

Interview

Julian Manley with Paul Hoggett

Julian Manley has been an active member of CPA for more than a decade. He has served on its Board for several years and had a vital influence over it becoming a Community Benefit Society, co-owned by its members. This reflected Julian's longstanding interest in sociocratic and cooperative principles of governance, an interest first triggered through his involvement with Mondragon in the Basque Country in Spain, and more recently manifest through being one of the key figures involved in the Preston Model of Community Wealth Building development in the UK.

In this interview with Paul Hoggett, Julian describes how his involvement in another social innovation, Social Dreaming, brought about his connection to Mondragon, a massive network involving more than 70,000 worker cooperative members producing everything from high tech goods to consumer durables. Later, through this connection, Julian was able to contribute to the seeding of a similar initiative in Preston. The Preston Model offered a very different model of economic and social regeneration, one which flew in the face of neoliberal globalisation, and it quickly caught the eye of leftist policy makers in various parts of the UK. The connection between this model and green approaches to community regeneration is explored in the latter part of the interview.

PH: So Julian, when you were living in Spain in the 1990s, from what I remember, you became interested in the cooperative model. And I'm wondering what was it that started to light your interest in this different way of doing things?

JM: it's not as if I planned any of this. The strange thing is that although these things have come by accident, they're all intertwined and interconnected in ways that I think speak to complexity. My interest in cooperatives came about when I was invited by the people in the Mondragon University to give a talk on Social Dreaming. I was amazed that they were interested in social dreaming at all. I was an outlier. I didn't know what Mondragon was, I didn't even know it was a group of cooperatives working together in a big business group. The minute I turned up, I felt that this was an unusual place, something a bit different. Mondragon University is the only truly cooperative university in the world with a different

approach to organising speakers. There was a sense of greater listening and acceptance of different positions and points of view. For example, with Social Dreaming, which you know, I often get challenged about, , they were prepared to simply soak in it and attempt to make connections with the way they worked and felt and thought. So, I was gobsmacked, totally gobsmacked. And, from that moment on, I wanted to delve into cooperation and cooperatives and try to understand if this was possibly a different way that people could interact with each other, and deal with group psychodynamics , but still make money, still make businesses that work in the world. It goes against all the accepted neoliberal positions about the functioning of businesses and the way people work, and how they are motivated and incentivized to proceed. It goes against all of that. And yet it works.

PH: Just to pause very briefly, what do they actually do or make there? Because I understand that they are one of the major manufacturing organisations in Spain. We're not talking about something small.

JM: In Mondragon, you have 70,000 worker cooperative members, working in big factories and producing things like advanced technology parts for cars. They produce electronic components, white goods, steel products, they have furnaces, and so on. So, I was fascinated that they were interested in Social Dreaming. You know, very few people in those days knew about me or Social Dreaming, but they were interested. I later realised that they were interested because of the value they put on the human aspect of their work. And the association they have with working together, being well with the place that they live in and their culture and their history, and they could see something in Social Dreaming that was related to all of those worlds.

PH: A strong link with place as well in that sense

JM: A strong connection to place and 'place' meaning both geographically, in terms of land and nature and, and culturally, in terms of the history and culture of the Basque Country. They are concerned that the 'founding fathers' of cooperation in Mondragon are now passing away and young people may not be as committed as the older generation to cooperation. And so they were interested to understand if Social Dreaming and associated ways of working, could foster a regeneration of interest in these things.

Who would have thought that all this could have been started off in Franco's Spain, after the Civil War when the economy was in tatters? The priest who set this up was Father José María Arizmendiarieta. He was interested in a particular version of Catholicism. For him, Catholicism had to be based on social action. It's opened my eyes a little bit to certain, potentially positive aspects of faith-based practice. The ironic paradox of all this was that because Franco's Spain was based on Catholicism, they couldn't touch a priest. The young people in Spain today don't have that. Catholicism is absolutely on a very downward slope in Spain as everywhere else, I suppose. Hence their interest in other ways of understanding humanity, emotions, feelings, spirituality, and so on. I think that there is a sort of hidden connection between Catholic social action and feelings that might be generated by social dreaming and I haven't quite figured this out yet. There is always a peculiar feeling of bonding that happens after social dreaming. You sort of de-individualise yourself and work towards the matrix or the group. You actually feel more bonded and more closely related to people. And I think what maybe happens to churchgoers, I'm not a churchgoer, is that people leave the church feeling bonded.

PH: I didn't know your involvement in Social Dreaming predated your involvement in cooperatives. So let me take you back. How did you encounter social dreaming in the first place?

JM: Well in your course, the MSC in Group Relations and Society. I remember it very clearly. Because I was steeped in Tavistock Group Relations type work, the thought of going into a group, and telling people something about your personal dreams, I thought would be absolutely disastrous. I thought: 'it will be awful'. You could only ignite incredibly negative dynamics in the group. And people would feel humiliated and shamed by expressing their personal dreams and so on. That's on the one hand, and on the other hand, it would be incredibly boring, because who's interested in someone's dream? I just thought it was terrible. And, you know, I had to do it because it was part of the course. Basically, I was forced to do the Social Dreaming. And, to my amazement, none of that happened. There was no shame there was no humiliation, there were no dynamics. By the way, I think that's absolutely fascinating, that the group dynamics that you're taught about and you had experienced simply seemed to fall away completely with Social Dreaming. I just couldn't believe what was happening. And so, I was hooked, because I couldn't understand it. I just needed to know, what on earth was this? Here was some kind of group work, where dynamics didn't seem to

exist. I just couldn't get it. Even today, I'm quite surprised. So yeah, that's why I became fascinated by it.

PH: So I'm interested, Julian, how in each of those experiences you encountered something which challenged your preconceptions, and yet, rather than reacting in a way, which simply confirms your existing preconceptions, they led to new encounters new and horizons. And that doesn't sound like a typical way of proceeding to me.

JM: Yes, well, I think typical ways of proceeding are very damaging. And they set people into routines, and a sort of pre-acceptance of something that is familiar. And I think this is part of our current problem with the neoliberal state where we think of the state as in a 'state of mind' which insists there is no alternative. So, I think 'the typical' actually moves people away from their lived experience. And that something that has shaken the pot a little bit has been the pandemic, the COVID pandemic, where many people suddenly had an experience of what life might be like, which was not typical. I think that's been quite beneficial, actually. Not only are some people deciding not to go to work at all but the huge numbers of people now working from home means that the work life balance has been radically altered.

So I think that one of the things that social dreaming can do, and one of the things that understanding cooperation can do is take you out of the routine, typical way of doing things. That's not actually radical, that's actually quite normal: my interest in social dreaming and cooperation, it's not pie in the sky, it's not utopia. Actually, I've just written an article about utopia. It's not a utopia in the sense that Mondragon is not perfect. It's not ideal. But it is something in your phantasy and in your imagination, that enables you to think in a certain direction. Even if there's no end to that road and there's no utopian object that actually exists, the process of moving towards it is a positive and enriching process in itself. And all of that goes against routine and typical ways of understanding things, for example, targets. You never achieve your outcome and you never satisfactorily achieve your targets. So you're going to carry on, on the treadmill, until you get to a place you can never get to, but you falsely believe you can get to it. And of course that leads to stress, depression, burnout, a place where you're never good enough.

PH: Just to go back to the cooperatives for a moment. How then did this, let's call it new social imaginary, arising out of radical Catholic social action in the 1940s and 50s suddenly resurface in Preston of all places soon after the global financial crisis?

JM: Well, that's a difficult question. I just say in passing, in the late 19th century, Preston was the place with the largest Catholic population in England. So, I suppose that lots of different factors come into play here. Some of them are about the place itself. And some of them are about actors that happen to be around. Preston is if you like, just the right kind of place, it's not too big, and it's not too small. So, it's not so big that everyone is anonymous. And yet, it's not so small that it's very, very parochial. About between 120 and 140,000 people live in that place. It has a strong industrial background. In other words, it has communities that still remember what it was like to be a mill worker, for example. So, there's that kind of background. And then, by chance, there were people around who were able to react in a certain way to a particular economic disaster, the collapse of an urban regeneration strategy, in Preston in 2011. Preston was left with absolutely nothing, because in those days, that was it. If there was no inward investment, there was nothing. And luckily enough, at that time I joined the University of Central Lancashire which was based in Preston. I was fresh from Mondragon where I had been doing some training and consulting with them. So, I invited people from Mondragon to come to Preston to talk about cooperatives and cooperation. And I made sure that those were public lectures, and at one of them I met a Labour councillor, called Matthew Brown, who was trying to understand what the hell they could do in these circumstances. And we immediately understood that cooperative ideas would fit in with ideas of generating local wealth, and with ideas of anchor institutions spending more locally, retaining local wealth. Providing quality jobs was something that could easily be married to cooperatives and cooperation, particularly with a background of deliberative or participatory democracy, as enshrined in cooperative governance. And so all of these ideas started kicking around, made possible by the vacuum. The vacuum of the collapse of the regeneration project meant that there was something that had to be filled, and it was filled with that kind of thinking. People are very proud of being Prestonians, and were more open to these possibilities. So, when we talked to anchor institutions, about the possibility of changing their procurement habits, from externally focused to internally, people were not exactly embracing, but prepared to give it a shot, prepared to have a listen, and prepared to work with different finance officers and anchor institutions.

By 'anchor institution', we're referring to an institution that is anchored in the area, come what may. It could be a hospital or a university. They all spend a lot of money, employ lot of people and they're not going to disappear, not here today and gone tomorrow. So the idea was to persuade finance officers in these institutions to change their procurement habits. The first objection we faced was the cry that tendering had to be competitive. We challenged this typical mindset with the idea that it was possible to cooperate with businesses that were locally based. We quickly found out that these businesses never bid for these anchor institution contracts because they were too big. Joe Bloggs with his van couldn't cope with that, nor could they fill in the forms which were too complex. So, we persuaded anchor institutions to cut up their massive tenders into small bits so that suddenly local contractors could compete. Then we persuaded these institutions to offer training to fill in their forms. It changed the dynamic, local people could now work for the anchor institutions, the contracts were going to local people not to global corporations, they were going to people who were known, with whom you could have relationships. So, we created the Preston Cooperative Development Network to encourage the creation and networking of worker owned cooperatives governed by democratic principles in the area. It teaches people through participation and experience what democracy is. There is a social and philosophical agenda, we were members of Jeremy Corbyn 's Community Wealth Building Unit set up by John McDonnell. The idea of democracy was fundamental to his thinking.

There are 10 new worker owned coops in Preston following the sociocracy model of democratic governance. We've created the Preston Cooperative Education Centre which offers a sociocracy course, training and support for fledgling coops.

PH: These are precarious times for fledglings. As the Model continued to evolve, was it, for example, affected by COVID?

JM: Well, this is being researched right now. It is widely assumed that Preston dealt better with the pandemic because we already had mutuality and cooperation in place when it came to food distribution and other tasks. The pandemic demonstrated the validity of the model. There is no definitive view of this yet, but the feeling is that 'yes', the Preston Model helped to support communities during the pandemic.

We have sometimes been criticised for being too local, even parochial. However, the way the design of the Preston Model is developing is to combine the local with the national. A great example of this is the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN), where 37 councils in England have got together and formally committed to working to cooperative principles and values inspired by the Preston Model. In terms of national governmental strategies, there is the example of Scotland, where you have a Minister for Community Wealth Building and a national policy influenced by Neil McInroy, who previously led the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, (CLES), and in Wales you have the foundational economy, a circular economy approach. So you have national designs in Scotland and Wales and an ‘under the radar’ national movement through the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network in England, so it’s not just about Preston.

The Preston Model can easily be connected to green and environmental policy, maybe along the lines of Kate Raworth’s ‘doughnut economics’, where the outer ring of the ‘doughnut’ represents the ecological limits of the planet and the inner ring represents the human or social limits of communities. The Preston Model can be seen as being a way of filling in the ‘inner ring’, so to speak. When we started off there was nothing environmental or green about it. As time’s gone on, we’ve been developing social value policies which include environmental policies, which fall naturally into community wealth building. When anchor institutions had massive contracts with global corporations, planes would be flying in and juggernauts coming up from Europe, whereas now it is local Joe and his van from a couple of miles down the road. The carbon footprint is massively reduced. There’s something natural about this process, and other connected processes, such as local food being provided for the local area. Community wealth building is more than bringing the money in to local households. If you are proud of where you live, then you don’t want to live in a place of unhealthy noise and road pollution. It’s no coincidence that one of the new cooperatives is Preston Pedals, a group that encourages cycling and bicycle maintenance. You want people to have enough opportunities to live and work locally. You want your neighbour to have the same. If you do have more consumer wealth, then you may also want to make better, more ecological, organic consumer choices. Green policies fit entirely naturally into local wealth building development, almost by accident.