

Commons, Sustainability and Democratization – Understanding sociopolitical change and sustainability in the perspective of global political populism and ecological crises

Hans Peter Hansen

Aarhus University, Department of Bioscience, Section of Wildlife Ecology, Denmark

With the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, what we refer to as Modernity has suffered yet another setback. Beliefs in and enlightened concepts of science, human rights and equality, progress, secularization and democracy have proven to be more fragile than we anticipated. We might ask ourselves if Modernity ends up to be just a short historical epoch? The “Donald Trump phenomenon” is the so far latest manifestation of an ‘anti-establishment’ and ‘anti-democratic’ global trend which also illuminates the internal contradictions and destructive forces of Modernity itself. The question faced by society is twofold: 1) How do we make sense of this new historical situation? and 2) How do we meet the societal threats from this new Trumpist era and renew our societies politically, economically and ecologically, without ‘throwing the baby out with the bath water’ with regard to the positive contributions from Modernity? Departing from my own theoretical inspiration from critical theory, I will share some possible answer to the first question. As an attempt to suggest some possible answers to the second question I will share some practical research experiences that create potential ‘openings’ for sociopolitical and ecological transformation – not ‘openings’ as final fixed solutions but as avenues for developing new sociopolitical cultural practices.

Case description can be found below.

The potential for change processes in the Context of Community based Defiance - The case of public wolf resistance in Norway

By Hans Peter Hansen, Researcher, Department of Bioscience, Aarhus University, Email: hph@bios.au.dk

Introduction

Resistance to wild wolves, conflicts and criminal behaviour follows largely the same pattern in countries where wolves' have (re)immigrated. The resistance is expressed as a strong distrust towards authorities and management practices, mutual rural-urban stigmatization and conflicting entrenched views. The communication is often strategically distorted leading to an escalation of the conflicts and in the battle for hegemonic discourse wolf management is often being reduced to a question about the scientific "truth". The strategic perspectives are being reinforced at the expense of the quality of life of the locals, the local economy, the social relations and mutual political recognition, altogether leaving no or few possibilities to explore common alternatives. The lack of political recognition and inclusion in the policy making and subsequent wolf management leads to apathy, resignation and non-participation as well as criminal activities such as illegal killing of wolves, vandalism and, in some situations even violence.



Swedish female with a tattoo on her leg with the image of a wolf and three Vs as an abbreviation of the Swedish words 'Våga Vågra Varg' ('Dare to resist wolves')

From a more overarching societal perspective, the outcome of these types of conflicts is typically political populism with devastating consequences challenging the legitimacy of the political and legal fabric of democracy.

It is within the abovementioned socio-political situation three researchers^{i ii iii} and a master student^{iv} entered the village Trysil in the eastern part of Norway one winter evening in 2015 in order to explore if there were any potential openings to the existing deadlock in the wolf management conflict. Months before the **Norwegian National Authority for Investigation and Prosecution of Economic and Environmental Crime** had initiated the arrest of 12 hunters around Trysil – including well-respected members of the community – with charges of illegal activities associated with illegal killing of wolves. The arrest was the result of several years of surveillance and six out of the 12 were later prosecuted.¹ In combination with the arrest, the wolf conflict had not just caused a conflict between the wildlife authorities and the local community, but also generated a hostile situation within the local community.

Method

In order to 1) to explore the social impact of the wolf conflict on the local community, and 2) to identify the drivers of the existing resistance, the master student settled herself in the community for a longer period of time and conducted participant observation and interviews with community members. Following the observations and interviews, a **Critical Utopian Citizens Dialogue (CUCD)** workshop was organized to explore the potential space discursive opening using democratic deliberative means.

The Critical Utopian Citizen Dialogue (CUCD) is a dialogue process inspired from a Scandinavian developed Action Research methodology, often referred to as **Critical Utopian Action Research (CUAR)**. The CUAR emphasise the perspectives of the citizens

¹ Five out of the six prosecuted was convicted and sentenced imprisonment. Later the Norwegian Supreme Court revised the decision and sentenced four of the six imprisonment.

focusing on common issues and the purpose is to explore the immanent but ‘not yet’ discovered futures applying three steps or phases: **critique**, **visioning** and **realisation**. Where other scholars often approach such conflicts emphasising the interpersonal relationship between the involved stakeholders, applying various social-psychological methods of conflict resolution, social intermediation and consensus building the CUAR explore the potential of the so-called ‘common third’ of the **citizens**. The ‘common third’ is here understood as the material as well as immaterial commons of society. Material commons can be natural resources that we as citizens recognise makes us inevitable interdependent of each other, whether we like it or not, while the immaterial commons is the shared future. Instead of considering participants as ‘stakeholders’, with fixed predetermined ‘stakes’ and opinions, the CUAR empower the participants as **citizens** and hereby cultivate their social responsibility. The CUAR further emphasise the importance of the **everyday of life** of the participants and recognise any kind of change or action depends on existing and created experiences, knowledge and values. These guiding principles are enforced by a few ground rules and by the creation of a social space where the participants, in plenary workshops as well as in working groups, are comfortable enough to express their ambivalences and to play with ideas and visions for the future without being ‘locked’ into fixed positions. In the plenary workshops participants are invited to offer their critique on the present situation in a brainstorm session. The critique is listed as visible keywords and the participants can then prioritize and cluster the critique according to what they find most important. This gives an overview of what is seen by the whole group as the most important issues. Later the question is reversed and the participants are encouraged to express how they would like the world to look like if they could decide for themselves. This is referred to as the ‘utopian’ phase of the workshop and again keywords generated and later compiled in themes in accordance with the priorities of the participants. It is not the objective of the CUAR to eliminate science or other types of expertise in a kind of culture-revolutionary manner; on the contrary, a research dimension – a so-called Research Workshop – is integrated as a part of the process in order to give the participants the opportunity to formulate and get answers to their own research questions. Based on the questions raised relevant expertise is invited into the process. This creates a more open-ended and dynamic learning process and explore the drivers as well as the potential solutions of certain social or socio-political problems.

The wolf-case of Trysil

CUAR researchers are typically engaged with the participants over a longer period, often several years, but due to the lack of funding this was not an option in this particular case. Instead of a long process, it was decided to organise just a one evening **Critical Utopian Citizens Dialogue** (CUCD) workshop, simply to test if it would be possible, within this heavily inflamed and politicized context, to generate a common ground and some kind of opening. Otherwise, the initiated CUCD was following the same methodological principles as the CUAR, offering the participants the opportunity to share how they experienced situation and how they – if they had the power – would like the future to be. Via newspaper announcements, people from the local community were invited to participate the CUCD workshop January 28 2015. A total of 17 citizens (12 males and 5 females) from the community turned up for the workshop at the local library in the village of Trysil. The majority of the participants represented citizens very critical to existing wild management and some participants were also familiar with or related to some of those 12 prosecuted by the state. Due to the sensitivity of the situation the researchers decided not to bring up wolves or non-wolves as the main question of the workshop. Instead, it was decided to highlight the social impact of the wolf-conflict under the headline **The impact of the wolf problem on people and nature?**



Photo from the CUCD workshop in Trysil January 28 2015. (Photo from Workshop report.)

During the workshop the participants gradually opened up and abandoned their initial superstition. The first part of the workshop offered the participant the opportunity to express their frustrations with the present situation in terms of how the conflict affected the community. This part of the workshop gave a rather detailed account of the existing drivers of the locals. It also revealed that it was not the wolf as such that was the main issue but how it was managed. One of the participants, known to be a strong critical voice in the local public wolf debate, actually stated that the wolf was one of the most

beautiful creatures in nature and that the whole conflict was driven by bad management. Based on the expressed frustrations the participants formulated a number of themes (see table below). – In the second part of the CUCD participants' generated, in a quite joyful and humorous tone, a list of keywords proposing a way forward. Due to the limited time available it was not possible to develop this further but the list expressed a general outcry for a more constructive dialogue and a number of more or less specific proposals:

- Management
 - o New management plan
 - o Different way of wolf management
 - o Also wolf packs around urban areas
 - o No wolf zones
- Policy
 - o Dialog with authorities
 - o Impact on politicians
 - o Local impact on wolf policy
 - o Have all heads of political parties live in **Trysil** for five years
 - o Share the burden
- Communication
 - o Communicate the consequences
 - o Make a better climate for dialogue
 - o Include women and children in the debate
 - o Communicate the local nature attitudes/values
 - o Develop new solutions
 - o Dare to speak out
- Research
 - o More nuanced research
 - o Researchers have to listen also to the local voices and experiences
 - o Reject the claims about widespread illegal hunting.

Conclusions

Although the described experiment was limited in time as well as in space, it confirmed experiences from similar citizen dialogue processes, that it is possible to identify discursive openings towards more constructive solutions and to make citizens abandon their locked positions. In this example, the recognition and inclusion of the everyday life perspective and the emphasis on the commons (in time and space) prepared the venue for a deliberative dialogue processes that brought the conflict into the public arena. Without taking the conclusions too far this citizens dialogue – with all its limitations – indicate that it is possible temporally to create a space for free and equal deliberation based on – with reference to Habermas – ‘communicative reasoning’, even in very inflamed cases.

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i Laura Tolnov Clausen, Postdoc at Department of Food and Resource Economics, Faculty of Science, University of Copenhagen, Section of Environment and Natural Resources

ii Mikaela Vasstrøm, Associate Professor at the Department of global development studies and planning, University of Agder and Senior researcher at Agder Research, Norway

iii Hans Peter Hansen Hans Peter Hansen is researcher at Department of Bioscience at Aarhus University, Denmark.

iv Camilla Morris is a Forest- and Landscape Engineer and a master student in Nature Management at the Science Faculty, University of Copenhagen.