

# Social Structure and Human Agency in the Age of Climate Change

Inaugural lecture

NMMU

Janet Cherry

30 May 2016

What I will present here is based on my grappling over the past three decades with one of the central problems of social science – the relationship between social structure and human agency. This is not a new problem for social scientists; from Karl Marx, who understood that human beings make history, but not in circumstances of their choosing; to the French structuralists who conceived the term ‘relative autonomy’ and ‘overdetermination’; to Anthony Giddens’ ‘structuration theory’ and other contemporary sociologists. 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.

It is appropriate to begin this lecture with the song *Emzabalazweni* – which, translated from isiXhosa, means ‘in the struggle’. This recording is of a group of men from the Port Elizabeth townships, the Amabutho of Nelson Mandela Bay. This organisation is made up of individuals who are considered by social analysts to be poor, marginalised, and powerless. Yet they were one of many social or civic organisations who self-organised and took action to bring about the historic change in South Africa which we call ‘liberation’ or the ‘transition to democracy’. In this lecture I will be talking about another kind of transition, a transition to a post-carbon, post-capitalist economy – probably a more difficult transition in some ways, yet as necessary and, I will argue, as possible as the transition in 1994. And this new transition will also be brought about through the agency of ordinary people, acting collectively, to create a new society.

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. This concern and the corresponding belief then raised for me, from young adulthood, a central question of power: who has the power to change the social structure? As an activist, I had to believe that my own agency could be effective; that I could be an ‘agent of change’. As an academic, however, I approached this from particular philosophical standpoints: those of a secular humanist and an historical materialist (although not of the determinist type). And my academic background in the disciplines of economic history, sociology and political economy enabled me to make sense of the social and economic structures of society. I paraphrased Karl Marx’s famous dictum

“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it.”  
(Eleven Theses on Feuerbach, 1888)

And adopted as my personal dictum

“The point is both to understand the world and to change it”

So the story starts with Cape Town in 1980, when I was taught by some of the finest radical intellectuals of the time to understand class formation in South Africa, structuralist theories of labour, capital and the state, and the relationships between race, class and gender. Our lecturers were drawing on European Marxists such as Althusser and Poulantzas to sophisticate their analysis of South African class formation, the migrant labour system and the relationship of classes to the state. At the same time some of us as students began to engage in action in support of the new black trade union movement. Inspired by Paulo Freire's work in particular, we facilitated adult education classes in squatter camps and migrant labour hostels in the evenings, convinced that ordinary working class people can not only analyse their own reality, but can act to change it. Intellectually my inspiration came from Karl von Holdt; we joked about fellow radical intellectuals who we called 'LOMS' in reference to their rigid Marxist determinism, the notion that human society acts according to laws of motion, as in physics. The most truth that I learned was from the migrant workers, who read Sol Plaatje and Luli Callinicos with my assistance; in one transformatory moment for me, a dustbinman, Moses Mbotywa, cried when he had a moment of revelation on understanding how the Land Act had created him as a member of the proletariat. We reflected together on our life chances, determined by our structural position in South African society, as a result of our respective histories. A committed radical students we read Karl Marx in the original, who wrote that

*Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.* (18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, 1852).

As students we supported the trade union Advice Offices doing filing and paralegal work, and we ran adult literacy and English classes, but we knew that as students we could not act for the workers: that it was their collective power that would bring about change. We could, and did, also support them in direct ways in their struggles – through organising consumer boycotts of red meat, and the following year of Wilson Rowntree sweets. The trade union organisers were our heroes; some academics were also, remarkably, trade union organisers. And so as I became increasingly involved in political activism, both as a student leader and as an underground member of the liberation movement, I was guided by the intellectual framework provided at UCT, together with the notion of praxis, of being empowered to bring about change.

Being part of history, feeling and knowing that I was involved in making history, was a powerful driver. For a few years after finishing undergraduate degree, any thoughts of further study were pushed to the back of my mind as the struggle intensified. These were the years of the mid 1980s, the height of resistance to apartheid; years when I was one of a huge number of activists involved in strategizing and campaigning against the apartheid state, and building at least some elements of the new society through our activism. Our activism was guided at least in part by the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who explored the idea of hegemony, ideology and civil society and influenced a new generation of thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau who in turn influenced activists in the 'developing world' engaged in various struggles. Gramsci's analysis was a counter to the economic determinist and fatalist Marxism of some radical thinkers, and allowed for human agency or what he termed 'praxis' ; it is precisely this relationship between our practical activity and the historical and social processes in which it is situated, which creates meaning for us as human beings.

It was thanks to the Security Police that I went back to university to do an Honours degree while sitting in North End prison – something for which I will always be grateful. This was the most intense period of reading in my life – with no competing demands and no limits on time, I could read EP Thompson’s ‘The making of the English Working Class’ and his rejoinder to Althusser, ‘The Poverty of Theory’. These seminal works took me deeper into historiography and the philosophy of social science, and how we understand the relationship between social structure and human agency. So my intellectual journey continued, moving in various directions but tied to a common thread.

The first love, of history, led to my Honours dissertation on the history of Korsten – called “Blot on the Landscape or Centre of Resistance?” it explored through rich archival research and interviews the organisation and campaigns of residents of this area in the 1950s, as well as the state’s carefully orchestrated forced removal of this community to Kwazakhele. It combined the ‘history from below’ of the ‘History Workshop’ school with a structuralist analysis of the state and the class position of the residents.

The central question was, and still is, the relationship between social and economic structures of society, and (political) power, as wielded by the state – but also by citizens. As the feminist Marge Piercy wrote:

“Economy is the bone, politics is the flesh. Watch who they beat, watch who they eat, watch who they relieve themselves on. The rest is decoration”

Another spell in detention saw me register for a Masters degree in economic history at UCT, and inspired by EP Thompson, the thesis was called “The Making of an African Working Class”. This thesis explored the economic, political and social history of African workers in Port Elizabeth, how an urban proletariat was created in the mid-twentieth century, and how they self-organised into independent trade unions in alliance with political formations of the day. What was it like for a teenage girl from the rural Transkei to move to Port Elizabeth and work in a textile factory? Dorothy Vumazonke told me:

*Oh those big machines! I thought to myself, wondering how I was to work with such a huge machine like that. It was difficult at first, as I say we had to rush for time, otherwise the production will slow down. There were big drums with cotton, which had some tree leaves that you had to thread in something like a needle, but not exactly the same as a needle. This was done on the whole wide machine, within minutes you press the machine to start. A thicker thread will come out. Then it is done on another machine until it is a small smooth thread which can make a towel and a cloth and many other different materials. (Interviewed at home, Kwazakhele, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1999)*

After the research on the history of Korsten and of labour organisation, my focus shifted to the township of Kwazakhele. From the years of uprising of the mid-1980s, I knew Kwazakhele as a place of extraordinary organisation and resistance to oppression – a community of working-class people who created their own neighbourhood structures to challenge the apartheid state. I was fascinated by the participation of ordinary working class people in bringing about change, and began to document and try to understand how people participated in bringing about changes in power relations – through trade unions, civic organisations and street committees. At the same time, these social movements were happening within the context of the bigger societal processes which created Kwazakhele – urbanisation, proletarianisation and the loss of traditional livelihoods.

After 1994, I contributed to building the new South Africa through serving on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a researcher, and then put some of what was learned in the 1980s into practice through training civil society groups and movements in many countries in thinking strategically about how to bring about change in power relations. I conducted research on transitional violence, on the relationship between violent and nonviolent strategies in bring about change, on human rights and transitional justice in South Africa, Belfast, Palestine and Zimbabwe; and am still a human rights fundamentalist in the sense that basic human rights and freedoms are absolutely necessary. However, I am less interested in the politics of political parties and the personalities of individual leaders, than in the broader social processes at work; less interested in the nation-state and the conflicts within elites than in the social and economic processes occurring across the globe.

In the past twenty-five years, how have things changed?

*Development and democracy: The Kwazakhele project*

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? I have tried to answer this question over the past twenty years, starting in 1994 with research on the 'Civics and Civil Society project' funded by the Albert Einstein institute. This was the first research in Kwazakhele, and led to a doctorate in political sociology, examining different forms of participation and the extent to which the vision expressed in the 1980s that 'we will control all aspects of our lives' was realised in the new South Africa. If this was going to happen anywhere, I argued, it would be in communities such as Kwazakhele, where people had realised their own power, and participated extensively in grassroots structures of democracy. This research was continued through election research and a study of political participation in every election since 1994; a study of development and the changes in employment, education, service provision and property relations under democracy; and culminating in a sabbatical last year at the ISS, and a book to be published. 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.

However, a child born in January 2016 in Kwazakhele has very different life chances to my stepdaughter's child born in Brisbane at the same time. Kwazakhele is not the worst place in the world to live: it has good infrastructure, health care, access to food, education etc. But half the adults are unemployed; they are an urban proletariat without wage labour, with no other means of livelihood. Among these unemployed are the Amabutho introduced at the beginning of this lecture – those who gave up their youth and their education for liberation, but who thirty years later are still destitute. In Nelson Mandela Bay, 60 000 manufacturing jobs have been lost since 2008 (Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2016). The idea of a precariat, of a marginalised underclass, has grown in popularity as the advances in productive capacity have required less in terms of human labour. Yet, instead of trying desperately to create more jobs making cheap toys or expensive Recreational Vehicles, or competing with the cheap labour of Singapore or China or India to make cheap clothes

for export (as advocated by Ann Bernstein and Dave Kaplan of the CDE), surely something better is possible? My fascination with this other fundamental problem of social and economic structure – how people combine to produce what they need – has once again come to the fore. Marx, of course, had a lot to say about this; his notion of humans being defined by our creative imagination, and yet alienated from our own creative labour, still has great resonance.

*Karl Marx: A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. (Capital Volume I Part III, 1867, p 198).*

The scientists are off the hook, because the problem is not one of technology, nor is it a shortage of resources. The scientists have done their bit, and human society has the capacity to produce the energy, the food, the clothing and the transport we need, in a sustainable way. The problem is the organisation of these resources to meet human needs – to produce and distribute them in ways which ensure that everyone has enough. These are social and economic forms of organisation – in other words, they are created by human beings, and can be destroyed or changed by human beings. Economists like to think that they are equal to physicists, and that there are laws of economics (like Marx's laws of motion) which determine how man's worldly goods are distributed - but they are wrong, as Marx was wrong in different respects. Economies are forms of social organisation, and while they can seem quite rigid – hence 'structural limitations' – they too are subject to change. Marx thought this change would come about when the technological capacity (the 'forces of production') came into conflict with the social relations of production – trying to invoke a notion of internal contradictions which inevitably tore the system apart. Capitalism has proven resilient, however, and has seen great changes in both the forces of production and the class structure of society, without giving up its central characteristics.

### *The imperative of transition*

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. I hope I do not have to convince you of the validity of this argument; the scientific consensus (read physicist James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren* (2009), or listen to his 'Why I must speak out about climate change') is incontrovertible. "The evidence for human-made climate change is overwhelming" How long have we got? "We have to stabilize emissions of carbon dioxide within a decade, or temperatures will warm by more than one degree... We don't have much time left."

*Environmentalist David Brower compressed four and a half billion years of Earth's history and that of its inhabitants into Genesis' six-day creation. When that time frame is considered, it isn't until 4:00 p.m. on the last day that dinosaurs walk the Earth. By 9:00 p.m., these dinosaurs are extinct. At 11:57 p.m., humans appear on the scene. Jesus is born forty-five seconds later. The Industrial Revolution occurs 1/40th of a second*

*before midnight. Since this moment of innovation, more resources have been extracted and consumed than by the rest of the people who've ever lived combined (Taylor Reed, 2016).*

*Brower states, "There are people who think what we've been doing for the last fraction of a second can continue indefinitely. They are considered reasonable people, but they are stark raving mad!"*

The question that remains to be answered is how we respond. This was first brought home to me in 2010 by an Australian activist who wanted to draw on my experience of organising against apartheid, for a 'mobilisation movement' to unite Australian civil society organisations around a programme to convince their government to take climate change seriously and move out of its 'denialist' position over the current decade - the 'Transition 10' campaign. In Port Elizabeth, we established a Nelson Mandela Bay Transition Network, and sent a delegation to Durban in 2012 for the COP17 Civil Society forum.

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. Paul Gilding has argued convincingly of the inevitability of a 'Great Disruption' of the global economy; the New Economics Foundation equally convincingly of the need for a 'Great Transition' (New Economics Foundation); Joel Kovel has made a convincing argument for ecosocialism. In summary, what is needed is a transition – to a post-carbon, post-capitalist economy and society.

Rasi Maharajh from VUT gave a lecture at CIPSET a few weeks ago and reminded me of Schumpeter's idea of the 'creative destruction' of capitalism; the breaking of the 'wage nexus' and the use of new technology (including renewable energy) to create post-capitalist relations of production – a new set of social and economic relations which are essentially more democratic, more just, and where resources are controlled by ordinary people. Hereby, Maharajh argues, we can 'transcend precariousness through innovation.'

This is the focus of my research in Port Elizabeth and of the research by my PhD students in Southern Africa, over the past few years. Sustainable livelihoods in both urban and rural communities, drawing on the work of Robert Chambers to conduct research and development work 'on the ground' in ways which empower the 'subjects' of the research and overcomes the bias of being an 'upper' in the context of development academics and professionals. Some of this research and development work has been quite depressing; PhD student Peter Makaye discovered how people struggling to continue with their traditional livelihoods in the dry districts of Zimbabwe engaged in what he termed 'desperate diversification' - giving a hint at how people will respond to the effects of global warming in subsistence farming communities. John Paul is looking at how conservation agriculture can assist small farmers to remain productive – and in fact increase their production – in drought-prone areas of Malawi. And Rwandan student Celestin Hategekimana found how women could be empowered through cooperatives, and how this economic power enabled them to change social power and to challenge patriarchy.

The concept of 'enough' and the limits to growth has been articulated by many social activists and economic analysts of the global North. Alan Durning, David Korten and many others have

emphasised the need for changes in consumption patterns from those who are 'overconsumers'. Yet my research is exploring how the alternative structures can emerge from those who are on the margins of the global economy – those who are not overconsuming. In other words, the assumption that development involves higher levels of production and consumption can be replaced by an economy based on sufficiency, self-sufficiency and a quality of life rather than a quantity of consumption. This is easier to achieve in societies where people are not already overconsuming.

A recent TED talk by [Bill Gates](#) demonstrates how the rising affordability of solar power is leading to a fundamental change in the geopolitics of energy. The concept of 'enough' and the 'limits to growth' first put forward by the Club of Rome in the 1970s, and recently revalidated, indicates the necessity of a model which breaks from one premised on accumulation by an elite, on increased consumption by the masses, and on fossil-fuel based energy. Control over energy at local level, as well as the concept of food sovereignty.

How is this to be implemented? There are those who argue for the necessity of a 'war economy' on a global scale, implemented by coercion if necessary (Philip Sutton, *Climate Code Red*; Paul Gilding, *The Great Disruption*); there are others who argue that human beings can change their behaviour and act differently in order to avoid catastrophe. Pessimists think that it is already too late. However, eternal optimist that I am, I think that we may see such change coming precisely from those places which are considered 'marginal' to the global economy.

Instead of seeking employment in MNCs, looking to export manganese, develop oil and gas, and export these all through giant harbours at a massive cost in carbon emissions, we can choose to move away from the highly centralised, resource hungry, carbon costly model which is controlled by a few and benefits an elite.

#### *Participatory Action Research to test alternatives*

Through the notion of 'Transition from the margins', the idea is to test alternative ways of organising society. This is explored 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.

An alternative model would involve localised, living economies, which can be more productive, as argued by Michael Shuman; a high quality of life using local resources efficiently; a distribution of work where people work fewer hours, control their own labour, have enough to meet their needs, and even increased time to socialise, enjoy nature, sport and culture. It is not so hard to imagine a different society; the question is how to change the power relations, to change the existing structures of social and economic power in our current society.

We are looking at ways in which new social and economic structures can be implemented and tested so that they can be replicated and become 'mainstream'.

This involves participatory action research on an integrated development of sustainable human settlements or townships – provision of basic needs, such as housing and energy, in a sustainable economy which provides livelihoods, within a vibrant culture.

*The Sustainable Settlement Pilot Project (Seaview)*

One such project was initiated in Zweledinga and New Rest informal settlements in Seaview, to test whether those who are literally on the margins of the city can have a high quality of life in this beautiful environment through building their own homes out of local natural materials, generating energy from sunlight and waste, capturing water and creating livelihoods in an integrated system. Unfortunately after conducting the baseline report which came up with a positive model to be tested, we have not received government support for this initiative.

*The Transition Township Project (Kwazakhele)*

The ‘transition township’ project in Kwazakhele is different in that it is based in a formal housing area, rather than an informal settlement. It is premised on the idea that townships are not ‘zones of non-being’ filled with disempowered victims of colonialism and apartheid, but rather are a modern, urban communities, relatively well educated, with security, property ownership and good infrastructure – the problem being the economic exclusion and the precariousness of the ‘old’ manufacturing industries on the fringe of the global economy. The potential exists for utilising new technology, renewable energy to create decentralised, sustainable, localised economies – community economies, solidarity economies – there are many terms for this idea, but essentially it involves empowering ordinary people to take control over resources and knowledge at local level.

However successful such projects are in doing so, you may ask, how will this change the economic structures of society at the macro level? The answer is not straightforward, but it does seem to me that the exigencies of climate change are creating opportunities for exploring alternatives that did not exist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Paul Mason, Paul Gilding and others are optimistic that human society can rise to the challenge, and that we can create a sustainable and socially just economy. However they are basing their arguments in the economies of the global north.

Rasi Maharajh argues that

*the types of innovation policies required to strengthen the low-carbon technological trajectory include elements that enable socio-economic and political consensus and essentially seek to expand local productive competences; build local resilience and adaptive capabilities; and enable participation in framing global research*

Changing economic and social power relations at local level in ways that can be replicated will ensure the transition is not only manageable but beneficial to the people ‘at the bottom’. Moreover, 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. I can imagine a society where people realise not only their agency to bring about such a transition, but also realise their creativity in building a new and more just society.



## References:

- Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, 1971.
- Luli Callinicos, *Gold and Workers, 1886-1924*. 1980.
- Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*. 1997.
- Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 1984.
- Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from The Prison Notebooks*, 1971.
- James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren: The truth about the coming climate catastrophe and our last chance to save humanity*. 2009
- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. 1968.
- Paul Gilding, *The Great Disruption: Why the climate crisis will bring on the end of shopping and the birth of a new world*. 2011.
- Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*.
- Rasigan Maharajh, 'Developing Sustainably and the Emergence of a New Productive Paradigm' in Cassiolato and von Podcameni, *Innovation Policies in a context of structural change and global crisis*, 2014 (forthcoming). Accessed at <https://tut.academia.edu/RasiganMaharajh>. 20 May 2016.
- Paul Mason, *Post Capitalism: A guide to our future*. 2015.
- Marge Piercy, 'In the (wo)men's rooms' in *Circles on the Water*. 1982.
- Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*. 1916.
- Taylor Reed, 'Diversity, the indigenous and the limits of being human' in *The Pulse*, March 2016. <https://thesaupulse.com/2016/03/>
- Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, 1942.
- Michael Shuman, *The Competitiveness of Local Living Economies*, 2010. Post Carbon Institute. <http://www.postcarbon.org/publications/competitiveness-of-local-living-economies/>
- David Spratt and Phillip Sutton, *Climate Code Red: The case for emergency action*. 2008.
- EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. 1963.
- EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 1978.
- Richard Webster, 'EP Thompson and the Althusserian Locusts', 1983 <http://www.richardwebster.net/print/xlocusts.htm>