WE NEED TO TALK: HOSTING CONVERSATIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND UNSUSTAINABILITY

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This think piece is based on reflections and processes currently underway within Comhlámh, an Irish association supporting international volunteers and volunteer sending agencies.

'Life now is so complicated, it's impossible for anyone to be good enough for The Good Place. These days, just buying a tomato in a grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labour, and contributing to global warming'.

So concludes Michael the Architect (Ted Danson) in the Netflix comedy 'The Good Place' upon discovering that (SPOILER ALERT) no human has gone there for 521 years. The reason? No matter how ethically the characters behave, they are implicated in a system that is unjust and unsustainable.

EXPLORING ROOTS

Michael's timeline is not random: rewinding 521 years locates the problem at a highly significant moment in human history – the conquest of the Americas, globalisation and the birth of the 'modern/colonial system'. This is the system Michael is alluding to.

The violent, extractive nature of colonialism/coloniality and its core beliefs – the separation of humans from Nature; and the 'superiority' of some over others – has fuelled a Western prosperity based on what sociologist Stephan Lessenich calls 'externalisation'. The price of this 'progress', he observes, has been continually relocated to other parts of the world (2019).

The idea of 'modernity' has enabled this violence and externalisation. Framed as 'civilisation', 'progress' or 'development', it has presented inequality and unsustainability as phases to be worked through on the way to the good life/place. This belief continues to be so dominant that climate change is itself externalised, with modernity offering 'solutions'.

When the 'solutions' fail, blame gets apportioned: to '[criminally negligent](#)' political leaders; the global North (Hickel, 2020); [Wall Street](#); fossil fuel companies (Buse et al, 2022); etc. While this approach represents a welcome corrective to dominant individualistic narratives and acknowledges unevenly distributed climate burdens, is it yet another way to avoid talking about root causes? Another instance of 'them', not 'us'?

UNWITTING OR UNWILLING?

For those of us investing in and deriving security and comfort from modernity's promise, there is much to consider. Stein argues that we enjoy a 'modern/colonial habit-of-being' that is 'ethically harmful and ecologically unsustainable' (2019: 198). Are we willing and able to grasp this?

While the inter-connectedness of violence and prosperity may appear 'self-evident', Lessenich believes it is overlooked because it can be: those who live well enjoy 'the power of not having to know' (2019: 136).

Nevertheless, as Lessenich also observes, 'knowledge on its own is by no means enough' (2019: 146); we are adept at obscuring inter-connections. Indeed, it is 'far easier to consider modern promises as broken but viable and fixable than to consider that they were always false and harmful' (Stein, 2019: 204).

The above disavowal may have persisted up to now (at huge cost to Earth and to people's lives) but we are at the point where it is no longer holding. The climate crisis makes it 'increasingly difficult to externalize the true costs of modernity's promises' (Stein, 2019: 202). We need to face these truths.

TOWARDS IMPLICATION

As Comhlámh, an organisation with roots in international volunteering and development, we have been trying to engage with these threads. Earlier this year, we began deliberating on a core organisational value: 'ecological sustainability'. At the very least, we wanted to pay attention to instances where, on questions of unsustainability, we might find ourselves skirting around interconnections and reaching for familiar, feel-good fixes.

In this work, we have found Audrey Bryan's (2022) application of the concept of 'the implicated subject' helpful. Bryan draws on Rothberg's (2019: 31) view of 'implication' as occupying a 'hard-to-pin-down position between victims and perpetrators that make them "transmission belts" of domination'. The implicated subject may not be the author of injustices but provides them with continued passage.

This approach raises difficult questions for us:

- Are we able to consider the ways in which 'development', 'international volunteering', 'partnership', etc. serve to normalise and reproduce unsustainability and inequality?
- What is our vision of a 'good place' beyond modernity for all?
- Are we afraid of the uncertainty this kind of visioning presupposes? Of what might come undone?

What we have learnt is that exploring implicated-ness requires more than conversations among colleagues. It requires tuning into the intellectual but also affective engagement in the room (uncertainty, defensiveness, discomfort), and methods which encourage honesty and authenticity.

There are no blueprints here and much of this is about trialling things. We therefore offer the following orientations tentatively, and based on our experiences to date:

- Find ways to start from 'depth' and expansiveness
- Find ways to slow down whilst considering the question 'who pays the price for the pace of my learning?'
- Open space between yourselves and the ideas that hold up unsustainability. Social cartographies are helpful: 'The House that Modernity Built' and other work by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective (2019) offer entry points into colonial-modernity.
- Be open to the possibility that explorations could be the undoing of how we have been seeing and doing.

- Pay attention to the affective engagement in the room. Implicated-ness doesn't offer absolution through an 'alternative way'.

We are indebted to the references, such as the work of below, which have supported our internal processes to date.

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