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Commentary

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The politics of knowledge: Feminist strategies for transformation

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Abstract

In my commentary, I take up the challenge of finding an academically fuelled strategy to make the necessary deep inroads into the Sustainable Development Goals by looking at lessons learnt from the struggles of the transnational feminist movement involved in UN multilateral debates and the transformative work of feminist political ecology on the ethics of care and caring-with others, including more-than-human others. I propose these feminist strategies offer some insights in how to shift dominant knowledge systems.

Keywords

Transnational feminism, international development, gender, care-with, feminist political ecology

Introduction

Amanda Yates, Kelly Dombroski and Rita Dionisio (2023) convincingly argue that we need more responsive wellbeing-led governance indices. I have long been wary of the dangers of universalising economic indices since joining the international development debates around gender and development in the early 1990s. I therefore see the importance of considering what kind of metrics and tools are needed in response to today's socio-ecological crises. I applaud their efforts to produce place-based, co-created research for community-led governance tools that unsettles Eurocentric human-centred wellbeing governance frameworks. Their article helps us to consider how to go beyond 'business as usual' and create more-than-human-centred metrics that reverse top-down hierarchical thinking and practice. I am in full agreement that we need to build metrics based on grounded knowledge systems that reflect diverse understandings of wellbeing and ethical human activity. Their proposal gives us hope that it is possible to produce place-based knowledge which can shift our lifeworlds, entangled in gross domestic product export-oriented growth at the expense of social, cultural and ecological wellbeing.

The proposal, however, as the authors acknowledge, requires heavy lifting. My concern is to what extent is it possible to replace Eurocentric anthropocentric histories of measuring wellbeing in economic terms with the knowledge produced by culturally diverse place-based ethics and actions for ecological and social wellbeing? Their example from Aotearoa New Zealand shows how to incorporate indigenous understandings of wellbeing and lifeworlds into legislative and governing

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frameworks in Aotearoa New Zealand. But the issue of scale remains. While I follow and appreciate their careful reasoning and clarity about the need for new analysis and action towards sustaining life, I am still uncertain about how to bring such engaged scholarship to the realm of political power.

My commentary comes from a position of considerable sympathy. I too echo Jason Hickel's scathing comments on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Arturo Escobar and Boaventura de Sousa Santos argument of the violence of a universalising set of development goals. But the question is how to dismantle such edifices? So, while I am excited by the direction, the honest insights and importance of the article by Yates, Dombroski and Dionisio, as a feminist scholar activist I want to push further.

The questions I address: How can we tackle exploitation, colonialism and oppression that underly development processes? How can we break down the SDGs (and all the indices around) given the technocratic and bureaucratic discourses that make up business as usual? How can we reach to the core of the SDG process in ways that could dismantle such a powerful global narrative? In other words, what could be an academically fuelled strategy to forge what Stephen Healy calls a profound paradigm shift in the values of dominant cultural, economic, ecological and political processes? Is it possible to partner with those who determine dominant knowledge systems?

I take up these questions along two different paths: learning from my advocacy days, I reflect on the struggles of the transnational feminist movement involved in UN multi-lateral debates which challenged and changed bureaucratic and technocratic processes, including the measuring and evaluating gender relations in economic development. Secondly, I look at my recent academic work on feminist political ecology on the ethics of care and caring-with others, including more-than-human others (Pueg della Bella Casa, 2017) and the attempts of local communities to bring practices of 'care-with' (Tronto, 1993) into environmental justice (Di Chiro and Rigelli, 2018). I am interested in what these feminist strategies offer in efforts to shift dominant knowledge systems (Barca, 2019).

Transnational feminism shifting development discourses

From 1988 to 2012, I participated in different transnational feminist campaigns around UN conferences and the Millennium Development Goals – the predecessors of the SDGs (Baksh and Harcourt, 2015). These campaigns had the broad ranging political intent to shift the international agenda to acknowledge gender power relations, and to factor in the contribution of women's economic, social, cultural and environmental work. These were not only exhilarating but also troubling times, involving complex negotiations, compromises and insider/outsider tactics as key players moved in and out of research and political institutions (Antrobus, 2005). Such concerted feminist engagement at the policy table made visible women's economic and social contributions in diverse contexts and situations. Multilateral and national indices now count gender variables, changing research designs and how statistics and economic outcomes are measured and predicted. The impact can be seen in the inclusion of gender variables in indices produced by agencies that were set up to focus on gender equality such as the Unifem and later UN Women, but also in economically powerful institutions such as the World Bank.

For example, behind the celebrated 2012 *World Development Report* on gender and development there was a slew of knowledge production processes with a dedicated team based at the Bank working for two years to set the research questions, along with teams of consultants in 19 countries to gather the data, along with scholars who produce the background papers and translation teams, dedicated websites and 10,000s of short overview 'handouts' (Razavi, 2011). The report is thus informed by the academic debate on complex gender disparities and the systemic understanding of structures and practices among households, markets and other institutions. The report marked a step forward in understanding how to measure women's economic and social reproductive work and value it in policies in order to tackle deep-seated gender inequalities evident in the gender gaps between paid and unpaid labour, in the care economy and labour markets. The report acknowledges feminism and

the role of women's movements and it stresses the pressing need for women's ownership of and control over assets, particularly land, conditional cash transfers and property/land rights for women. The report also enabled the Bank's considerable clout to push feminist analysis of economic development and gender and development policy and provided a rich database to mine further.

The report has several shortfalls, the most glaring of which is the failure to question how poverty is embedded in capitalist processes, but there is a lot to be learnt from the backside story of how feminism infiltrated and shifted economic practice and values. Besides the work of feminist economists, there were organised discussions across community-based groups, civil society groups, feminist research networks – from grassroot to government levels. Money and time were devoted to collecting data and testimonies (so-called 'grey' literature), caucusing at UN events, fund raising, writing and editing briefs, finding ways to package and convince officials so that different types of knowing moved from the margins to inside the spaces where decisions were being made. These strategic efforts shifted development discourse to change their approach to gender. They were a huge, collective organising process, involving thousands of people in networks that stretched across the world, largely led by researchers and activists from the Global South (Batliwala, 2011). They translated gendered lived embodied experiences into knowledge and indices that shifted the way development processes were done. Though it was only partial, it was an academically fuelled strategy that forced questions and changed the values of dominant cultural, economic, ecological and political processes in development discourse. The intentionality of the work was driven by an intersectional feminist movement with all its diversities and contestations which continue to be the subject of scrutiny and analysis (De Jong, 2015; Ferguson, 2015).

It may seem that such a global example is far removed from the place-based proposals of Yates et al., but I refer to the politics of transnational feminist strategies at the interplay with UN and Bretton Woods institutions because it is an example of how it is possible to shift major discourses. Feminists started with a political goal in mind, and kept vigilant, with research as part of the strategy. Many different relational tactics and methodologies were used calling on a vast array of people in diverse institutions. It could well be that the politics and processes that work in Aotearoa New Zealand politics are not necessarily replicable, but it is important to consider how to link to others similarly engaged in challenging the mainstream in order to infiltrate mechanisms like the SDGs, knowing what is required is not only painstaking empirical research but also a commitment to a huge amount of organising and back-stage energy in the political realm.

Practices of environmental justice and 'caring-with'

My second example comes from my research activism of the past three years where I have been involved in a transformative process of practices of 'care-with' in environmental justice movements. Specifically, I have become engaged in the degrowth movement as a feminist political ecologist and in organising the academic-activist hybrid 8th International Degrowth Conference on Caring Communities for Radical Change in August 2021 in The Hague. Degrowth as a form of activist research seeks alternatives to current patterns of economic and socio-ecological destruction (D'Alisa et al., 2014, Paulson et al., 2020) in both theory and practice. I joined other feminists in a dialogue with the European degrowth community that brought feminist theories and practices of care to degrowth with the intent of strengthening communities for radical socio-ecological change. The 8th International Conference was a 5-day event that looked at how to do economics differently – practically and politically – with discussions that ranged from forest bathing and recycle workshops to how to bring down economics founded on fossil fuels. Feminist political ecologists took up the proposal that degrowth is about 're-rooting and re-commoning' processes of production and reproduction (Nirmal and Rocheleau, 2019: 470). We argued that care is central to shifting mainstream economic thinking by emphasising the gendered work of social reproduction; commoning; provisioning; or interspecies reciprocity and more-than-human relations (Singh, 2019; Harcourt and Bauhardt, 2018).

We brought examples of provisioning and care from communities that are already practising environmental and social justice or 'earthcare' (Merchant, 1989) in the defence of and care for more-than-human others (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017). By looking to the everyday and embodied experiences of different communities in the conference we reflected on paid versus unpaid labour, collectivised versus feminised care work and the importance of building community around care as a major strategy for degrowth. By telling otherwise stories, we aimed to show how it is possible to reconceptualize care and social justice, making visible the everyday realities of care work as political challenges to mainstream economic values. We drew on examples from communities on the margins of mainstream economic activities, arguing that we have to learn from the groups who have long been dealing with economic oppression and the impacts of climate change and who are living already what European scholars and activists see as 'alternatives.'

These conversations on how to learn from place-based 'otherwise' resistance based on understandings of care with more-than-human others, are perhaps closer to what Yates et al. are proposing in their article. Our feminist approach builds from local knowledge and processes, with the difference that our research is not so much about indices but about intentionally embedding the knowledge of community resistances into the politics of the global degrowth movement.

Conclusion

The excellent article by Yates et al. has emboldened me to consider the importance of the politics of knowledge – not only in how knowledge is constructed and shaped by empirical practice, but also to be explicit in the political strategy of knowledge production. It is important not only to challenge theoretically Eurocentric ways of measuring, and to insist on pluriversal knowing, but also to find strategic partnerships that push for change, especially if the intent is to challenge such mainstream constructions as the SDGs. I hope my examples from the transnational feminist movement and feminist political ecologist forays into degrowth movements offer some insights into strategic political engagements which can help to bring about much needed ecologically, cultural and economic transformations.

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