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IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19: REFLECTING ON SOCIAL WORK'S CLIMATIC FUTURE

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Article abstract

We have moved into an era some call the Anthropocene, a time when nothing is untouched by the seeming unending expansion of modern systems (political, economic, cultural, virtual) and their inevitable global impacts. In many ways, COVID-19 intensified our awareness of this global interconnectivity not only through contact-tracing the pandemic, but also through its varied impacts on modern systems that further highlighted our ongoing dance with global and local environmental changes. The interconnected nature of our climate of change is revealing to us the partial, dualistic and ultimately limited modern worldview that continues to constrict the social justice principles our vocation of social work holds as its ideal. Something is out of balance and we need to work upon this imbalance in ways that do not deny the loss, confusion, injustices and power-grabs highlighted in the wake of COVID-19. Through approaching our climate of change in this way, we are given an opportunity to reflect on social distancing in relation to honouring boundaries, the value of slowing down modern ways of living, and the need to look more closely at our modern blocks to a sustainable future on planet Earth; in other words our climatic truth-work. In this article, I reflect on what Canadian society, the social work profession and the international community have learned (or not learned) from the pandemic about the climate of cultural change before us.

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Abstract: We have moved into an era some call the Anthropocene, a time when nothing is untouched by the seeming unending expansion of modern systems (political, economic, cultural, virtual) and their inevitable global impacts. In many ways, COVID-19 intensified our awareness of this global interconnectivity not only through contact-tracing the pandemic, but also through its varied impacts on modern systems that further highlighted our ongoing dance with global and local environmental changes. The interconnected nature of our climate of change is revealing to us the partial, dualistic and ultimately limited modern worldview that continues to constrict the social justice principles our vocation of social work holds as its ideal. Something is out of balance and we need to work upon this imbalance in ways that do not deny the loss, confusion, injustices and power-grabs highlighted in the wake of COVID-19. Through approaching our climate of change in this way, we are given an opportunity to reflect on social distancing in relation to honouring boundaries, the value of slowing down modern ways of living, and the need to look more closely at our modern blocks to a sustainable future on planet Earth; in other words our climatic truth-work. In this article, I reflect on what Canadian society, the social work profession and the international community have learned (or not learned) from the pandemic about the climate of cultural change before us.

Abrégé: Nous sommes entrés dans une ère que certains appellent l'Anthropocène, une époque où rien n'est épargné par l'expansion apparemment sans fin des systèmes modernes (politiques, économiques, culturels, virtuels) et de leurs inévitables impacts mondiaux. À bien des égards, la pandémie de COVID-19 a intensifié notre prise de conscience

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de cette interconnexion mondiale, non seulement par le retraçage des contacts durant la pandémie, mais aussi par les impacts variés de celle-ci sur les systèmes modernes, qui ont mis en évidence nos ajustements continus face aux changements environnementaux, aux plans mondial et local. La nature interconnectée de notre climat de changement nous révèle la vision partielle, dualiste et finalement limitée du monde moderne qui continue à restreindre les principes de justice sociale que notre vocation, le travail social, considère son idéal. Nous faisons face à un déséquilibre et nous devons travailler sur celui-ci sans nier les pertes, la confusion, les injustices et les luttes de pouvoir mises en évidence dans le sillage de la COVID-19. En abordant notre climat de changement de cette manière, nous avons l'occasion de réfléchir à la distanciation sociale dans le sens du respect de nos propres limites, à la valeur du ralentissement des modes de vie modernes et à la nécessité d'examiner de plus près les obstacles modernes à un avenir durable sur la planète Terre; en d'autres termes, un travail de vérité climatique. Dans cet article, je réfléchis à ce que la société canadienne, la profession du travail social et la communauté internationale ont appris (ou pas) de la pandémie sur le climat de changement culturel qui nous attend.

AFTER MORE THAN TWO YEARS OF THE COVID-19 pandemic and its isolation, it is hard to not get pulled along by the enthusiasm to reopen, socialize, put our masks away, and seemingly pick up where we left off in early 2020. Though, as with many, I feel this pull like a gravitational force, I think it is important for us to pause and reflect on the challenging climatic reality of where we were and still are, and of what we could have learned and perhaps still can learn from COVID-19 as we search for a sustainable and just future.

When the pandemic began to enter public consciousness in January 2020, the focus in Canada was on a host of Indigenous protests concerning the national government's decision to build pipelines across sovereign Indigenous territory. The traditional chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation in British Columbia announced they had "unanimously opposed all pipeline proposals and have not provided free, prior, and informed consent to Coastal Gaslink/TransCanada" (Unist'ot'en, 2020). Not far from where I was teaching truth and reconciliation to social workers in southern Ontario, the Mohawk communities of Tyendinaga and Kahnawake enacted their support by blockading Canada's busiest rail corridors. Across Canada, thousands joined protests that called for a change in the way colonial governments and institutions relate with Indigenous nations and the land. The preceding months had also seen climate strikes spread across the planet, calling for a change of modern politics, economics, and ethics. This growing movement was then halted by a pandemic that global environmental research had predicted as one

inevitable result of unrestrained modern pressures on the lands, waters, and air that sustain life on Earth.

In many ways, COVID-19 intensified our awareness of global interconnectivity not only through contact-tracing the pandemic, but also the dance of environmental changes with our modern activities. In the first half-year of COVID-19, stories emerged about how the slowing of human movement led to the canals of Venice clearing enough to see through the water again; the air in urban centres becoming less smoggy; rats, birds, and foxes increasing their presence in silenced cities; and global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions finally decreasing. A momentary constriction of the modern growth economy and related systems that dominate the planet was sensed by many of our living relations as a space of regenerative potential. As the summer of 2020 closed and 2021 began, the “silver lining” stories of the pandemic shifted toward darker storms. A record number of hurricanes appeared in the Atlantic Ocean. Forest fires along the west coast of Turtle Island (North America) turned the skies orange and grey, while the spreading smoke brought a haze to large swaths of the continent. To the south, the Amazon rainforest burned at unprecedented rates just as the comparatively new corporate giant Amazon.com posted record profits as the easiest place for isolated humans to get virtually anything they desired.

We have moved into an era some call the Anthropocene, a time when nothing is untouched by the seemingly unending expansion of modern systems (political, economic, cultural, virtual) and their inevitable global impacts. Local changes, which can be observed wherever we live, are related to global climate processes that led, in 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to intensify their warning that we must phase out fossil fuels by 2030 to limit catastrophic changes (IPCC, 2018). It was in the midst of the pandemic that the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) released its position statement on climate change and social work (Schibli, 2020). The human-centric nature of the profession meant it took about three decades of escalating climate crises, scientific research like that synthesized by the IPCC, and Indigenous activists’ calls for GHG reductions before the social work profession in Canada produced this statement. One of its points about the social context of COVID-19’s emergence states: “emission reductions that exploit developing nations [and Indigenous peoples in colonial nation-states like Canada] and do not require a change in consumption patterns will do little to address the global crisis we are all facing” (Schibli, 2020, p. 6). These dynamics have intensified over the past two years, and I want to reflect here on what Canadian society, the social work profession, and the international community have learned — or not learned — from the pandemic about the climate of cultural change before us.

“As a profession founded in principles of social justice, CASW acknowledges the reality of climate change and encourages social

workers to educate, advocate, and be the change they want to see in the world” (Schibli, 2020, p. 3). Thus began CASW’s Executive Summary to its position statement on climate change and social work, which then added a Canadian-specific lens by stating, “the impacts of climate change are most prominent in what is taking shape in northern communities” (Schibli, 2020, p. 9) where Inuit ways of living are being impacted by a host of consequences on mental health and well-being. Melting glaciers and ice, shifting lands and water, changing animal migration patterns, and impacts on Inuit culture have become established features of life in a warming north. Attempting to clarify the social implications of these changes, CASW quotes Inuit climate activist and author of *The Right to be Cold* (2015), Sheila Watt-Cloutier: “Teaching wisdom on the land and the ice is the hallmark of Inuit culture. It is not only the ice that is at risk of being lost, but the wisdom that comes with it” (Schibi, 2020, p. 11). In other words, climate change is impacting the world around the Inuit and thus the culture itself. But, as I discuss elsewhere, climate change is also a cultural issue for modern systems and nations like Canada (see Leduc 2010; 2016), a point that is reflected in the ongoing blocks to a sustainable response and the events that unfolded amidst COVID-19.

Under the cloak of the pandemic’s uncertainty, Canadian politicians have been reigniting the economy in predictable ways like speeding up oil pipeline construction, real estate developments, and highway expansions across Indigenous lands and green corridors. From fish and fur to forests, minerals, and oil, resource extraction is the root of Canada’s identity as a colonial nation. These origins were on display at the December 2015 Paris UN Climate Change Conference, and in the years that followed. Amid a barrage of optimistic headlines like “The Paris agreement marks an unprecedented recognition of the risks of climate change” (2015) and the conference’s self-acclaimed “Major leap for mankind,” some critics expressed more restraint. Perhaps the strongest critics were Indigenous activists like Watt-Cloutier and the Indigenous Environmental Network, which has “long spoken about the failures of the UN process and the environmental movement” for catering to corporate interests (Paquette, 2016). One key concern was that Canadian, American, and European delegations were causing “reference to the ‘rights of Indigenous peoples’ to be cut from the binding portion of the Paris Agreement, relegating the only mention of Indigenous rights to the purely aspirational preamble” (Paquette, 2016). This colonial dynamic is a haunting echo of the 1783 Treaty of Paris that came to define the borders of what became the United States and Canada without mentioning the land’s Indigenous peoples. It is a dynamic that, between attempts to take global leadership around GHG emissions and the suppression of Indigenous environmental protests of pipelines, paralyzes Canadian climate politics, all while touting the truth and reconciliation process.

Beyond the Inuit experience of a warming north, other regions around the planet are being impacted by droughts, heatwaves, forest fires, extreme hurricanes, and flooding. While these changes are occurring out in the world, it is becoming clear that the most important locus of change needs to be in modern ways of relating *with the world*. As Naomi Klein succinctly puts it in her popular account of climate change, we are being given “a civilizational wake-up call” that is speaking powerfully “in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions” (2014, p. 25). And what is the world saying? We need to reimagine, in her words, “the very idea of the collective, the communal, the commons, the civil, and the civic” (2014, p. 25). Similarly, Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Great Derangement* writes that we should “make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (2016, p. 9). Dominant modern ways of storytelling and knowledge-making are directly related to the dearth of wholistic cultural responses to our climate crisis, a pattern that partakes in economic, political, and academic tendencies that are bound up with colonialism.

The interdependence of all the elements that make up life on Earth is central to what the environmental sciences and eco-humanities have been rediscovering, and make no mistake that this is a modern *re*-discovery of what Indigenous ways of knowing have long attested to. The difference today is that we are learning about this interdependence from a planetary climate of change, one that is responsive to the fragmentary and violent ways of modern worldviews. When I went to work in a northern Indigenous community following the completion of a graduate degree in social work in the mid-1990s, I was unprepared to consider the possibility that our Earthly relations had any relevance to the health of individuals, communities, nations, cultures, or even the human species. Earth, as the context of our modern lives and social work practice, was discussed less than the occasional reference to Indigenous worldviews, colonial impacts, systemic injustices, and the role of social work in that violence. But to be clear, this fragmentary perspective is not limited to social work, for it pervades the disciplines of the modern university. Highlighting one manifestation of this issue, Michael M’Gonigle and Justine Starke ask in *Planet U*: “What does it mean when an institution ‘ churns out students whose entire training is rooted in an assumption of unending economic growth’ and then across campus environmental researchers highlight the unsustainable nature of such growth?” (2006, p. 33). The division of knowledge into hard sciences, social sciences, the humanities, and even social work can be seen either as a mistaken assumption of modernity, or as a more problematic systemic tool for maintaining the shapeshifting forms of colonial violence.

While CASW’s statement highlights social work’s responsibility to support northern Indigenous communities, such an impetus to help “others” can also deflect where our primary advocacy work for just change

needs to be focused — that is, on colonial systems that act as if creation (land, water, climate) is separate from our ways of living. I cannot help but think of Cindy Blackstock’s cautionary words to social workers in light of our profession’s colonial legacy of the residential schools and the child welfare system that ensued: “The notion of improving other people is endemic to social work. It is both a source of moral nobility and trepidation. It implies an ability to define accurately another’s deficit, to locate its importance in [their] life and assumes the efficacy of external motivations and sensibilities to change” (2009, p. 31). As much as social justice principles are our ideals, the truth is that we unquestioningly served the residential schools and continue to benefit from an unjust child welfare system, not to mention the myriad of other ways the profession grew on the backs of Indigenous and marginalized communities. Challenging social workers to look at the racial dimensions of these dynamics, Anishinaabe scholar Gus Hill (2021) states: “The majority of you, my colleagues, are of White ancestry. I, too, have White ancestors. Whiteness is not about being White. I contend that Whiteness is about the embodiment of unchecked colonial privilege. I have it, you have it, we all have it. What do we ‘do’ with ‘it’?” (p. 61).

The wholistic nature of Indigenous knowledge offers us a way of seeing the climate crisis as inextricably knotted to colonial ways of dividing knowledge and approaching land as resources to be owned, rather than as relations to be engaged socially. This is one reason that Anishinaabe-kwe social worker Kathy Absolon states that land-based decolonization of our profession requires the following:

(1) living consciously in one’s connection to the Earth; (2) resisting indoctrination into Eurowestern values and ways of life; (3) identifying values and principles that uphold Creation, humanity, and social equity; and (4) carrying those values into all aspects of personal and professional life. (2019, p. 48)

Truth and reconciliation challenges social workers to find ways of situating our values, ethics, theories, and practice within the land, water, air, and energetic relations that make up the climate of our lives.

Watching the so-called “Freedom Convoy” protests of early 2022 from the safe distance of my home, I could not help but notice some striking similarities with the climate denial movement of the past two decades and, more deeply, colonialism. The first is the expectation that Western governments need to uphold individual rights over collective well-being. The luxuries and privileges afforded to some by the legacy of fossil fuels and other forms of unrestrained resource extraction must be maintained for the benefit of the few, and any social response that tries to curtail that belief is resisted through circular narratives marked by a denial of social responsibility and, oftentimes, outright racism. Second, the focus of the denial is rather difficult and slippery to grab hold of. In relation to climate change, it began with a negation of the reality of

climate change itself, then the role of fossil fuels and modern societies in those changes, followed by a shift to how the impacts will not be all that bad, how our technologies will provide a solution in time, and so on — anything but holding ourselves relationally accountable to each other and the world. For the Freedom Convoy, the diatribes around vaccinations, mask mandates, social distancing, and anything else that limits “individual freedoms” were the focus of resistance. Neither movement recognizes how our Earthly relations are actively responding to out-of-control modern ways of living, as well as those so-called freedoms.

The Freedom Convoy movement starkly demonstrates how wrapped-up modern Canadian society is in privileged narratives that deny a real relational connection and responsibility to the broader world. Recognizing the extent to which our political, educational, and professional systems hold features of this worldview, the influence this movement had in Canada should not be surprising. In its wake, the economy and society quickly shifted into high gear, lifting mask mandates and moving toward voluntary vaccination. I cannot help but reflect on the words of François Boudreau and Gus Hill in their editorial introduction to the special COVID-19 volume of this journal as they highlight the conflict between social work’s “responsibility to stand up for the wellness and safety of those who suffer the most,” and a society that “appears to prioritize money at the expense of human lives and connection” (2020, p. 154). Considering these addictive cultural tendencies, it appears that protest movements in the spirit of the Freedom Convoy will likely continue to be a fault line where modern and colonial privilege hold on for dear life in the face of intensifying climate issues and their global interactions with ecological collapses, food system impacts, shapeshifting pandemics, and justice-seeking social movements like those of Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Land Back.

The interconnected nature of our climate of change is revealing to us the partial, dualistic, and ultimately limited modern worldview that continues to constrict the social justice principles our vocation holds as their ideal — and thus allows us to perpetuate inherently colonizing dynamics. Something is out of balance, and we need to work upon this imbalance in ways that do not deny losses, confusion, injustices, and power-grabs. When I approach our climate of change in this way, I cannot help but reflect on social distancing in relation to the act of honouring boundaries, the need to slow down modern ways of living, and the value of taking time to look at our modern blocks to a sustainable future; in other words, our climatic truth-work. From COVID-19, we could have learned about all of this as being vital to a sustainable and just climate change response.

Two years after the onset of the pandemic, we are trying to speed up and return to a fictional normal that is the root of our climate of change. I am reminded of the questions that Boudreau and Hill conclude with in

their editorial: “Do we need to call for a refunding and reinforcement of the social safety net? For a green economic recovery?” (2020, p. 157). The answer to both is “yes,” because a sustainable social safety net is ultimately dependent upon the health of our Earth relations, and to continue dividing the two is to be caught in those faulty modern assumptions that are fuelling our climate of change. If we decide to take up the Earth-based decolonizing journey as described so beautifully by Absolon, then social work will have to more fully embody some key principles that will fundamentally transform our profession:

- (1) We need to make social work *earth-based* by resituating our social work theories and practices within Earth relations as they manifest locally and globally, including a broadening of social justice to environmental justice in a context in which we are responding to emerging and intensifying climate crises over the next century.
- (2) We need to make social work *Indigenous-informed* by grounding our values in land and climate, wholistically weaving once-divided knowledges of the academy, and honouring diversity through relational accountability to people (cultures), land, climate, and the mysterious spirit that gifts all life.
- (3) We need to *slow down and decolonize* our practice so as to not serve unsustainable growth-based systems that fuel our climate of change and the conditions for disaster capitalism — systems that include economic growth, and the way those growth principles play out in the universities where we teach, and the profession itself.

In the wake of COVID-19 and the intensifying climate change events, our profession will have to continue facing the truth of our colonial roots and our commitment to justice. A choice is before us as social workers: will we simply become a kind of social mop-up crew whose actions are constrained by these unfolding local and global crises, and thus serve the dominant economic interests and cultural worldview that continues to benefit from the destruction of the long-term viability of life on Earth? Will we become servants of a societal economy that is based on the principles of unending growth and thus, increasingly, what Klein describes as disaster capitalism? Or will we take our places as supporters of justice and truth-work, and take up internal cultural change as the only means to slowly guide our many intertwined communities to a sustainable and vital future? We must struggle with these difficult questions in our ways of educating and practicing social work if we are to make a conscious choice going forward, rather than being simply reactive to our climate of change.

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