

Dangers of the Market Discourse: For Partnerships in Natural Resource Management

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Abstract

The principles underpinning the market are sometimes in conflict with the principles of community engagement. Likewise, maintaining natural resources, or natural capital, is not always consistent with the development of economic capital. Because our rural landscapes are multi-functional, the natural, economic, social and human capital are interrelated. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential. Inconsistencies in different ways of thinking needs to be considered in community engagement process.

Economic systems rely for their success on the value of services that flow from the stock of natural, social, human and financial capital. Decision-making processes that allow trade-offs while building overall the assets base are required.

The market is based on a particular form of reasoned thinking, that of economic rationality. Other forms of rationalities exist, including communicative rationality, ecological rationality and scientific rationality. This paper explores the different kinds of rationalities that influence our thinking today, especially those related to natural resource management.

Over the years, many have expressed concerns about the impact of some types of rational thinking. Far from the Habermasian belief that people's ability to reason and think rationally will lead to a democratic society, the reverse may occur. Even Marx recognised the power of capitalism to change consciousness with negative consequences. The arguments of current Australian economists are used to highlight the basis of some of the impediments such as poor trust between stakeholders.

Making explicit these impediments allows participants to develop strategies to shield the community engagement process from any negative influences. This increases the likelihood of developing effective multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Introduction

Community engagement and economic rationalism are two of the common discourses in natural resource management (NRM) in Australia at present. These two discourses co-exist, and both influence NRM policy and practices. However, the principles of these two discourses are somewhat incompatible. The core of the argument is that the market discourse of economic rationalism follows principles of competition not trust; individual rather than collective action; and

economic rather than social or environmental concerns. The discourse of community engagement tends to emphasise principles of trust, collective action and the integration of social, environmental and economic perspectives.

This paper briefly outlines the principles of each discourse, and then discusses why there are incompatibilities. Specifically, the paper discusses the impacts of the market discourse on community engagement. Discourses will be discussed in the paper, but a brief definition is needed here to avoid confusion. In this paper, discourses are the norms and rules that govern the way people think, and as such is a cage that constrains people's thinking.

The idea that the principles of market discourse and economic rationalism have some problems is certainly not new; however, few people have made the link to community engagement. Firstly, community engagement and its principles are defined. Secondly, the principles of market discourse and economic rationalism are discussed. Then, a comparison of the principles of community engagement and market discourse highlights the incompatibility that underpins these ways of thinking and the ensuing problems for NRM in Australia. Using the Habermasian and Foucauldian ideas about discourse to discuss community engagement exposes the pervasive nature of the current rhetoric about community engagement, and the equally popular discourse of economic rationalism.

Community engagement

Community engagement, especially in the form of community partnerships, are increasingly used in NRM in Australia (Aslin and Brown 2004; Buchy, Ross and Proctor 2000; Chamala, Coutts and Pearson 1999; Curtis and Lockwood 2000; Dale and Bellamy 1998; Dore and Woodhill 1999; Lockie and Bourke 2001).

The aim of most partnerships is to engage with the wide range of stakeholders from multi-functional communities, with the aim of achieving improved outcomes for sustainable land management. The underlying assumption is usually that involving more perspectives will lead to better decisions and higher levels of ownerships, and thus adoption or acceptance of the actions and/or policies proposed. Key principles of community partnerships are:

- ownership of the process
- equity and equality
- trust
- inclusive of multiple interests
- wide representation
- openness and transparency
- sufficient time and resource (adapted from Aslin and Brown 2004).

These principles of genuine community partnerships are akin to those of social capital in terms of building relationships and collective action. Indeed a further goal of community engagement in NRM is sometimes seen as building social capital. Social capital is a contested concept, but Woolcock (2001) suggests there is relative consensus about the proposition of one of the classic authors on social capital, that "social capital refers to features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam 1993, p. 167).

In NRM, sustainable development is frequently discussed in terms of social, environmental, and economic capital (e.g. OECD 2001b; Commission of the European Communities 2001). This approach considers sustainability as the maintenance or increase of the total stock of these different capitals, or a 'triple bottom line'; and is a way of encouraging consideration of all of the dimensions in sustainable development and NRM (Lehtonen 2004). All forms of capital are essential for a vibrant civil society, sustainable NRM and productive agriculture, yet social capital is often neglected (Cox 1995; Lehtonen 2004; Pretty 1999; Sobels, Curtis and Lockie 2001) especially where economic rationalist principles prevail.

Cooperation and trust are facilitated by social capital (Putnam 1993, p.167), and trust, in turn, lubricates cooperation so that the greater the level of trust the greater the likelihood of cooperation (Putnam 1993, pp.167-71). In terms of partnerships between state and community stakeholders for NRM, this trust and cooperation must not only be within communities but between communities and government. Hence other writers (Sobels et al. 2001; Cox 1995) reiterate the link between trust and social capital, and suggest that "trust in government is one of our social capital indicators" (Cox 1995, p. 5).

Trust and social capital are key principles of community engagement, and both have an unusual characteristic. Social capital tends to increase with use, and thus trust can be self-perpetuating, as explained by this quote:

"Social capital is productive ...a group whose members ... place trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking trustworthiness" (Coleman 1990, pp. 302, 304, 307).

Similarly, distrust can also be self-perpetuating. As Gambetta (1988) explains:

"Deep distrust is very difficult to invalidate through experience ...once dis-trust has set in it soon ...has the capacity to be **self-fulfilling**" (Gambetta 1988, p. 234; emphasis in original).

As both trust and distrust can be self-fulfilling, both are difficult to change once established. Unfortunately in NRM in Queensland and other parts of Australia, trust between rural communities and government is lacking (Cox 1995) as it is in many parts of the western world

(Rose 1999). Certainly the landholders and other rural people who work closely with government are more likely to trust government programs and policies, as relationships have been established between people. Even then, rural people are likely to say that they like and trust the government staff in their region, but not government as an institution. This was evident in my research in southwest Queensland where people made comments such as:

“We have been very lucky with the local people in DPI; they are practical people.”
(Landholder group 7)¹

“The government is useless... [but] not the individuals, they are friends of ours. But it (Government) does not work.” (Landholder group 8)

“Now these [specific project] fellows surprised me. That [name of person] fellow is very intelligent. First appearance of him...well he had ear-rings and all sorts of turn-outs... he looked like a hippie from outer space, but when you got to know him, he was a good fellow.” (Landholder group 10)

A lack of genuine trust in governments and even within communities is a concern for many participatory projects in Australia (Kelly 2001; Cox 1995; Pretty 1999). Putman (1993) argues that, the decrease in trust reduces the ability of governments to promote any of their programs. A lack of trust in government certainly makes community engagement more difficult. Trust is one of the principles of community engagement which is incompatible, and some say is even threatened by the market discourse of economic rationalism.

Economic rationalism

The development of public policy in NRM in Australia tends to be dominated by economic rationalism or the market discourse. Economically rational decisions and self-reliance of the individual are core themes which are encouraged in government programs (Higgins and Lockie 2001; Stewart and Armstrong 1998). Government staff in western Queensland tended to say things like this government officer:

“We want to get people to become less dependant on government assistance ... less reliant ... I’m talking about people becoming much more pro-active in their business, taking a more businesslike approach, rather than being reliant on drought handouts, bloody drought subsidies, all those sort of things that we’ve seen as measures to improve. I think that’s a big ... all those things are a big message.” (Government group1)

Much of the conversation about how landholders could adopt more sustainable land management practices, and how to encourage them to change, revolves around economics.

¹ These groups of landholders and government staff were interviewed during my research; number codes are used to ensure confidentiality of the groups interviewed.

Not only does government espouse economically rational principles, but also landholders adhere to these principles, for example:

“Our industry is every bit as entitled to as much government support as any other industry is, but providing it is about increasing productivity.” (Landholder group 2)

“I don’t believe governments should get themselves involved in areas that are not linked to productivity enhancement.” (Landholder group 8)

Solutions to problems are often conceived in economic terms, for example as agricultural industries become less profitable the government offers structural adjustment programs. In western Queensland the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS) was aimed at encouraging productive landholders to buy out small, less profitable properties. This scheme focussed on ‘farming as a business’. The incentives were not taken up, and very few properties were amalgamated.

The program failed because it did not account for the social links that producers had to their communities, and that people tended to hang on for as long as possible in the hope that the situation would change. My observations are supported by Higgins (2001), who suggested that there is little evidence that RAS improved the efficiency of the market. He also pointed out that the reliance on formal risk management skills within RAS devalued local knowledge and experience, and by assuming that farming would use more and more technological inputs, this scheme did little to develop resilient, sustainable and equitable production systems.

Lockie (1997) also points out that schemes such as the National Landcare Program (NLP) are closely consistent with the economic rationalist doctrine:

“Land degradation is conceptualised in this context as the outcome of distorted market signals that encourage producers to externalise the environment costs of production ... according to this doctrine, governments may acquire a legitimate role in correcting distorted market signals and encouraging producers to internalise the full social and environmental costs ... NLP has attempted to do this by improving the quality of information available to landholders, their ability to interpret that information, their ability to plan and manage their resources on the basis of it” (Lockie 1997, p. 232).

This role of government in correcting the distortions of the marketplace to overcome environmental degradation continues today and is also adopted to address some social concerns. Natural and social capital differ from economic capital because they tend to be public goods, and so rarely have a market value. Environmental and social aspects cannot be easily measured and thus are often not incorporated into the market or economic system (Dovers 2000). Grants through landcare, the National Action Plan for Salinity and NHT2 can be seen as

ways of correcting market distortions by providing financial assistance to landholders to undertake conservation works, which are not paid for by the market.

Social problems tend to be 'fixed' by government welfare schemes. These are seen by many rural communities as schemes for those individuals who have 'failed' in society, and thus there is a reluctance to ask for help. This reveals a general acceptance of the underlying principles of economic rationalism. Environmental and social problems do exist in rural and regional communities, and some form of assistance is required. However, some of the current programs probably exacerbate the problems, rather than provide solutions.

Economic rationalism and the market discourse tend to assume a level playing field, where all individuals strive to maximise their personal benefits. It is based on principles of competition, and then government schemes are used to correct the externalities, such as providing incentives for environmentally sound production when the market does not pay for such goods. These underlying economic market-driven principles contrast with community engagement principles.

Dangers of market discourse

Arguments exist about whether or not trust and collective action can be melded with efficient markets, based on economically rational principles. Putnam (1993, p. 181) argues that "markets operate more efficiently in civic settings". However, Olson (1993) argues that collective action can choke innovation and dampen economic growth. Another argument, which is relevant to community partnerships, is that economic rationalism works against the building of social capital.

Edwards (2002) argues that economic rationalism has negative consequences for society by fostering a lack of trust between and within communities and governments. She believes that economic rationalists ignore relationships between people, and that strong communities, characterised by positive trusting personal relationships, are created by developing our sense of belonging, identity and self-worth (Edwards 2002, p. 80). Thus, Edwards sees economic rationalism as eroding one of the greatest assets of Australian society, social trust:

"The foundations of social trust lie in our relationships to government and to each other. Our trust in government reflects our belief in our ability to pull together as a community and collectively manage ourselves as a nation that historically prided itself on anti-authoritarian larrikinism, Australians have demonstrated a remarkable faith in their institutions" (Edwards 2002, p. 88).

Edwards (2002, p. 85) goes so far as to claim that the current focus on economic rationalism is causing greater distrust in Australian government institutions. This in turn results in serious problems for community participation — people distrust any activity associated with

government. Negotiations and collective action are difficult when people do not trust each other, particularly when they have different views of the world and have different rationalities for making decisions.

Community engagement for NRM requires individuals to work collectively. The current regional arrangements, where the government has established regional committees with the responsibility for allocating funds, indicates some recognition that rural communities must work cooperatively. We need to build social capital in these communities, to reinforce networks and foster relationships built on trust, not competition, between individuals within rural communities. And we need to reduce the dominance in the development of public policy in NRM in Australia of economic rationalism or the market discourse and its associated reliance on particular kinds of knowledge as a basis for decision-making.

Rationality

Many people believe there is one 'rational' way of making decisions, without realising that rationality can be determined by our view of the world. Others, such as Foucault (1991) and Habermas (1996) believed in different kinds of rationalities. This highlights for us the contrasting values encapsulated in economic rationalist market discourse and community partnership and social capital view.

The Habermasian view — a universal rationality

Habermas (1996) points out that economic rationalism is but one form of rational thinking. Habermas regarded discourses as rational thinking that would reach the truth, "it is pure freedom in the ability to raise and challenge arguments" (Dryzek 2000, p. vi). As such discourses lead to a universal rational foundation (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 89). For Habermas, values, spirituality and culture may cause variations between individuals, but these were not shared amongst society; whereas reason was a universally shared capacity of individuals. Reason, at least potentially, could discern universal laws and norms for society's moral and political domains (Cavalier and Ess 2001). Science particularly is seen as providing rational, objective answers in the search for the one truth in a world governed by natural laws. This idea of one universally rational way of thinking and positivist, quantifiable 'truths', is the basis of the thinking which underpins economic rationalism and traditional scientific thinking.

The impact of this on NRM decision-making is a devaluing of some kinds of validity claims in communicative or discursive negotiations. Even when local communities have wanted to participate, governments and scientists have tended to ignore the practical knowledge of local communities, as highlighted by authors such as Chambers (1999). In the past, land management decisions have tended to be based purely on rational technical, scientific or economic knowledge, and decision-making has suffered because different types of knowledge

are not valued and integrated. The value of integrating different knowledge systems is beginning to be recognised as valuable.

However, the dominance of rational thinking can cause problems for NRM partnerships. Far from the Habermasian belief (1990) that people's ability to reason and think rationally will lead to a utopian rational consensus, the reverse may occur. Some indications of this can be seen in rural communities in Australia today. Economic rationalism is (at least partly) the rationale behind the reduction of a range of services in the bush, including the closure of banks and many other businesses which undermines people's trust and reduces some of the 'capitals' important to sustainable development and collective action.

The Foucauldian view — rationalities and discourses

Foucault (1981) and others such as Dryzek (1997) believe in different kinds of rationalities, rather than the universal rationality of Habermasian school of thought. Foucault does not believe that truth is the same at all times, in all centuries, or in all disciplines. To really understand what Foucault means by truth, we need to understand what he means by discourse. To him, discourses determine what is seen as true or false at any given time.

Foucault explains discourses by turning to different disciplines of medicine, mathematics, economics and psychiatry – these are recognisable, but enigmatic as we have difficulty defining their limits:

“what individualized a discourse such as political economy is not the unity of its object, not its formal structure It is rather the existence of a set of rules of formation for **all** its objects ...**all** its operations...**all** its concepts ...**all** its theoretical options” (Foucault 1991, pp. 54, 59).

For Foucault, discourse does not mean a discussion or words, but the set of rules which defines what is 'truth' relevant to a particular discipline or body of thinking. Discourses may span considerable time, and do not necessarily disappear when an alternative discourse is formulated. Discourses define what is sayable, what is remembered, which “utterances are put into circulation ... what is valid, or debatable or definitively invalid” (Foucault 1991, pp. 59-60).

This means that discourses determine what will be seen as true or false at any given time in history. Games of truth are the rules which influence the discourses concerning a certain domain at a certain time. Truth relates to specific practices, places and times, and thus truth varies with the context and the discourse to which it relates.

In this way of thinking, just as discourses produce truth, discourses produce knowledge, and knowledge from the most powerful discourses is what is heard. As Flyvbjerg (2001) points out,

Foucault turns Francis Bacon's dictum "knowledge is power" on its head. For Foucault, it is more important to consider how power influences the production of knowledge:

"Power produces knowledge ... power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relations without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations ... it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power. But power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge" (Foucault 1979, pp. 27-8).

Here, Foucault explains that power relations, in their various processes and struggles, determine what is understood as knowledge. This occurs because power also "produces reality and rituals of truth" (Foucault 1979, p. 194).

For Foucault, power, knowledge, truth and discourses are linked. Knowledge can 'provide' people with the power 'to do' or 'to influence' but, in addition, power defines what gets to count as knowledge. Therefore, 'power is knowledge' is more accurate in a Foucauldian way of thinking.

As such, the market discourse or economic rationalism can be seen as an object of political practice (Foucault 1991). Economic and scientific information promoted to communities during participatory activities can thus be 'political' in the sense that it belongs to a particular discourse. In NRM partnerships, the market discourse of economics influences the knowledge that is used to formulate answers whereas local understandings about social relationships or environmental management do not fit the unspoken set of 'rules' and are effectively invalid or invisible.

Difficulties in recognising discourses

In a sense then both Habermas and Foucault draw attention to the fact that any discourse will be embedded in a particular set of assumptions or rationality. The discourses of our own society can be difficult to recognise. Even more difficult to recognise are the subtle impacts that the dominant discourses have on the way we think and act. Foucault saw the key task as:

"We must rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, re-establish the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides with them" (Foucault 1972, p. 9).

“Discourses can result in areas of knowledge and some ways of thinking being obscured, and existing without public knowledge” (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 124). The dominance of certain discourses can prevent some voices from being heard. Alternative and marginalised discourses are usually dismissed because they are seen as radical or irrelevant. For Foucault the task was to unmask these ‘invisible texts’.

Silence about the assumptions of the discourse in which our thinking is embedded is not appropriate. We need to discuss the discourses that we use in decision-making. In my research, both landholders and government staff seemed to succumb to the dominant, economic rationalist discourse, even if it did not seem to serve them well. Some examples of landholder adhering to the principles of the market discourse are:

“Look at Charleville, 5-6 million dollars goes into ... Family Services... there's a lot of money, government money. To service the sheep industry for Queensland there's 4 million dollars. Now if that's not a gross wrong doing to the community, what is? — because there's no productivity in servicing.” (Landholder group 2)

“We should only help those who want to be helped, those who want to be profitable.” (Government group 2)

These quotes suggest that being profitable, not depending on welfare and supporting those who are profitable are the only ‘rational’ ways of formulating government policy. The market is seen as the appropriate vehicle to provide solutions; the market discourse is the dominant discourse and other discourses and points of view tend to be ruled as ‘irrational’, invalid and even not truthful. Thus landholders, as well as scientists and government officials, are trapped in the dominant discourse that assumes that science and technology will provide all of the solutions needed for sustainable land management.

In NRM negotiations, this means arguments based on the principles of partnership that ‘collide’ with economic principles are likely to be overlooked. Wide representation associated with partnerships needs to be understood to mean representation of diverse discourses rather than simply a range of stakeholders. As is evident from the quotes above, stakeholders as different as landholders and government officials can espouse similar principles. All stakeholders living within a particular society at a specific time are likely to be influenced by the dominant discourses of the day, so may not necessarily represent a wide variety of views.

Conclusions

Foucault gave priority to understanding the impacts of discourses and public deliberation as a way of producing the truth (Florence 2003²). Thus, community engagement and discussion can

² Maurice Florence is a pseudonym for Michel Foucault.

be a way of exposing both dominant and 'invisible' discourses and developing an understanding of how the principles of discourses can work against each other or 'collide'.

Foucault acknowledges that his approach is provocative. His intention is to make previous discourses seem "problematic, difficult and dangerous" (Foucault 1991, p. 84), so as to encourage people to look at the situation a different way. People have difficulty recognising that:

"Their history, their social practices, the language they speak, ... even the fables told them in childhood, obey rules which are given to their consciousness: they hardly wish to be dispossessed" (Foucault 1991, p. 71).

Individuals are influenced by the discourses and rules which govern their existence, and by who voices them, even if they are unaware of this. Many scientists would feel very uncomfortable with this exposé about the way knowledge is formed, but Foucault (Rabinow and Rose 2003, p. xxvi) thinks this 'ethic of discomfort' is the philosophical task bequeathed to our society. Perhaps, in community engagement we need to feel uncomfortable with the propositions placed before us, for it is only through this feeling that the effects of discourses become evident. In this way the problems, difficulties and dangers of economic rationalist discourse are revealed and the challenge of achieving sustainable resource management is recognised as requiring not just the involvement of community stakeholders in partnerships, but commitment to principles such as trust and cooperation, that are at odds with those underpinning economic rationalism.

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