

Justice Matters

An interview with Larry Lohmann
The Corner House, UK

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LL: My name is Larry Lohmann and I work with a small organisation called The Corner House which does quite a lot of solidarity work, a lot of research as well which is connected with that solidarity work.

Q: Tell us about the kind of injustices your organisation faces

LL: We work together with a lot of different groups in a lot of different countries on a range of issues, most of them involving some kind of oppression, many of them involving some of kind of racism, some kind of neo-colonialism, and it could be on any one of a range of different topics. It could be people fighting against the encroachment on their land of commercial tree plantations; it might be people fighting carbon trading; it might be people involved in struggles over hydroelectric dams or large energy plants; it might be people fighting against the financialisation of nature or people victimised by the projects of large development organisations or even of European governments. So it's a range of issues involving injustices that we're involved with.

Q: What's driving these injustices?

LL: Well, for example, ecosystem services. This is a new economy, a new kind of trading where you're trading climate services, you're trading biodiversity services, you're trading things even like spiritual services supposedly. This is a new kind of thing which is impacting a lot of people on the ground who are seeing their land taken away for biodiversity or carbon projects, who are seeing their lives affected in many sorts of bad ways by these projects. And the question is: well, where does it come from? And I think this is a question that a lot of people are curious about, and we don't have any answers – any *clear* answers – to this yet. But it's a problem which we're working on.

One thing we do know, though, is that it's very much like some of the oppressive projects which we've experienced before. It involves new kinds of land grabs. It also involves the accumulation of capital. It's involved in the whole project of the accumulation of capital in a different way. For example, a lot of ecosystem services projects are intended to provide credits which can be used by different kinds of industry to evade regulation or to exempt themselves from regulation.

This is the kind of topic which you need to look at in a larger context, the larger context of capital accumulation, to see what kind of role that these projects play in this larger economy.

So I think this is one example of the kind of investigation and the kind of mutual discussion that we're having with our colleagues.

Q: What are you and your organisation doing to overcome these injustices?

LL: Our first priority when starting to work on a problem of this kind with groups that we trust is to have a discussion and to try to come to some kind of mutual enlightenment, mutual discussion, some kind of process which enables us to learn together. And from then we usually try to strategise together; to try to think of ways of expanding the political space which might be available to the people who are being oppressed by the policy or by the project. This is again a very mutual process. A lot of times we're called upon just to join in a discussion which people are already having in order to be able to deal with these challenges more effectively.

Q: What difficulties does your organisation face?

LL: Well, these are the standard difficulties that I think are faced by any groups, any movements, any networks which have been involved in countering oppression for centuries. We're up against a very difficult range of opponents.

One new challenge that faces us particularly in that we're located in Europe, in the North, is sometimes we have to get used to the idea that some of the people that we thought were our friends and allies are not actually our friends and allies. We've long had a troubled relationship with what's called environmentalism in Europe, in North America and in the industrialised world. On the one hand, we're used to calling *ourselves* environmentalists, but on the other hand we find that in many cases some of our worst enemies actually are environmentalists of a certain stripe. This has been a very painful lesson to us; we've had to learn to rethink who our friends are in the struggle against oppression and who are not our friends, and this sort of unsettles or shakes up the usual dividing lines. We find sometimes we're fighting against our so-called fellow environmentalists as much as we're fighting against the large corporations or the World Bank or oppressive governments.

Q: What needs to change to achieve justice?

LL: When the cry of injustice goes up from a crowd, it's usually an expression of a consciousness in the making: "What's happening to us? How can this happen? How does it work? Who is doing this to us? How are they making alliances *against* us? What alliances should *we* make?" This is sort of a dynamic process of discussion and enlightenment, and it involves what Ashish Nandy, the Indian political psychologist, used to call an expansion in the awareness of oppression above anything else.

This is very different from the concept of justice as a sort of technical term or as sort of what Raymond Williams called a "keyword", a sort of ready-made objective which can be achieved, the sort of thing that you can put into any existing project no matter how oppressive. You know, "let's take this project and make it more just", "let's put a little environmental justice into it", "let's cut down on consumption", for example, "let's make slavery sustainable".

That's a very different kind of concept of justice. And for me and for the people that I work with most closely, this is really not the kind of justice we work with. For us, justice is more a process of discovery of oppression and discovery of strategies for dealing with it.

Q: What would a just future look like?

LL: If we assume that justice is not a technical term or a sort of ready-made addition which you can pour into any existing project, then there's not really much content that you can assign to that question. I mean, I know what it would be to achieve a future in which children were no longer being poisoned by lead or by dioxin – that's clear. But I can't say that I know what a future in which justice would be achieved is like.

Malcolm X always used to say: Racism is like a Cadillac – there's a new model every year. And I think this is true of our work as well. I mean, today achieving a just future might be a matter of, among many, many other things, fighting against ecosystem services and the ecosystem services economy. But who knows what Cadillac will be coming down the road next year. So it's very difficult for me to answer that question in specific terms.