

Social Structure and Human Agency in the Age of Climate Change

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Synopsis

The lecture deals with the relationship between social structure and human agency. This is not a new problem for social scientists, and the motive for my intellectual enquiry over the past thirty-five years has not changed; it is how to respond to the injustices of our society, with a profound belief that a different social order is possible. The central question was, and still is, the relationship between social and economic structures of society, and power, as wielded by the state and by citizens. What is new are the changing physical circumstances of the world in which we live, which mean that human society can no longer afford to analyse ourselves and our social, political and economic systems independently of the natural world.

Since 1994, the relationship between political participation in a liberal democracy, and the social and economic structure of society, has come to the fore in South Africa. What has changed and what has not changed? Common to all my postgraduate studies was the agency of ordinary people, and their participation in bringing about change; situated within an understanding of the broader social and economic processes occurring at that point in history. After so many years of research, I was left with a fundamental problem: however high the level of participation, political change does not lead to change in structure of economy and society. All the evidence is that we have a stable and relatively strong democracy. Yet the economy remains profoundly unequal and unable to provide livelihoods to the majority. Capitalism has proven resilient, and has seen great changes in both the forces of production and the class structure of society, without giving up its central characteristics.

However, there is an overriding imperative which is going to necessitate a change in the global economy, a change in the way in which human society is organised. This imperative is climate change, which is accepted as being anthropogenic – in other words, its genesis lies in our own actions as human society; and equally, the new ways in which we organise society in response to this challenge, will be the indicator of how human agency can triumph over a profound threat.

How we respond is essentially about human agency: how we change the existing social and economic structures of our society. Assumptions about economic growth, about consumption patterns, about development priorities have to be questioned; the necessity of finding alternative ways of organising the economic and social relations of human society is apparent.

Current research is exploring such alternatives, through Participatory Action Research methodology, which attempts to change power relations in the process of research. It involves a number of different elements – creativity in work; livelihoods rather than ‘jobs’; control of resources and a ‘relative autonomy’ for localised community economies; and the principle of permaculture – which is not, as many people think, about growing vegetables, but instead is about an integrated and sustainable human society or culture premised on generating more energy than you consume.

I argue that such a change is more likely to come from the developing societies of the global south; that a paradigm shift can more easily occur on the periphery than in the centre.