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Egalitarianism and Sustainability at the Centre for Alternative Technology

Stephen Jacobs

The Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) is situated in an old slate quarry just outside Machynlleth in mid-Wales, UK. It was founded in 1973 as an experiment in sustainable living. However, CAT was never just an experimental community, but is primarily an educational centre endeavouring to inspire people to respond to environmental issues. In 1974 CAT opened its doors to the public and began to offer short courses in topics such as renewable energy and organic gardening. In the first decades of CAT's existence, collective decision-making and egalitarianism were considered core principles. In this short article I will address why consensus decision making was regarded as integral to CAT's vision of an environmentally sustainable way of life and the challenges it faced in implementing an egalitarian organisation. This article is part of a larger project about the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT), funded by the Leverhulme Trust. This research has now been published by Routledge: *Sustainable Living at the Centre for Alternative Technology: Radical Ideas and Practical Solutions* (Jacobs, 2023).

Background and Early Days

The 1970s was in many ways similar to today, as there was a perception that human activity was hurtling the planet towards an eco-apocalypse. This eco-apocalyptic sensibility was informed by books such as Rachel Carson's (2000) *Silent Spring*, first published in 1962, and *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972) published a decade later. Silent Spring warns of the dire consequences of using pesticides. *The Limits to Growth*, which was one of the first uses of computer modelling, predicts that the trends of increasing world population, industrialisation, pollution, and resource depletion would be disastrous for humanity and the planet. There was, however, a major difference between the 1970s and today. In the 1970s, environmentalism was a niche concern, but today nobody can be unaware of the environmental threat of human activity to the planet. This shift of environmental concern from the margins to the mainstream has had a direct impact on the organisational structures and decision-making processes at The Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT).

CAT was never formally a workers' co-operative or a housing co-operative although it has had the appearance of both. CAT is a registered charity, and as such legally must have a Board of Trustees who have ultimate authority and responsibility for the organisation. However, until 2010 when CAT ran into severe financial difficulties, the Board of Trustees remained mostly in the background. CAT was run along co-operative lines, with the workers at CAT making strategic as well as day-to-day decisions.

Although some of the CAT staff lived independently in the area, some lived on site. In the first decades, the site community was regarded as an essential aspect of the project. The concept of sharing is integral to both sustainability and co-operative living. The site community was also regarded as an experiment in sustainable living. Furthermore, as CAT aspired to educate and inspire people, it was vital to demonstrate the feasibility of sustainable lifestyles. As one member of the site community suggested:

> Visitors didn't want to come and see bits of technology or displays. They wanted to know whether and how people could live their lives using those technologies (Jacobs, 2023, p. 93).

CAT was founded by Gerard Morgan-Grenville, who came from an elite family. Morgan-Grenville was concerned about the impact of human activity on the environment. He travelled to the USA, where he visited several countercultural communities which were attempting to find alternative ways of living that were less environmentally destructive. After returning from the USA in 1972, Morgan-Grenville registered the charity, which was initially called the Society for Environmental

Improvement, and in 1973 found the disused slate quarry just outside Machynlleth, in mid-Wales, UK. His vision was to establish a centre:

> Where people, ordinary passers-by might readily perceive the disastrous course on which our civilisation was set and be shown things that they, *anyone*, might do to reduce their impact on the environment (Morgan-Grenville, 2001, p. 158).

People began to hear of this experimental community, mostly through alternative publications such as *Undercurrents*, word of mouth, and the occasional mention in mainstream media. A steady stream of people found their way to this relatively remote corner of Wales. Life in the very early days was incredibly tough. Living conditions were very basic and the pioneers had to work incredibly hard simply to make the site habitable. There were two main organisational challenges in this very early pioneering period. First, Morgan-Grenville himself had very clear ideas about what he wanted to achieve, and secondly there was a constant flow of volunteers through CAT.

Peter Harper, an early member of CAT, observed Morgan-Grenville "was in principle all-powerful and could have run everything as he saw fit, by *fiat*" (Harper, n.d., p. 7). Morgan-Grenville did not live on-site but remained in the background hustling for materials and resources. His establishment credentials gave the embryonic project some respectability that it might not otherwise have achieved. Occasionally he would send missives on embossed paper or arrive on site in his BMW and express his impatience with the speed of progress. Inevitably there was a degree of resentment by those living and working on site, in very arduous conditions, to Morgan-Grenville's autocratic manner. This ultimately led to a confrontation and Morgan-Grenville graciously stood back, although he did remain the Chair of the Board of Trustees.

The main organisational challenge was the constant turnover of individuals, many of them with very strong ideas about the direction that the project should take. Harper recalls: "What emerged was the consensus of all who happened to be there that night" (Harper, n.d., p. 10). Inevitably a more formal decision-making structure had to be established to ensure that the project did not simply descend into anarchy and chaos. As Jo Freeman argues in her important paper *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*: "For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit" (Freeman, 2013, p. 233). Consequently, Morgan-Grenville invited Rod James to be CAT's first Director. James instituted some decision-making structures such as constituting formal meetings.

Philosophical Foundations

Consensus and egalitarianism were core principles from the beginning. Even Morgan-Grenville was looking for a new form of organisation. On the one hand, he was not impressed by the countercultural groups that he encountered in the USA, indicating that they were too chaotic to actually achieve anything worthwhile. On the other hand, he had an anti-authoritarian disposition. He viewed the hierarchical structures of the corporate and political world as being primarily concerned with profit and power, and therefore inherently destructive to the environment. In an article that he wrote in 1979 Morgan-Grenville reflected that:

> It seemed at the time an intensely exciting idea to create a new environment in which the criteria for decision making would be less commercial and political and more environmental and educational (Morgan-Grenville, 1979, p. 214).

The ethos at CAT was to find new way of doing things that were consistent with sustainability. How the organisation was structured and how decisions were made were considered integral to the environmental concerns. These decision-making experiments can be considered as, what Darcy L. Leach calls, a prefigurative style of politics:

> A belief that movements can only accomplish radical social change if their own tactics, organisational structure, and interpersonal behaviour reflect or "prefigure" the kind of society that they want to bring about (Leach, 2016, p. 42).

The notion that hierarchical organisation is inherently destructive to the environment, and that a sustainable lifestyle inevitably must be more egalitarian has a long history. This link between sustainability and egalitarianism is most explicit in Murray Bookchin's concept of the ecological society. Bookchin suggests that all hierarchies, social, political, cultural, and environmental are characterised by domination. Bookchin advocated 'the achievement of a totally new, non-hierarchical society in which the domination of nature by man, of woman by man, and of society by state is completely abolished' (Bookchin, 1980, p. 14).

Alternative technology, sometimes also called 'appropriate technology', was inspired by E. F. Schumacher's 1973 publication *Small is Beautiful*. Schumacher (2011) argues that the prevailing ideas of economic growth, increasing centralisation and economies of scale are all inherently environmentally destructive. Schumacher had a very Manichean view of technology. He argued that: "Small-scale operations, no matter how numerous, are always less likely to be harmful to the environment than large-scale ones" (Schumacher, 2011, p. 22). Similarly, he suggested that small-scale technology was "technology with a human face" (Schumacher, 2011, p. 9). Renewable energy — wind, water and solar — was regarded by Schumacher and his admirers as integral to the ethos of small is beautiful. Renewable energy has always been central to CAT's agenda. The site was off-grid and power was almost entirely derived from small scale renewable energy systems. In CAT's early days this was symbolised by the Cretan windmill, a wood and cloth construction that stood on a prominent ridge, which could barely generate sufficient power for a lightbulb.

Experiments in Egalitarianism

Although Rod James was officially appointed as Director of CAT and the Board of Trustees legally had the final say in any strategic decisions, there was a genuine attempt to be as egalitarian as possible. Overall, the fact that it was never legally a co-operative and there was, in all but name, a CEO, never really impinged on CAT's egalitarian ethos in the early decades. For example, James instituted formal weekly meetings. These meetings fostered a sense that everyone was actively involved in the decision-making process. These meetings were incredibly time consuming. Sometimes many staff-hours could be spent debating relatively insignificant issues. For example, discussing the exact placement of a spice rack in the community kitchen took up a considerable part of one long meeting. Some issues were also quite technical and required expertise knowledge. However, there was a sense that everybody was entitled to express their view even if they lacked the requisite knowledge. James recalled that he spent a great deal of time lobbying people prior to meetings to try and pre-empt the discussions from being diverted. He was obviously relatively successful. One long term volunteer observed that James "did not come across as a leader. Although I think that, in some subtle way, he did lead" (Jacobs, 2023, p.107).

Consensus decision making can tend towards making compromises when 'each individual acknowledges a certain merit in the position of others without being forced to repudiate his own' (Moscovici & Doise, 1994, p. 30). Compromise is not always the best decision. As one of my interviewees indicates:

> It was difficult to make plans because the structure of a co-operative tends to be one of universal compromise. So, the organisation sort of sits in the middle of a number of disparate passions and enthusiasms and projects (Jacobs, 2023, p. 109).

Consequently, consensus decision making can be prone to both agonising over minutiae and being unable to make important strategic decisions.

As CAT grew in size and complexity, it became increasingly time consuming and challenging to manage. Pete Raine, the second Director, constituted a small management group. This management group was called Overview and was comprised of four elected members from the permanent staff plus the Director as the Chair. The idea was to preserve the egalitarian ethos

but make the system more streamlined. Harper observes: "It was noticed how much more efficient it was to delegate many decisions to a small group, rather than spend a day a week thrashing things out *en masse*" (Harper, n.d., p. 14).

A three-tier system of decision-making was developed. Day-to-day decisions were left to individuals or particular small groups, such as the engineers or the education department. Decisions that affected the whole group were decided by the Overview group. Overview decisions were then discussed and ratified in regular meetings of all the permanent staff. This was later streamlined and the Overview minutes were simply posted on a noticeboard, and unless anybody objected they were deemed to be ratified. Long-term strategic decisions were also debated at the permanent staff meetings.

While this system was relatively successful, it also faced several challenges. Although there was an expectancy that all permanent staff members put their name forward to be elected to the Overview group at some point, not everybody wanted that level of responsibility. As the organisation grew, membership of Overview became much more time-consuming. Furthermore, it was not always clear at what level an issue should be decided. This could cause resentment as occasionally an individual made an executive decision, thinking that it only impacted on their personal sphere, which others perceived as having much wider implications for the organisation as a whole.

The most radical egalitarian experiment that CAT established was its pay structure. If everyone in the organisation is valued equally, then everybody should be paid the same. The pay structure was informed by the basic principle that remuneration was determined according to needs, and not the more widely accepted principle that certain roles are valued more highly and therefore should be paid more. It is important to stress that salaries were very low, and most people felt that the rewards of working for CAT were not primarily financial.

Initially it was determined that staff with children needed more and there was an extra allowance for staff with families. However, in the 1990s this was challenged as some staff argued that it was not necessarily true that if you did not have children your needs were less. This proposal was regarded as such a radical challenge to the existing system, that it was one of the very few occasions when the issue was decided by a secret ballot, rather than reaching a consensus in an open meeting. Those who argued for pay parity, regardless of whether you had children or not, narrowly won the vote and a flat pay system was implemented.

While every effort was made to keep the organisation as egalitarian as possible some, often unacknowledged, relationships of power did develop. Some people are naturally more confident and willing to assert their views than others. This sometimes left shyer members of staff feeling unacknowledged. Perhaps, the greatest challenge to egalitarianism was the development of an informal hierarchy. This informal hierarchy was based on how different roles were valued at CAT. I call this informal hierarchy "the authority of expertise" (Jacobs, 2023, p. 116). Much of the installation and maintenance of CAT's renewable energy systems was contingent upon the expertise of the engineers. It was, for example, difficult to challenge engineers about the supply and distribution of power. Furthermore, the engineers would have been able to earn considerably more than they were paid at CAT. Engineers' voices could be given more weight in meetings, and sometimes they were given more leeway in the rotas for the more mundane tasks around site. There was a tacit acknowledgement that "the engineers are king". There was also an authority of longevity. Often more credence was given to members of staff who had been at CAT for many years than to relative newcomers. While this could avoid replicating ideas that had been already discussed at length, it also could stifle new, innovative voices.

Despite its flaws, the organisational structures and decision-making processes at CAT did contribute to the development of social capital. Robert D. Putnam distinguishes between what he calls "bonding social capital" and "bridging social capital".

Bonding social capital creates strong identity and loyalty to the in-group, while bridging social capital creates links with others (Putnam, 2020, pp. 22–24). Initially strong bonding social capital

was needed to establish CAT. However, as environmental issues became more mainstream, bridging capital became more of an imperative. It became increasingly important that CAT was not simply seen as a small group of mavericks, whose experiments with sustainability could be perceived as too small-scale or even irrelevant to the challenges of the climate emergency.

The Demise of Egalitarianism and Consensus Decision Making

CAT had to respond to the changing context to remain relevant. There is now an awareness that the climate emergency requires a political, economic, and social response at national and global levels. Furthermore, the technology of renewable energy has considerably advanced. "Small is beautiful" (Schumacher, 2011) is no longer apposite. The DIY small scale responses to environmental challenges represented by the Cretan windmill were increasingly anachronistic in the age of mega-watt wind turbines being manufactured by large multi-national companies.

CAT also faced two significant interconnected internal challenges: organisational complexity and finance. This created a crisis that contributed to the demise of the egalitarian ethos of the organisation. CAT had grown considerably in size and complexity. By 2010, the staff had increased to about 150 and its annual turnover was approximately £4 million. CAT staff realised that the decision-making structures were no longer fit for purpose. The time it took to be a member of Overview had increased exponentially. Furthermore, other than the Director, no one was employed with specific management skills. Staff meetings also became increasingly drawn out and challenging. Harper conjectures that consensus decision making had inevitably become unworkable. He cites Dunbar's number, which suggests that humans can only maintain up to 150 stable relationships, as a major contributing factor to the demise of consensus decision making (Harper, n.d., p. 24).

CAT instituted a review process of the decision-making structures of the organisation. Staff members were invited to submit ideas, and after a very protracted debate, a new decision-making system was implemented. This had a two tier-management structure. The Directions Team, elected from the staff membership, were responsible for the long-term strategic goals of the organisation. An Operations Team was appointed for the day-to-day managerial decisions. This system was sometimes described as the Directions Team being analogous to elected MPs, and the Operations Team corresponding to a sort of civil service. It did not work. It was challenging to find the right candidates for the Operations Team with sufficient managerial expertise to work on a CAT salary. Perhaps more problematic was that the staff at CAT were accustomed to being very autonomous — or as one long-term member of CAT expressed it: "We wanted managers, but we did not want to be managed" (Jacobs, 2023, p. 121).

At around the same time, CAT experienced the worst financial crisis in its history. CAT was running various MSc programmes in sustainability in partnership with the University of East London (UEL). In 2007, CAT established the Graduate School of the Environment (GSE), which meant that it could charge students directly. However, the resources for serving the MSc programmes were inadequate. Consequently, CAT decided to construct a building which would have lecture theatre, workshop rooms and accommodation. The Welsh Institute for Sustainable Education (WISE) building would not only to provide the resources necessary to run the postgraduate courses but would also be a demonstration of sustainable building techniques.

This was the most ambitious project that CAT had ever undertaken and for the first time CAT borrowed a substantial sum. It was also the first time that CAT used outside contractors for a project. Unfortunately, there was a dispute with the contractors which delayed the building. CAT successfully sued the contractors, but they went into administration, so CAT was never able to reclaim the money owed. This led to a close investigation of CAT's finances, and it was revealed that these were in far worse shape than anybody had realised, and the Board of Trustees had to actively intervene. The banks agreed to extend CAT's credit on the condition that there was a clearer management structure and lines of accountability. A CEO was appointed, a more hierarchical managerial structure was introduced, and the flat pay scale was abandoned.

This was an extremely traumatic time for CAT. Many, including people who had dedicated years on CAT's very low pay, were made redundant or had their job descriptions completely rewritten. However, for many of the long-term workers at CAT, the most distressing thing was that the organisation was transformed overnight. The underlying conviction that consensus decision-making and an egalitarianism ethos were integral to developing a sustainable world seemed to have been swept away without any consultation. Conversely, the new management team felt that CAT had become too inward looking, and anachronistic. In particular, consensus decision-making was viewed as being more consistent with the "small is beautiful ethos" and was no longer regarded as apposite to the size of the organisation nor to the scale of the challenge of the climate emergency.

CAT still thrives today, albeit in a very different form from its earlier manifestations. Although there have been many organisational changes along the way, CAT's mission has been consistent throughout its 50 years of history — identifying practical solutions to environmental destruction, informing people about these potential solutions, and inspiring them to take action.

The Author

Stephen Jacobs is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Wolverhampton. In the mid 1980s he was staff member and part of the site community at CAT. In 1986 he and several other members of CAT formed The Undergrowth Housing Co-operative and bought a property nearby, which is still providing low cost, low environmental impact accommodation, and is run as a fully mutual housing co-operative.

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