



‘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>.

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 through a discussion of findings from an ESRC-funded knowledge exchange (KE) project based in the authors' home city, Liverpool UK³ (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 Commerce⁴ 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 change⁶ 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-Viñe 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.

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