

## Democratic practice to address the climate crisis

**Supervisors:** [Dr Nela Smolović Jones](#), Department for People and Organisations and [Dr Nik Winchester](#), Department for Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, The Open University Business School

### Project description:

This project is focused on exploring democratic practice as a way to engage communities and individuals in addressing a just transition to a green economy in the context of the current climate crisis.

Climate change presents a twofold threat to the wellbeing of working-class and poorer communities and thus to social justice. First, the livelihoods of people working in carbon-intensive industries will inevitably be jeopardised by a shift to a green economy (Powell et al., 2019; Pollin, 2014). Second, these communities bear a disproportionate consequence from climate change through, for example: worsening fuel and energy poverty (Day et al, 2016; Bouzarovski and Herrero, 2017); food poverty and water shortages (Feller and Vaseva, 2014; Yoon et al, 2019); air pollution and related illness (Benmarhnia et al, 2014; Krstić et al, 2017); and unsustainable housing with a vulnerability to extreme heat waves (Macintyre et al, 2018).

These concerns are at the heart of socially just environmentalist movements that may encompass environmental activists, the labour movement, government and some business organisations (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2013; see also Aronoff et al, 2019; Buck, 2019; Farnhill, 2014). Yet practice initiatives that seek to include poorer and working-class people in deliberations about how the climate crisis might be addressed have been limited. This project will therefore address the growing consensus that more empirical study is needed to better understand the processes of developing a democratic agency to enact environmental change (Stavis et al, 2018).

Of value in enhancing knowledge of working-class and democratic environmentalism projects will draw on the literature on democratic organising, which holds participation and inclusion of diverse stakeholders in complex decision-making as a normative good (Rhodes and Harvey, 2012; Smolović Jones et al, 2016). We are particularly interested in projects that address forms of grassroots engagement and deliberation in respect of complex issues and assume that agency in this process must emerge from actors with a direct stake in its outcomes. Projects should focus on a democratic approach to addressing and researching the climate crisis since it holds the potential to draw out the deep-seated identifications people hold in relation to place, values and ethics (Smolović Jones et al, forthcoming; Smolović Jones, 2019; Smolović Jones et al, 2016). Here, democratic practice is conceptualised as interwoven in the broader social fabric, involving a matrix of stakeholders and power differentials and the history and dynamics of local communities (Barca and Leonardi, 2018). The resulting mix of

contestation and negotiation between these may enhance or harm democratic attempts to address the climate crisis (Fougère and Solitander, 2019; Wittneben et al., 2012). To date, however, the literature on democratic organisational practice in relation to the environment has been largely conceptual in nature (e.g. Barthold and Bloom, 2020) and lacks empirical insight – projects will therefore remedy this omission.

Bearing this context in mind, we welcome proposals addressing but not limited to the following:

- Studies of feminist groups with an environmentalist agenda or organisations that explicitly seek to blend commitments to environmentalism and feminism.
- Studies of the democratic practices of activist organisations, such as Extinction Rebellion, which could explore how the organisation agrees actions, sets its strategic priorities, learns or mobilises for action.
- Studies of grassroots groups that seek to bring together a diverse range of people – such as trade unionists, activists and community representatives.
- Inquiries into the practices of environmentally sustainable fashion organisations, such as the work of Traid, which works with large business organisations but whose priority is generating money for environmentally friendly development projects.
- Studies that seek to draw on the experiences of precarious or low-income workers in re-designing their communities and work for a just transition to a green economy.
- Studies that explore these issues with an explicit focus on gender dynamics are also strongly encouraged.

Methodologically, we are particularly eager to consider proposals that adopt an in-depth, qualitative and ethnographic emphasis. For example, proposals that involve embedding a researcher within an activist group or organisation. However, we will consider proposals that take other qualitative approaches.

The successful applicant will receive further academic support within the Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures (REEF) centre of academic excellence and/or the gendered organisational practice research cluster (GOP).

### **About the Supervisors:**

Dr Nela Smolović Jones is interested in the interface between gender and democratic practice, especially topics such as feminist solidarity building, equality at the workplace and gendered corruption. She is currently focusing on how communities democratically engage to build policy towards a just transition to a green economy.

Dr Nik Winchester has a focus on ethics and social justice. He has a particular interest in deploying and developing contemporary social theory as a means to analyse and explore empirical practice in these domains. He is currently focusing on the theory and practice of social justice in transnational economic contexts.

## References:

- Aronoff, K, Battistoni, A, Cohen, A. & Riofrancos, T (2019). *A Planet to Win: Why We Need a Green New Deal*. Verso Books.
- Barca, S & Leonardi, E (2018). Working-class Ecology and Union Politics: A Conceptual Topology. *Globalizations* 15(4): 487-503.
- Barthold, C & Bloom, P (2020). Denaturalizing the Environment: Dissensus and the Possibility of Radically Democratizing Discourses of Environmental Sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics* 1-11.
- Benmarhnia, T., Oulhote, Y., Petit, C., Lapostolle, A., Chauvin, P., Zmirou-Navier, D., & Deguen, S. (2014). Chronic air pollution and social deprivation as modifiers of the association between high temperature and daily mortality. *Environmental Health*, 13(1), 53.
- Bouzarovski, S., & Tirado Herrero, S. (2017). The energy divide: Integrating energy transitions, regional inequalities and poverty trends in the European Union. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 24(1), 69-86.
- Buck, J. (2019). *After Geoengineering: Climate Tragedy, Repair, and Restoration*. London: Verso.
- Day, R., Walker, G., & Simcock, N. (2016). Conceptualising energy use and energy poverty using a capabilities framework. *Energy Policy*, 93, 255-264.
- Farnhill, T (2014). Understanding the labour–environmental relationship in Britain, 1967–2011: A new narrative using political opportunity structure and coalition theory. *Labor History* 55(4): 427-447.
- Feller, U., & Vaseva, I. I. (2014). Extreme climatic events: impacts of drought and high temperature on physiological processes in agronomically important plants. *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, 2, 39.
- Fougère, M, and Solitander, N (2019). Dissent in Consensusland: An Agonistic Problematization of Multi-stakeholder Governance. *Journal of Business Ethics* 1-17.
- Krstic, N., Yuchi, W., Ho, H. C., Walker, B. B., Knudby, A. J., & Henderson, S. B. (2017). The Heat Exposure Integrated Deprivation Index (HEIDI): A data-driven approach to quantifying neighborhood risk during extreme hot weather. *Environment international*, 109, 42-52.
- Macintyre, H. L., Heaviside, C., Taylor, J., Picetti, R., Symonds, P., Cai, X. M., & Vardoulakis, S. (2018). Assessing urban population vulnerability and environmental risks across an urban area during heatwaves—Implications for health protection. *Science of the total environment*, 610, 678-690.
- Pollin, R. (2014) 'Coal Miners and the Green Agenda', *New Labor Forum*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 23(1), pp. 88–91. doi: 10.1177/1095796013513242.
- Powell, D., Balata, F., Van Lerven, F., and Welsh, M. (2019) *Trust in Transition: Climate breakdown and high carbon workers*. New Economics Foundation, London.
- Rathzel, N., & Uzzell, D. (2013). *Trade unions in the green economy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Rhodes, C & Harvey, G (2012). Agonism and the Possibilities of Ethics for HRM. *Journal of Business Ethics* 111(1): 49-59.
- Smolović Jones, S, Smolović Jones, O, Winchester, N, & Grint, K (2016). Putting the discourse to work: On outlining a praxis of democratic leadership development. *Management Learning* 47(4): 424-442.

- Smolović Jones, S (2019). Performative democratic practice: An ethnographic study of the Women's Rights Centre in Montenegro. PhD thesis. The Open University.
- Smolović Jones, S, Winchester, N. and Clarke, C. (*forthcoming*). Feminist solidarity building as embodied agonism: An ethnographic account of a protest movement. *Gender, Work and Organization*.
- Stavis, D, Uzzell, D & Räthzel, N (2018). The Labour–nature Relationship: Varieties of Labour Environmentalism. *Globalizations* 15(4): 439-53.
- Wittneben, B, Okereke, C, Banerjee, B, & Levy, D (2012). Climate change and the emergence of new organizational landscapes. *Organization Studies* 33(11): 1431-1450.
- Yoon, H., Sauri, D., & Domene, E. (2019). The water-energy vulnerability in the Barcelona metropolitan area. *Energy and Buildings*, 199, 176-189.