



**The Social handprint: Understanding decentred  
citizen agency and UK UnCut**

by

**Bronwyn Hayward**

**RESOLVE Working Paper 06-10**



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## **Abstract**

Handprint imagery has emerged spontaneously in recent discourses of sustainability as various attempts are made in education programmes, new social movements and green business to rally citizens to 'reduce their ecological footprint and increase their handprint', that is to take action to restore degraded environments, reduce carbon emissions and/or address ecological and social injustice.

In this paper I highlight problematic assumptions about the agency of citizenship, which are embedded in these visions of individual handprints. I define agency here in this working paper discussion as the capability of an individual to freely develop independent thoughts (will formation) and exercise autonomy (freely choosing to act or refrain from acting on that thought) (See Barber 1984). I then turn to draw on the ideas of Iris Young (2006), Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) and Bonnie Honig (2009) and the writings of authors in ecological citizenship (Dobson 2003) and Bookchin (1990) to inform an alternative vision of a *social* handprint of collective action. In the latter vision, agency is expressed as will formation and autonomy for action and demonstrated in a variety of 'decentred' ways as collective action and resistance across time and space to imagine and create new or alternative futures.

To illustrate my discussion I make some suggestive comments in closing about the new turn that consumer politics has taken in recent weeks in the wake of student protests in London. I consider the emergence of UKUncut as a decentred expression of collective and creative social agency which is offering resistance and questioning the social contract, particularly asking what do businesses owe the wider community in the wake of failed economic growth strategies?

## **1. Competing visions of Sustainability**

My exploration of handprint thinking is set against the tension between two schools of sustainability. The first is a policy managerialist approach which aims to 'solve' environmental symptoms of degradation, but not necessarily challenge the economic or political power imbalances and social injustices that may act as the drivers of degradation (Ophuls 1973; or for critical commentary see Hajer 1995). The second is a disruptive cultural and philosophical project aimed at rethinking the trajectories of resource consumption and our expectations about governance and fostering social justice within ethical, cultural and physical limits (Christie 1996; Dobson 2003; Eckersley 2003; Hayward 2008; Jackson 1996 and 2009; Jasanoff 2010; Leach et al. 2010; Leichenko and O'Brien 2008; MacGregor 2010; Matthews 1996; Midgley 1995; Soper 2008; Shiva, 2005).

In sympathy with the latter project, and to extend it, I draw on Iris Young's ideas of 'decentring' which resonates with Arendt's concept of 'natality', and Honig's vision of 'emergence' to offer an alternative vision a social handprint as the imprint of embedded social struggle, holding hands in a vision of ecological citizenship where we might draw strength from our mutual vulnerability and dependency acting in solidarity over time.

## **2. From Ecological Foot Prints to Social Handprints**

In recent times we have seen a rapid shift in the discourse of sustainability politics from impact assessment (measured by ecological footprints), towards citizenship as agency (depicted in social handprint models). In 1996, Wackernagel and Rees published their ground breaking Ecological Footprint model, a tool that graphically represented the physical space required for meeting the needs of a given population through manufacturing, distribution, consumption and waste (Wackernagel and Rees 1996, pp.51-52). The model sparked other ways of measuring human consumption and impact on the environment, including carbon footprints (Druckman and Jackson 2009; Wiedman and Minx 2007), or water foot printing (Hoektra and Chapagain 2005).

While the concept of the social handprint may be novel in comparison to the ecological footprint, the use of handprint images in human rights and environmental campaigns and in religious practice to reflect and evoke the idea of human agency is not. In this paper I reflect on the way the social handprint is used to represent the 'centred' capacity of individuals to take action at a point in time and in a particular place to address environmental degradation and social injustice. I explore the strengths and limitations of this approach before presenting an alternative vision of effective human agency, as decentred, tentative, vulnerable, dependent, and open to others, beginning from uncertainty and acting humbly. I make a case for thinking about the smaller but longer term transformative potential of thinking about human agency as social, tentative, partial and mutually dependent action and reflection over time.

Critical feminist theorists and community activists will not be surprised by the plethora of handprint models that have emerged in recent years: in environmental education, in campaigns by social movements and in the green economy. But they have caught the environmental and sustainable discourse by surprise. In each case citizens are urged to: reduce their ecological footprint and increase their handprint.

The political, and gender implications of these social handprint models are ambivalent. On one 'hand' they represent an Aristotelian return to active citizenship in environmental politics. On the other 'hand' they can also reinforce unexamined notions of self-help citizenship in which individuals attempt to 'fix' environmental symptoms, but leave underlying issues of justice and economic growth unchallenged. They raise a variety of questions about whose handprint is it? Under what conditions and when can we effect change, or fail to effect change? Who should act under what conditions, and why?

Firstly, handprints are increasingly used in environmental education programmes to represent an individual's 'action competence', that is their skills and capabilities to effect desired change (Jensen and Schnack 1997; Bishop and Scott 1998). One of the most prominent education handprint models was launched at the 4th International

Environmental Education Conference in 2007 (UNESCO 2007), and subsequently refined at the Knowledge Conference in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia in 2008 as a 'Hands for change' programme by the Centre for Environmental Education (CEE, 2009; Gunawardene, 2008). The CEE programme aimed to raise awareness about sustainability and assist individuals to assess the efficacy of their actions to address ecological degradation and social injustice. CEE developed an online web tool which asked people a range of questions such as, 'Do you make conscious efforts to conserve / save water?... Do you eat locally grown fresh food? Are you involved in activities that strengthen relationships between different generations in your community....Do you ever share any of your income or resources with other people (not your family or employees) or charitable organisations?'(CEE 2009).

Secondly, social handprints are often used by non-governmental organisations to mobilize citizen action. In this context social handprints suggest it is possible and morally imperative for individuals take action to address environmental injustice. For example, "if environmental degradation or social injustice is the negative effect of my life style...my handprint is what I do about it" (Edinburgh Transition, 2010). Similarly the 'Your positive handprint campaign' (Figure Two) aimed to 'commit 1 million people globally to look beyond reducing their carbon footprint,...to take positive action '...to restore the great ecosystems around the planet; forests, oceans, freshwater, tundra, corals and the soils' (Restore the Earth 2009). The Catholic peace and justice organisation CAFOD mobilized members join a protest march with handprint imagery arguing „our climate is in our hands" in London before the Copenhagen Summit in December 2009 (CAFOD 2009, Figure Three).

Thirdly social handprint models are increasingly used in the green economy. For example the company Carbon Handprint UK argues, 'Your carbon footprint is your effect on our planet, your handprint is what you do about it' (Carbon handprint UK 2010). Their website encourages consumers and business to enlarge their handprint by engaging in a range of actions from „off setting Christmas shopping to adopting an „Eco-code" in the work place (Carbon Handprint, 2010). Other schemes call

for businesses to develop a “deliberate environmental handprint” by developing pro-environmental technology (Viridian 2006).

### **3. The Social Handprint: rethinking assumptions about human agency**

The ambiguity of social handprints reflects competing assumptions about human agency in the context of on-going debate between two broad schools of thought about sustainability. The first is a managerial approach that seeks to effect behaviour change at the individual level but not necessarily challenge dominant models of economic growth, or social justice. The second is an alternative, disruptive cultural and philosophical project aimed at rethinking current trajectories of resource consumption, ideas about what makes a good life and expectations of citizenship and governance in a changing environment (Christie 1996; Dobson 2003; Eckersley 2003; Hayward 2008; Jackson 1996 and 2009; Jasanoff 2010; Leach et al. 2010; Leichenko and O'Brien 2008; MacGregor 2010; Matthews 1996; Midgley 1995; Soper 2008; Shiva 2005).

At one level the emerging handprint models resonate with powerful political symbolism of citizen activism and resistance that has inspired environmental, civil rights and indigenous people's movements. Viewed in this light, social handprint models reflect a welcome turn in sustainability discourse towards citizenship as action. As Barry notes this approach differs from the dominant ideas of human wellbeing expressed through consuming. In the Aristotelian vision wellbeing is achieved by participation, by doing or being (Barry, 1999 pp. 180-181).

However not all social handprint models encourage active citizenship or questioning of the underlying social practices of consumption and growth. Some models of social handprint less the imprint of a citizen and more the handprints of a green-consumer or perhaps a civic-gardener. Green –consumers and civic-gardeners take remedial action to address environmental degradation for example by purchasing environmentally friendly products or engaging in local, small scale ecological restoration projects. These efforts may be worthy and important, but largely



ineffectual if their effect is to leave wider patterns of investment, consumption and systemic injustice largely unchallenged or worse to impose the views of a few citizens, about what is the problem and what the appropriate solution on others is. Psychologist Albert Bandura illustrated the underlying limitations of consumer-citizenship in particular when he argued:

As long as consumers “daily needs are met, they have little incentive to examine the humaneness of the working conditions, the level of pollution by the production processes, and the costs exacted on the environment to produce, ship, and market the profusion of goods and dispose the wastes. Under these modernised conditions, lifestyle practices are disconnected in time and place from the very ecological systems that provide the basis for them” (Bandura, 2007, pp. 14).

Social handprint models should encourage agency and enable citizens to reconnect lifestyle practice with time and spatial consequences of their actions, a link Bandura argues has been disconnected through globalisation and export economies which make it difficult for people to consider the indirect effects of their choices and everyday practices on countless distant others (Bandura, 2007; Eckersley, 2004, pp. 242). Viewed in this light, we could envisage social handprint models as ways to reinvigorate debates about whether we have an obligation to ameliorate the harm we have caused (Pogge, 2002 pp. 30-31). Considering their social handprint might enable citizens to critically reflect on how their agency could make a difference „for good” (Dobson 2003).

Alternatively however, handprint models may simply reinforce uncritical assumptions about the value of individual action. For example the CEE quiz style ‘handprint calculator’; allocates more positive agency points for sustainable actions taken by individuals than actions taken on city, community, nation or state level (CEE 2009). This suggests individual agency is preferable to collective action yet fails to account for the way the choices of individuals may be constrained or mediated by their context including social institutions, norms, habits and the structures of the economy (Giddens 2009; 50-57, Jackson 2008, Seyfang, 2005; Druckman and Jackson,

2009). Despite their best efforts and intentions citizens may find themselves wearing ill-fitting 'institutional shoes' that distort the size of their ecological footprint, or "social gloves" that hamper their ability to effect change.

An emphasis on individual agency can be understood in light of many years of neo-liberal policy. Neo-liberalism is used in a variety of ways but commonly refers to a policy project which aims to extend free market values including values of efficiency, competition and choice to citizenship and the state (Larner 2000; Ong 2004, O'Brien et al 2009). Neoliberalism has equated good citizenship with citizen-entrepreneur, or citizen-consumer behaviour at the expense of social citizenship or engagement in collective decision making about the common good (Dobson 2010; Igoe and Brockington 2006).

The turn towards social handprints in sustainability also raises questions about the value of action. John Elliot (2010) argues after Arendt (1958) that taking action is important, but taking time to pause and engage in dialogue is also critical. Making room for dialogue and listening seems a prudent strategy if we wish to develop an idea of "determinative morality", or a vision of what we ought to do, not just what we ought not to do (Dobson 2003 and Dobson and Valencia-Saiz, 2005). Making space for reflection before launching into action also matters given the reach and grasp of some citizens. Aided by global communication, strengthened by financial investment and international infrastructure, the capability of some to define the problem, identify solutions and leave indelible handprints on the futures and pasts of distant others is inestimable and undesirable. For example Restoration of the Earth calls for citizen action to rescue "great ecosystems" yet mobilising a global campaign threatens to marginalise the values of small indigenous communities (Hayward 2008). Given the limits of our understanding, our aim should be not to always increase our handprint, but to ensure we have a light touch, taking agency in ways that are reversible and humble rather than heroic, and our actions should be taken with the consent of those affected (Freedon 2009). Luce Irigaray puts this problem another way when she argues "Freedom must, at every moment, limit its expansion

in order to respect other existing beings and, even more, to find ways of forming with them a world always in becoming where it is possible for each human or non-human living being to exist- or ex-ist". (Irigaray, 2008)

Furthermore some social handprint models implicitly suggest we should take action. However the experience of indigenous communities also reminds us that sometimes no amount of 'action' can "put right" a suffering, loss or injustice (Walker 2004). In these situations listening, empathy and compassion matters. For example the Australian Sea of Hands campaign for reconciliation aims to highlight shared responsibility for past injustices of war, colonisation, domination and genocide (Sea of Hands 2008). This campaign reminds us that actions do not always speak louder than words. Bearing witness in formal truth, justice and reconciliation tribunals is also important (Gibson et al 2008; Dobson, 2010a).

#### **4. Rethinking agency, as natality and emergence in decentred contexts**

Handprints are often thought about as incriminating evidence at the scene of a crime. This centring approach is unhelpful however if it encourages us to restrict our agency to our own immediate community or to play ecological detective, identifying 'who dunnit' in environmental crimes. Accountability in decision making is important, but centring blame for ecological problems when things go wrong or focusing our efforts around a small locality risks shifting our focus from the wider structural causes of environmental and social injustice (Hayward, 2008; Young 2006). The centred symbol of a handprint, focused on understanding change in one place and one point in time can leave systemic unchallenged, especially where we narrow our idea of responsibility and ignore the wider responsibilities of others who benefit from a chain of human suffering (Dobson 2007, pp174-175; Barry 2003).<sup>i</sup>

Many environmental problems are experienced at the local level, however taking local action alone risks policy irrelevance or injustice (Hayward 2008; Young 2006). To think about human impact as an imprint at one place, in one time, overlooks the potential for citizens to connect empathetically with others. Handprints may inhibit

new understanding of citizenship as dependency rather than autonomy. Reducing citizenship to individual autonomy of action overlooks the opportunity to think about citizenship as a quality of human connectedness, 'holding hands' in our mutual dependency and vulnerability with others to effect change.

The plethora of social handprint models emerging in discussion about environmental change provides a chance to rethink our impact as citizens and ways our actions might restore social and ecological justice. Our handprint could be that of a steward or guardian in a local community. Yet to be effective in an era of global environmental change we also need to take action at multiple levels to help ensure our proposed solutions are not simply displacing or obfuscating the problems. Non-governmental organisations, the media and citizens' tribunals have a role to play in this process (see also Eckersley 2004, pp. 243-254). While endless deliberation can drain a minority's resources, informed public reasoning and inclusive deliberation enables us to ensure that global actions are taken in ways that are also sensitive to locally defined needs and concerns and that actors can be held accountable to those communities. Dobson argues that our justice actions should be asymmetrical, we should not take action in expectation others will reciprocate, but because we think it's the right thing to do, 'I will even if you won't' (Dobson, 2010b p22- 23).

At the risk of overstatement of difference, my point of departure is ground in the context of indigenous communities who have experienced the devastating legacy of actions by former colonial powers. Action should be informed by the consent of local communities to whom you feel obligation. Despite their problematic legacy, a modified notion social contract may be preferable to charity or an assumed mantle of obligation. (O'Brien et al 2009; Hayward and O'Brien 2010; Pateman and Mills 2007). In the New Zealand situation for example, a treaty, even where dishonoured, has proved a very important vehicle for on-going reflection about grievances of colonisation (J. Hayward 2003; Walker 2004). Acting without mechanisms to ensure our agency is consented to, can exacerbate injustice.

Both Hannah Arendt and Bonnie Honig have portrayed the possibilities of human action as uncertain and unknowable. In an era in which the paternal liberalism of behavioural economics has entered new heights in environmental planning, and where it can be assumed and is assumed that individuals can be „nudged“ unthinkingly into new habits of supposedly desirable behaviour simply by altering the choice architecture of policy institutions and frameworks (Thaler and Sunstein 2009 193-210), I find Arendt and Honig’s validation of the importance of imaginative action, a breath of fresh air.

One difficulty with the way environmental problems are framed at the moment is that they are characterised as urgent emergencies, which limits our opportunity for reflective democratic action (Hayward and O’Brien 2010; Honig, 2009). This approach also overlooks the complexity of environmental problems. As wicked problems, the science community understands there is no easy choice. But the question is wider than one of complexity, it is a question of moral tragedy or as Honig would say, some of the very difficult environmental problems we face today, questions of food insecurity, drought, and environmental justice, may be tragic situations in which we find we must act, because even not to act is to take action where in acting no action seems desirable (Honig, 2009: pp. 5).

The simplicity of behavioural economics and psychology approaches which implicitly suggest environmental problems can be addressed if we are simply cajoled into doing the right thing, changing our habits by unthinking, uncritical action, not only obfuscate, but also exacerbate the moral dilemmas and difficult decisions we face by failing to acknowledge severity of the issues, the scale of human suffering and the need for engaged, careful thought and action.

Moreover our agency is not exercised autonomously- and this is why I remain wary of lone handprint images. In reality effective human agency is supported by interactions with others, not simply the impact of one person on the material. Arendt decentres human agency and action when she reminds us that political action is

never taken alone but in concert with other (Arendt 1958; pp189). Honig extends Arendt's ideas about the limitless potential for something new, unforeseen in action as natality.

Honig's challenge to anyone who advocates nudge, or even more deliberative democratic approaches is to remind theorists and activists alike that both these world views rest on ideas about rational unitary beginning places, they imagine we all somehow begin to take action or begin deliberation from an indefinable defined place in time and that it is what happens next that legitimates subsequent action or decisions (Honig 2010). I suggest even Irigaray might intimate this when she argues that to begin to meet others you need to know the place you have started from (Irigaray 2008). Growing up surrounded by indigenous cultural traditions I acknowledge the power of this symbolism and feel drawn to it. But now living as an immigrant I recall that many displaced people, refugees, those whose lives have been made chaotic by the actions of others, have no similar resources to draw on.

For these reasons I find it helpful to consider the way that Honig, like Young, resists all cantered approaches to politics –arguing this fails to acknowledge the way that real life politics is messy, decentred, and that while we attempt to give voice to the local community in one point in time and in one place, we risk overlooking the way power is increasingly concentrated globally and resistance needs to be decentred and targeted at all levels to be effective (Young 2006; Hayward 2008). However I also argue that it is often at the level of the local, when we come to know and experience our community that we also experience our deepest struggles for justice and it is in these communities we want to make a difference (Hayward 2008). The challenge however is to find ways to connect with others in this experience of local struggle in ways which enable local voices to challenge regional and global power inequalities which limit or dominate their life experiences.

Honig presents an agonistic view of politics, celebrating decentred struggle rather than grater public deliberation. She puts the case for popular, collective action taken

in concert everywhere as a way to empower popular sovereignty. She argues, like Iris Young, that the dominant trend in deliberative politics privileges those who can express their concerns through rational argument and to cedes decision making authority to external institutions who exercise external scrutiny of these deliberative processes. She argues instead that we need to retain our focus on local communities and their struggles and at the same time decentre our thinking across time. The issues that matter are not only how we act and what we say in one community at one point in time or in one place but how our actions affect others and how we might feel later, over time. Decentring struggle as well as dialogue enables us to take the long view, to better understand 'the struggle without end' as Maori author and legal scholar Ranganui Walker describes it (Walker 2004). In facing difficult challenges and thinking about how we will feel about the actions we take today, when we reflect on them over time, Honig argues we can deepen our human experience in very difficult situations. To extend Honig's argument, other words the imprint that matters may not be the social handprint we leave behind when addressing difficult environmental changes, but the way those experiences change us.

Pogge, (2002, p 29) puts a related challenge for rethinking handprint models of human agency in the face of global problems- his work suggests we should consider the fuller effects of our lifestyles in consumer economies and how these enslave or harm distant others (Pogge 2002). Pogge also argues that the efficacy of our actions and our interactions with others need to be judged across space and time- often fully understood well beyond our lifetime, and in light of what went before and what those who come after us do.

It is when we interact with others that new possibilities are created. One of the most powerful models of new possibilities of human agency and connection has been articulated over many years by Vandana Shiva. Shiva, like Irigaray, calls for an understanding the potential for human action as connection at multiple levels, and as action that is not presented as mastery or ownership but by as connections of compassion and struggle. Shiva says the human agency that really matters is "what

we do in between” major events (Shiva 2005: 11). This idea of seeing what we do, where we are women acting in-between major events is picked up again and again by feminist philosophers and reflects the on-going centuries of struggle below the surface of dominant politics to achieve new voice and new forms of agency.

##### **5. Discovering the Seeds of Decentred Social Agency: the Emergence of UKUnCut**

This desire to understand our agency and its potential for change in connection with others (rather than simply regarding agency through handprint models that portray humans impacting on the material world) resonates in a fascinating way this week with the youth political and consumer movements in London called UK uncut.

In closing I want to briefly turn to highlight these youthful protests and the potential for new beginnings we can see here. In the last week, students protesting fees have begun to protest outside Topshop and Vodafone and Miss Selfridges and other stores they argue are not paying their fair share of tax here in Britain.

What is different and important about the Un-uk protests is we can see consumer politics taking a new turn, as young citizens demand we rethink the social contract regarding what businesses owe to their local and regional communities and states (Guardian 2010). This picks up and echoes the protest of Indian women the Plachimada, whose protest against Coca Cola were highlighted by Shiva in her book *Earth Democracy* (Shiva, 2005). The students in London this week who block access to shops and businesses are also highlighting the injustice of cutting public services and passing this debt to individuals via dramatically increased study fees or health costs while the state continues to support business/ growth strategies which fail to 'benefit all' but instead undermine the environment and the community (Jackson 2009).

What will make this a really interesting turn in political agency is if these local movements can then also decentre, connect and support the similar protests about multinational businesses and what they owe the communities in which they are located globally. If this happens we may begin to see a wider spread, effective



challenge to the practices of consumption and business investment which have enabled western lifestyles to benefit from the suffering of distant others.

Suddenly as Honig and Arendt and Young suggest we should, we begin to see how our actions can be connected and ways we are mutually dependent as citizens in our suffering, albeit in different ways. Suddenly we also see the limits of a handprint-capturing agency at a point in time. What matters about the student debate is the way that political action is shifting a discourse and thinking. Perhaps the imprints we should note are the harsh negative impacts and externalities of growth and investment capital that impact on both the environment and its citizens (Young, 2007; Pogge 2002). We need some model other than a handprint however to symbolise social struggle and resistance.

## **6. Conclusion: Social handprints or holding hands?**

In this paper I have welcomed the return to Aristotelian concepts of active citizenship in the face of environmental change, symbolised in the emergence of social handprint thinking. However I argue our agency should not be measured as individual actions, taken at one place, and time but should be thought of as “decentred”, collective efforts across time and space, taken with others and with consent. Implicitly the ideas of Iris young, Hannah Arendt and Bonnie Honig in particular have to challenge the traditional green mantra of ‘thinking global, acting local’ by suggesting effective agency in the face of global environmental change should also be global and regional, but taken in ways that are tentative, mindful of the limits of our knowledge and informed by local consent.

The alternative model of social handprints I sketch here is normative and partial. In this paper I have attempted to argue that handprints can be a valuable way of considering human agency, but our aim should be to make our handprints smaller and lighter. In limiting the heroism of our actions, I am not calling for a loss of courage to act. Rather I have argued that as we connect with others to enlarge our field of compassion, and exercise our agency- holding hands to challenge injustice,

we do so with humility as well as courage, accepting we may not always know what is best to do in the face of global dangerous environmental change.

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<sup>1</sup> For example the deaths of at least 6 children and illness of over 300,000 infants in China affected by melamine poisoning from milk products illustrates this problem. Fonterra, a New Zealand dairy cooperative owned 43% of the shares in the Sunlu milk treatment plant which contaminated milk with melamine to boost protein levels. Chinese company executives were tried and imprisoned. Two executives executed. But the process of centring blame on a single company and the execution of two people did not address the unease about New Zealand's wider role. Moreover as a result of the 2008 free trade agreement with China, the New Zealand owned dairy cooperative benefited as worried Chinese consumers switched from local to imported milk (Baldwin 2009; Bhalla et. al. 2009 and Carins 2010).