behaviour change (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003, 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2011). Cities, then, can be actors facilitating the transition to a low carbon economy.

In market economies, the private sector is a key actor. The Dutch transitions school (Elzen et al., 2004; Geels, 2005; Grin et al., 2010) conceptualises the transition to a low carbon economy as one of private sector-led innovation as individual companies innovate and produce new technologies that are diffused from niches across the wider economy, with the state acting to facilitate or retard this process. As Friedman (2008: 243-4) argues:

> "There is only one thing greater than Mother Nature, and that's Father Profit, and we have not even begun to enlist him in this struggle. We don't need a Manhattan Project for Clean Energy: we need a market for clean energy".

Theorists of local economic development have long understood that in market economies, to promote wider public goods (like a liveable climate) state actors must *work with*, *influence* and *support* private sector owners of a privately-owned and managed economy that they do not control (Eisenschitz and Gough, 1993; Elkin, 1987; Valler et al., 2000). Thus, while the power of the marketplace to produce the innovations necessary to avoid dangerous climate change is contested by writers from the ecosocialist left (Foster, 2002; Kovel, 2007), in a market economy the private sector cannot be ignored: they must be supported to do the right thing. This is true even in state-centred climate change strategies such as that adopted by the UK Labour Government 1997–2010.

Thus our question is: if mayors and city leaders stepped up when action at an international and national level was found wanting, can business actors who *also* see the need to address dangerous climate change also step into the vacuum locally? Can they to some extent fill the gap left by the withdrawal of the agencies? Might this be through leading by example and persuading other SME owners of the need to act? If so, might this be an economic geography of business motivations that serves as a tool for progressive change (Amin and Thrift, 2000), a return to the claimed utopia of the engaged and activist private sector that built the UK's northern industrial cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hunt, 2005), including Liverpool (Bennett, 2010)? Can engaged SME owners change the material practices associated with concrete production processes and energy use locally? Or are SME owners' actions, while welcome, merely palliative, unable to progress the large scale changes necessary to decarbonise economies and avoid dangerous climate change in the absence of action at greater scales, given that climate change policy is a multi-scalar phenomenon (Bulkeley, 2005) and that individual SME owners cannot affect changes to the urban infrastructure that powers them and supplies them with resources (Bulkeley et al., 2013)? To understand that, we first need to examine what the literature says about the extent that SME owners do or do not engage with the work of transitioning millions of small businesses onto a low carbon trajectory.

4. SME engagement with the transition to a low carbon economy

Conceptions from cultural economic geography that *would* see SME owners as actors generating solutions to climate change problems has some support in a wide management literature engaged with more fully elsewhere (North and Nurse, 2014). While sustainable development as conceptualised by Brundtland was seen to operate at a societal level, a wide literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR) emerged through the 1990s that argued that businesses should hit a 'triple' economic, environmental and social bottom line. CSR advocates argue that while business was once seen as part of the environmental 'problem' (Eden, 1994, 1996),

[7] Eg see the Nantes Declaration of Mayors and Subnational Leaders on Climate Change of September 2013. http://archive.iclei.org/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Global/initiatives/2013_Nantes_Summit/WorldMayorsSummit2013_Nantes_EN_Declaration_only.pdf.

it is now part of the solution as taking action to reduce environmental dis-benefits is a win-win (Beckmann et al., 2013; Pinkse and Kolk, 2009; Porter and Reinhardt, 2007; Robertson and Nicholson, 1996; Welford, 1995). Eden (1996) identifies three drivers of the business case for an engagement with sustainability: (1) the bottom line (a discourse that suggests taking environmental action is 'good for business'), (2) regulatory compliance ('you must do it or break the law'), and (3) ethics ('you *should* do it'). Bansal and Roth (2000: 717–8) argue that businesses engage in pro-environmental action as a result of (a) competitiveness pressures and in response to new economic opportunities, (b) from the need to comply with legislation and regulation, (c) from stakeholder pressure, and (d) as an ethical commitment. CSR advocates argue that greening makes business sense and enhances profitability by reducing waste, making more sales to green customers, and boosting the businesses' reputation as a good corporate citizen (Pinkse and Kolk, 2009: 63–88). Epstein (2008) and Bansal and Roth (2000) argue that there are costs from non-compliance with regulation – fines, intrusive inspection, closure of operations, reputational damage or boycotts – that entrepreneurs will want to avoid by going green.

Bansal and Roth (2000) argue that a growing environmental awareness and the need to reduce energy costs driven by increasingly higher fossil fuel prices is now often seen by conventional business owners as integral element of ensuring continued competitiveness. To stay in business, they argue, businesses conventionally look to reduce their costs in terms of the quantities of inputs and of wastes, and to maximise profitability through process intensification and capital investment in the most efficient machinery (although some craft-based businesses continue to use less efficient, traditional techniques for cultural reasons). Thus, ecological modernists argue, through market forces businesses who do not take this approach will flounder (Jänicke, 2008; Mol et al., 2009). Consequently, business owners make rational cost-benefit calculations of environmental behaviours and economic return, and legitimate their actions in terms of longevity and profit. Looking to the long term, some businesses attempt to completely reengineer their business models in response to climate change and concerns about the continued availability of cheap fossil fuels (North, 2010a), for example Marks and Spencer's 'Plan A'. Thus responses to climate change can be conceptualised as an opportunity for business, not a threat, especially by business representative organisations (Confederation of British Industry, 2012).

Critics argue that is an over optimistic conceptualisation. Fundamental Marxist objections are that capitalism is structurally and irredeemably growth orientated and ecocidal (Foster, 2002; Kovel, 2007; O'Connor, 1991). Less fundamentally, Eden (1994, 1996) is concerned that greening business is a way of taming and commodifying more critical green ideologies at purely rhetorical or surface levels, a utilitarian process of 'amoralisation' (Crane, 2000) through which ethical or critical concerns are progressively edited out. Over time, environmental values are subjugated to the dominant paradigm of economic growth, thus maintaining a hegemonic system of material accumulation with little commitment to social justice or international and intergenerational equity. In this vein, Walley and Stubbs (1999) argue that CSR can be green 'spin' erroneously presenting changes in business practices or the development of new products and services in response to a number of wider societal or economic drivers as some sort of fundamental environmental transformation of business practices: for example, the growth of a new, ecologically-minded middle class attracted to new goods and services that are marketed as environmentally ethical. As Epstein (2008) and Pinkse and Kolk (2009) argue, 'greenwash' is widespread. There are easy reputational payoffs from minimal CSR activities that promote a subsection of the business's operations as sustainable and ethical, whilst ignoring fundamentally unsustainable practices that make up the bulk of that business's operations. Critics and shareholders can then be mollified at little cost. In contrast, significant changes in business practices in terms of reductions in throughputs of resources, waste and emissions are atypical. Fundamentally unsustainable or unethical but profitable business practices are rarely discontinued.

What is sustainable is challengeable. *How* ethical or sustainable should a business be? How do economic actors understand trade-offs and decide between perhaps contradictory pressures from shareholders, NGOs and customers, while maintaining the profitability of their business in difficult times (Hahn et al., 2010)? How will shareholders and customers respond to company decisions about what or what not to produce (Epstein, 2008: 23), given the persistence of fundamental disagreements about responsibility for climate change, the extent that it represents an existential danger, and the possibility of preventing it (Hulme, 2009). How should they respond to the arguments of climate sceptics who argue that climate change is not a priority given the need to maintain economic growth or address longstanding problems such as poverty or ill health (Lawson, 2008; Lomborg, 2001, 2007)? Consequently, concrete transformation of business processes and practices can be more difficult than simplistic assertions that 'going green is good for business' might claim.

Why then *do* some SME owners take action to improve their businesses' environmental performance? How do they reconcile the demands of business profitability, the demands of their customers, the views of their colleagues, and what they think the capacity of the natural world to provide resources and absorb wastes demands in terms of reducing harmful emissions (Catasús et al., 1997)? Spence (2007), Williams and Schaefer (2013) and Murillo and Lozano (2006) argue that while SMEs owners engagement might be at a lower level, less visible and more informal than that of larger companies (for example, they probably would not have a dedicated environmental manager), the upside is that SME owner-managers have more freedom to run their businesses as they see fit. Managers of larger companies have to report to shareholders and owners who may not be supportive. In contrast, SME owners can spend their own money on what they want to without seeking permission (Spence, 2007: 537). It may be easier for owner managers who champion sustainable business practices to make change in a small business with fewer colleagues to influence than a large, multinational organisation operating across many markets and jurisdictions. They may be supported in making change, and drive through change themselves, through a proactive use of their upstream and downstream supply chain relationships (Ciliberti et al., 2008).

They may be inspired to make changes by their customers and employees. Spence (2007: 538) argues that given that many SMEs cannot compete with larger businesses on price alone, they need to provide additional value through good community or environmental values. Jack and Anderson (2002) argue that entrepreneurs draw on their social networks and the values that emerge from them in developing their businesses. Their personal reputation matters, as does how they treat their employees, who may be family, friends or neighbours. Their social networks and the values these networks hold help the entrepreneur to identify perceived opportunities and barriers to business performance: does the business 'fit' with the community that it serves, which provides its employees and customers, in terms of its values and what it does? Do these values support or retard environmental action? Hammann et al. (2009) discuss how responsible management practices in German SMEs had a positive impact on the firms and their performance. Values create value, they argue. Rutherfoord et al.'s (2000) study of Dutch SMEs found that they had a strong sense of responsibility for the environment of the community which housed them, which they did not find replicated in the UK. Williams and Schaefer (2013) argue that that given that acting

on environmental issues is often seen as difficult or a costly, SME owners may be unconvinced by the so called 'business case' for taking action alone. They argue that ethical and ecological values, emotions and commitment are what come to the fore in driving owners to take action, not a cool headed cost/benefit calculation. In their analysis, they found managers who were more interested in, and knowledgeable about, climate change than previous studies suggested. Their research uncovered managers with a highly developed and long standing ethical and practical engagement with issues around the environment and climate change, who thought holistically, refusing to compartmentalise their business and personal values and actions. These SME owners understood climate change as part of a wider social and environmental agenda to which they were committed, not just as a technical or business issue. They got their data from popular sources, not from information targeted on them as businesspeople.

This is not to say that these businessowners saw themselves as environmentalists. The opposite. They saw themselves as practical business people and constructed environmentalists negatively as 'hippy tree huggers'. Theirs were professed business values of prudence and thrift. But they *also* talked about care of the natural world and the rights of future generations. In discussion, it became clear that their values could emerge from their biography, perhaps passed down from their families, from past experiences of activism, or from travelling. This meant that they understood how climate change is affecting distant others, understood their geographies of responsibility (Massey, 2004), and wanted to take action. They felt that they could and should make a difference, and it was their responsibility to do so. Thus, despite the more pessimistic analyses of literature that assumes a focus only on the bottom line without any exploration of wider values, the evidence of these studies seems to be that some SME owners do engage with pro-environmental work. Bradford and Fraser, 2008: 164–5) found that 82% of the firms they surveyed were aware of the overall policy environment of reducing greenhouse gasses, whereas energy costs alone were a driver of environmental performance for 62–64% of them.

SME owners then are not homogenous and motivations for being in business should be disaggregated. Williams and Schaefer (2010) argue for a differentiation between highly driven, profit-maximisation orientated entrepreneurs who are perhaps less interested in ethical considerations, and those interested in a work/life balance who had a business that generated sufficient personal drawings to support their chosen lifestyle and who consequently may take ethics more seriously. Parker et al. (2009: 288–9) differentiate between 'environment', 'advantage', 'compliance' and 'profit-driven' SME owners, while Paulraj (2009) identifies 'coercive', 'competitive' and 'comprehensive' responses. Environmental values-driven SME owners have a high commitment to environmental performance out of a sense of moral obligation or of duty, and perhaps are more likely to act comprehensively to drive through fundamental changes in business practices. Advantage or competitiveness-driven SME owners are innovative and proactive, and see environmental improvements as a way to better business. They respond to the business case for environmental action as they think it will give them a competitive edge, perhaps in the more medium term, while profit or compliance-driven business owners will only make changes that give an immediate return. These owners see pro-environmental behaviour as a cost to be minimised, not as a tool for enhancing competitiveness. Purely compliance-driven business owners do not respond to moral arguments at all. They may make money from unsustainable activities such as externalising their emissions or polluting their local environment, and need to be forced to maintain environmental standards through regulation. Thus some SME owners will respond to moral arguments, others to purely business arguments. Some will self-manage improvement, while others will need to be regulated into doing the right thing.

These findings suggest a diversity of responses to environmental stimuli and that an engagement with ethical perspectives from cultural and diverse economic geographies might be productive. *Is* the 'bottom line' sacrosanct, with other perspectives following behind? Cultural and diverse economies perspectives point to the role the affective (passion, sympathy, moral judgement, embodied knowledge and practices, sentiment, trust, mutuality and reciprocity) in the construction of economies which might better be thought of as 'hybrid entanglements' in which the 'economic' is shot through with culture in an "entangled play of corporate values (and) workplace cultures" alongside cost variables. How people "stand, walk, flirt, talk" matters in performing economies, as do the metaphors they use to create and then enrol actors in performing visions of urban futures (Amin and Thrift, 2007). From another perspective, JK Gibson-Graham's (2006a: 186–189) non-capitalocentric economic geographies recognise that entrepreneurs are not just deracinated profit seekers, but may be interested in both "profit" and "food, sex and saving souls" (Cyert and March, 1962: 9 quoted by Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 187). Might we uncover wider sets of motivations for engaging in pro climate change behaviour using these perspectives? With these perspectives in mind, we spoke to SME owners who were taking environmental action on Merseyside.

5. Morality, curiosity, enthusiasm and commitment as drivers of change: Findings from Merseyside

Having reviewed the literature, the paper now presents findings from Merseyside. We discuss emerging business discourses identified by some of the proactive businesses we spoke to that suggest a broader articulation than on the bottom line, and a politics of possibility: discourses of morality, curiosity, passion, persistence and enthusiasm. We found SME owners with strong *moral* and environmental ethics running 'normal' businesses in unlikely places including, for example, businesses based in Liverpool making shop signs, extruded plastics, even tar products and lubricants. They were *curious* about the problem of climate change, and wanted to find solutions that they could be part of. They were *enthusiastic* and *committed* in driving though change.

5.1. Business morality and the environment

Our respondents agreed that 'values create value'. A PR company owner argued "I've got a young team for whom this is a very important part of their world view and they like the fact that we as a management team went down that road". For this entrepreneur a commitment to low carbon activities signalled that this was an organisation in tune with contemporary cultural mores, and the sort of business high quality staff would be attracted to. In similar terms a lubricant and tar company manager argued:

> "A lot of graduates are coming into good positions and like late 20s and 30s, they're more aware socially and historically and that from university days. They've grown up with Greenpeace, and we find that a lot of graduates (are) interested in the philosophy of the company and want to know what their environmental policy is. They'll only go and join the company that goes in with their beliefs."

Thus values enabled the business to recruit the best staff who had strong environmental values, and who had been influenced by environmental groups. Another respondent, this time a printing company owner, argued that these moral values and their *passion* for them created other business opportunities:

> "because we were passionate about what we were doing, with the environment being a strong corporate message, it pricked people's ears up and they say 'that's very good, love the product, love the service, added bonus of the environment' and so we were getting a lot of recommendations from word of mouth" (printer).

Going beyond conceptualisations of CSR that identify a concern for climate change as a driver of profitability, we also found morally-driven, environmentally-proactive business owners who argued, for example, that wasting precious resources was 'immoral' (an ethical discourse) *as well as* inefficient (a discourse of competitiveness) and 'sloppy' (a moral evaluation of inefficiency):

> "It's the right thing to do, waste is not morally acceptable is it? ... it's part of the culture of efficiency that we want here. Waste isn't free. We pay for waste so it follows if we have less of it, we save more money. You wouldn't stand on the corner giving out fivers to a stranger would you? So why should you do that as a business just by being *sloppy*?" (PR company).

If these SME owners believed that it was their responsibility to act, they also rejected what they saw as moralistic entreaties by non-business actors. Their morality was endogenously generated. They were particularly resistant to interference by people who, they believed, do not understand them and for whom they consequently had little respect, people not 'like themselves': "Stop beating us around the head with high taxes and dubious facts and statistics, kicking the airlines, they account for just over 2 % of all carbon emissions. ... just tell us what's in it for us and you might get a better hearing" one respondent said. Another respondent argued: "I'm not convinced by the, tree-hugging champions who think we've all got to go off and live in caves". We can see a brutal discourse of austerity in one SME owner's argument that "politicians and policymakers, particularly those *who have the comfort of living off the fat of other people's taxable efforts*, have got to be very careful (saying that from) a point of *comfort and luxury*." (emphasis original). This description of a cosseted public sector and climate activists and greens wanting everyone to 'go and live in caves' and wear hairshirts while living off the wealth generated by self-identified 'can do' entrepreneurs came up many times.

5.2. Curiosity

We also found *curious* businesspeople finding discourses of dangerous climate change and resource depletion alarming in and of themselves:

> "I was reading articles, there was some sort of fuel crisis about that time, that produced a spate of articles about what should be happening and what isn't happening, and that on the one hand they're saying at present use we've got 50 years of fossil fuel left but if China comes on board it might be 20 or 30 years at our current use." (Sign manufacturer)

Curiosity could mean that businesspeople are as likely as anyone else to spend an evening online, surfing from a page about saving money on lighting to one about looming resource crises or climate change. Often doing their own homework about how to reduce costs can lead to unexpected places and expose the curious businessperson to non-business focused or unconventional sources of information that overcome the technical deficit identified by Williams and Schaefer (2013). Our sign maker told us:

> "once you read an article about something like that it provides you with a thread and then you read some more and then you find other websites that are of interest, and so it's that virtuous circle of starting to read stuff."

Surfing could lead to unconventional sources of information that can have an influence. It can lead to climate science, or discussions of energy insecurity that the businessperson, like anyone else, might (or might not) find convincing. A Groundwork advisor described the process thus: "I've been to a number of companies where I've mentioned things to them and then they go out and do the work themselves and start looking at data, investigating it further. So it can work like that." This curiosity can lead to a feeling that 'something should be done' about problems:

> "I was reading articles that were saying that something needed to happen. ... about reducing your carbon footprint, trying to stop using as much electricity. I believed the rhetoric about environment about that we were harming it. It seemed to make sense ... I think it sparked something. I was interested in it. I just thought that it was something that just needed to happen." (MD, manufacturing company).

The important issue here is the statement "I believed the rhetoric about the environment about that we were harming it".

5.3. Commitment

For some SME owners, this recognition led to an idea that 'something must be done', to make change happen, and it is the responsibility of businesspeople to do it – they need to be *committed* to driving through change. This businessperson, who makes signs for fast food outlets, was an early adopter of renewables and energy efficient technologies. All his signs use LED lighting, and customers are not given other options. His factory roof is covered in solar panels, and he has replaced all the lights in his factory with LED. Rainwater is captured. He has substituted efficient gas boilers and then biomass for less efficient gas. The factory has been insulated, and an evaporative cooling system has replaced air conditioning. Ninety% of the factory's waste is recycled. He has introduced a bike-to-work scheme. Not being a high energy user, this is not the sort of business from which you would expect to see competitiveness-driven, comprehensive eco-innovation: but this is what we are seeing. This is a curious, enthusiastic and committed entrepreneur who owns a factory that manufactures shop signs, an entirely conventional part of the economy, on an industrial estate in North Liverpool.

He is not alone. Another SME owner put it thus:

> "Running a business is different now in the sense that you could budget for plant and equipment to improve your efficiency or to change a product to make sure the business stays competitive and profitable, and I don't think anybody who's running a business argues with that. They're gonna do it one way or the other ... But what I think now is that most companies should also factor in as part of their expenditure is what they can afford to spend on reducing their impact on the environment. Obviously some of this is down to legislation and people have to do things, but some of it really is up to the individuals to *get off their bottoms and do something*." (Extruded plastics company, emphasis original).

Here we see an argument that while it can make sense to change business practices to account for changing conditions (a discourse of competitiveness) this SME owner takes a moral position. Individuals have to 'get off their bottoms and do something'. They need *commitment*. Again, this is not a business responding to competitiveness pressures alone. It is a longstanding Liverpool firm that makes heavy duty industrial products from recycled plastic that is putting a commitment to industrial symbiosis, to using recycled plastic feedstock that would otherwise be exported to

China for processing, at the heart of its promotional strategy. Its website now proclaims "We convert plastic waste into many useful end products for a multitude of applications to achieve the most sustainable closed loop."

Our SME owners self-identified as being proactive, self-starters, 'bloody minded'. They will seek out information their own way, in their own time, and won't give up:

> "*I think it's important* ... if you've run a business for 40 years and you've managed to retain a certain level of profitability, that's not easy. So there's elements of what I do every day I've brought to this. I haven't just started in business a couple of years ago. ... maybe it's business skills - or just being the fact that *I'm bloody minded. Nobody likes to give up*. ... on the business side that's some of the culture we have here. People do whatever it takes to get the business." (Manufacturing company).

This bloody mindedness meant they kept going against a vernacular climate sceptic 'common sense' summarised succinctly by one of our respondents:

> "Any reduction in carbon output by the British economy is (pretty irrelevant) compared to China's growth and the increasing output of carbon and that can be hugely demotivating. You're asking businesses for a huge amount of pain and quantum of their collective effort counts for very little when China suddenly puts its foot on the gas and grows its economy by another three percentage points ... Go talk to the Chinese; ask them to be more environmentally friendly 'cos they can have more of an impact. That's the hard commercial and political reality isn't it? "(PR company interview).

Our SME owner managers argued that persistence and encouragement could overcome this common sense fired by climate sceptic discourses of the popular press. Here an environmental manager from slightly larger SME told us:

> "One guy came into the first environmental awareness session. He was ranting and raving how he was not getting involved, he was effing and blinding all over the place. I stopped him in his tracks: 'but you're already onboard with the environment ... because I see you most nights walking round switching lights off that have been left on'. It was there, it just needs drawing out. A lot of people are happy that you've recognised some of the things that they're doing."

5.4. Enthusiasm

Commitment and enthusiasm can mean businesspeople want to tell other businesspeople what they have learned. They talk to their peers in diverse ways about what has inspired them to take action. They listen to each other, and take each other (rather than business gurus like Richard Branson) seriously. Like other citizens who want to effect change, they talk to each other about 'ice caps' and 'polar bears' as well as about energy efficient lightbulbs (Slocum, 2004) and the high cost of fuel. They can actively seek out their customers and make the case for change, perhaps choice limiting to guide their customers to making the most sustainable choices. Our sign writing company stopped offering high energy lighting options. Here an extrusion company talks about encouraging customers to use recycled cladding:

> "At the end of the day they're a supermarket. Their industry is not putting hoardings round their refrigeration centre. You need to attract their interest to the point where they think 'oh that's something that is'. We're now seeing it because we're doing a round of visits to our big construction customers. We've ended up with about six or seven *fairly keen individuals* who wanted to hear, looked at the opportunities, saw a version of that presentation, and are currently chasing up hoardings."

Here the communication led to a wider hybrid entanglement creating value:

> "Waitrose get lots out of that. ... Y'know the Green Party or Friends of the Earth who visited think it's wonderful ... Waitrose's customers loved it. I've gone at Waitrose's request and fielded a day of questions from their customers and a couple of events and their customers are driving them in that direction for sure."

Here we have uncovered a hybrid entanglement including human actors (a plastics company, a supermarket, its customers, Friends of the Earth and the Green Party) and non-human actors (a supermarket, plastic hoardings). Customers for Waitrose, are, the company believes, interested in Friends of the Earth's views on their cladding. Customers are interested enough to come and ask questions about it. These are more than competitiveness or regulatory-driven responses.

This is not to say that they don't frame their arguments in ways that they think will appeal to peers who are only motivated by the bottom line. They adjust their discourses appropriately, linking discourses of morality to the practicalities of ensuring the future competitiveness of the business:

> "You say to somebody 'oh we're all doomed, the polar caps are melting, the polar bears are dying, the penguins are dying ... you gotta stop all the planes, stop all the cars and all that'. It frightens people. And they say 'what about my business?' 'Well you won't have a business if you carry on this way, you won't have a life, y'know'" (Manufacturing company).

In a similar manner, this respondent stressed resource constraints:

> "OK (I say), don't accept the environment thing just accept that you have a way of life which is supported by our use of fossil fuel. Everywhere you look at it, every product you buy, it cuts right across everything. If you want to live the rest of your life with the benefit of that you should start to do something now to stretch it out a bit, so it doesn't disappear too quickly. That's the argument that should be used with people to get people on board really." (Manufacturing company).

As with all the examples above, this is not an environmentalist speaking. These are all examples of businesspeople arguing that morality, curiosity, enthusiasm and commitment has led to an understanding of climate change and resource constraints that needed to be integrated into business planning.

6. 'War stories': a new tool for facilitating greenhouse gas emission reduction?

Local actors who want to facilitate the transition to a low carbon economy at the scale of the local economy might catalyse this process through use of what one of our business respondents called 'war stories' where businesspeople who are 'mavens', or catalytic individuals, 'show and tell' what they have done to their peers:

> "Business people share 'war stories' all the time. We've got six business people as our guests around the table and, and they're good lads, there'll be loads of banter but there will be loads of war stories, you know, 'how are you doing, what's on the agenda, what's working, what's not working?' And in context like that where you can say well, 'hey guys, this works for us, have you thought of that?'"

Our most enthusiastic and catalytic green ambassador offered to host visits from other entrepreneurs. He made his electric vehicle charging point available to his neighbours. He told them about what grants were available, what innovations the private sector was coming up with. He showed them how he started small, built up interest, and over twelve years did more and more. His enthusiasm, the twinkle in his eye, how he stood, talked, engaged his audience (if he did not quite flirt), 'walking the walk' through his dogged determination to make the changes he felt necessary was communicated in practical, peer-validated language to fellow businesspeople in ways that the agencies could struggle to replicate. It is this curiosity, enthusiasm, persistence and bloody mindedness that will build the low carbon economy. This is agency by catalytic business people, not the state, a methodology that could be used by local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships, Chambers of Commerce and other business clubs, local advice agencies, or environmental NGOs and other Transition Towns and low carbon community groups that want to engage with local SMEs. Businesses can learn from each other through autonomous eco-networks and relationships (Störmer, 2008), perhaps using stand-alone guides and toolkits or web resources provided by local agencies or other local organisations.

This is good news, but are these catalytic individuals filling a gap left as government withdraws? Is local action enough? It is important to be balanced, and understand the limits of what is possible, as well as the opportunities. 'War stories' will not convince everyone. Our curious, enthusiastic entrepreneurs often ran into cynics who "thought I was a complete nutter ... the glazed look, kind of a wan smile and you know, 'when you growing a beard and getting some wellies?'". Others lost interest when they found out that the payback was not immediate. There is no guarantee that a catalytic individual with the skills to influence others will find a receptive audience. The curiosity, enthusiasm and commitment demonstrated by our respondents meant that they took action and drove change through when others did not. In our focus group with Enwork advisors one participant argued that complacent businessowners who were comfortable with the income they drew from their business (i.e. they are not profit maximisers) could struggle to see the need to make their business more efficient by engaging in carbon emissions reduction. Often, we were told, businesses owners would be too embarrassed to say they haven't taken basic steps that would save them money – switching off equipment that was not being used, printing double sided, turning off lights etc. There could be resistance to making change even when presented with an obvious business case. One advisor recounted:

> "I can't explain it, twice I've had a case where a rock solid economic case for change was turned down, just because the guy just couldn't be bothered ... someone went and got a loan at something like 4% to replace his boiler rather than let me do it through the interest-free Carbon Trust loan. The specifics was he had to go in his loft and to get the loan he had to put insulation in I don't think he could be bothered to go in the loft ... so he just took the loan from the bank, bought the quickest boiler he could as opposed to the one we specified." (Enworks business advisor).

Without curiosity, enthusiasm and commitment, and given limited funds, more sceptical SME owners can understandably be reluctant to invest in untried, potentially risky, new technologies. Our respondents pointed to the difficulty of changing cultures and behaviour in the face of the force of habit and established business practices. It may be, they said, that the business operates to a rhythm or timetable, to a business plan, or has production or delivery deadlines that cannot be disrupted. This means that changes in technology or processes are only possible at set times. If these are missed, the opportunity can be lost. If we add external barriers to decarbonisation mentioned by our interviewees such as lack of funding, planning constraints for the installation of renewable energy, changes in and uncertainty over feed-in tariffs, it is understandable that many SME owner fail to engage with low carbon agendas, and change can be slow from business actors who are firefighting: "*You're asking harassed MDs to consider that – no incentive. 'Sorry boys, you know, I've got customers, bank managers, to look after and I've got a commercial scrap on here'.*"

The difficulties of establishing and maintaining autonomous business networks are well known (Friedman and Miles, 2002) and the extent that other businesspeople or community actors have the necessary technical knowledge to replicate that of the agencies is questionable. What the private sector could not replicate alone was the helpful hand-holding that enables a symbiotic, long term relationship between enthusiastic and committed SME owners and knowledgeable business advisers to develop. A knowledgeable advisor who can take the SME owner through a process of identifying first the low hanging energy efficiencies that can be immediately realised can help a committed entrepreneur in time move onto making the detailed decisions about the specifics of eco-efficiency for his or her own business (Granek and Hassanali, 2006; Seuring and Müller, 2008). While our enthusiastic green ambassadors could motivate others to take action, the extent that they could do this over long periods of time given the pressures of running their business is questionable.

7. Conclusion

Where then is the politics of hope here? It is that just as a lack of action at an international level has spurred action to reduce greenhouse gasses at lower urban and community levels, our research has uncovered many more ways of engaging with businesspeople to do the hard work of the transition to a low carbon economy that more pessimistic analyses of capitalism as irredeemably ecocidal would occlude. Local action on climate need not wait for the revolution (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 251). The power of state actors to influence agents they do not control is limited, and even well-funded agencies will be ineffective if their advice is not acted on (Granek and Hassanali, 2006) with the result that interventions aimed at SMEs can be disappointing (Friedman and Miles, 2002). The good news is that if action from the top down is not always effective, conversely, its absence need not be a disaster.

Our findings are of interest in showing the diversity of ways in which businesspeople can come across information about climate change and resource crises through their own rhizomatic searches online which they then use to guide their discussions with business advisers. It shows they are driven by curiosity and care for the future, not just by profit maximisation. Here, the process of knowledge construction is owned by and constituted by the business owner in a 'hybrid entanglement' of ethical, cultural and business discourses, driven through a conception that something must be done, curiosity about what the issues are and what the solutions are, and persistence in driving issues through networks and through the encouragement of peers, customers, suppliers and staff. In local urban climate change policy terms perhaps we need to be more open to the possibility of conceptualising the local private sector as local actors capable of autonomously generating environmental solutions, and, crucially, spreading them to other less innovative businesses.

That SME owners engaging with the morality of anthropogenic climate change can employ curiosity, enthusiasm and a self-identification as effective change makers to the project of the transition to a low carbon economy in the context of their own business will not perhaps be that surprising to culturally-informed economic geographers. It may be new to economic development managers

schooled, unknowingly, in the vernacular 'common sense' associated with the entrepreneurial cities (Harvey, 1989) paradigm which assumes that inter-urban competition for footloose capital is the object of economic development policy, and that anything that does not create new jobs and businesses is ruled out of court. War stories may be a tool to widen discussions of low carbon transitions out of the constraints of debates about how to maximize growth in sustainable ways (Bulkeley, 2013: 102–3). If SME owners can make an impact on 4.8 million businesses responsible for 60% of industrial emissions that is a worthwhile contribution from actors often seen as barriers to change, not as providers of solutions.

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