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Telling the Feel-Good Story of the Decade

The Potentials and Pitfalls of Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract: In the last twenty years, the term "sustainable development" has influenced ecological thought, consumption habits and structural practices in profound ways. As a fluid discourse allowing appropriation and contestation, it may mean anything from technological innovations preserving consumerist status quos, to deep changes in social and political structures. Against a background of imminent environmental crisis, the United Nations' declaration of a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development legitimates the broad concept of sustainability; an assemblage of grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations have taken up the challenge to draw the world's youth into the discourse. What "sustainability" are they advancing, via what media and messages? What may be in the offing when the critical edge of the sustainability discourse precipitates turns to the participatory, the localized, the "green"? A measured critical response to the Education for Sustainable Development movement is called for. In this essay I will sketch out some of the questions a potential response might pose.
Key words: SUSTAINABILITY – GREEN DEMOCRACY – EDUCATION – ENVIRONMENT – MEDIA

The United Nations has marked 2005 as the start of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), echoing ideas first expressed in the Agenda 21 plan, which 178 governments signed on to at the Rio Earth Summit of 1992.   Sustainability is a Big Idea in several senses; from the wide range of positive, salutary values it connotes, such as self-determination and collective empowerment, global interconnectedness and an expanded "species consciousness," to its swift application in virtually every sphere of society and human endeavor

(from agriculture to textile production to investing, how many fields remain untouched by the prefix "sustainable"somewhere, somehow?)   Most crucially, sustainable development is demanding attention/being posed as the solution to a pressing quandary - the continual need for increased economic development versus the looming spectre of irreversible environmental destruction.

 Like another, larger long-term effort with which ESD is connected - the UN's Millenium Development Goal to implement Universal Primary Education (UPE) by the year 2015 - the idea of promoting sustainable development on a worldwide scale is both noble and (given current political and economic structures) perhaps not fully unattainable. Nevertheless, I would argue that the project itself is an important legitimation of the sustainable development discourse. It should invite a measured critical response, especially from those of us who are most enthusiastic about its promise. When we say "sustainable development", what do we really mean? Or rather, which particular vision of sustainability is the guide? How do the political and social implications of sustainable development provoke tensions with, or set it at odds against, the very governmental and economic forces attempting (in fits and starts, but with increasing momentum) to promote it?

 Paradoxically, such straightforward questions, if pursued in overly straightforward ways, may be chimerical.   Sustainability emphasizes, among other things, a holistic approach to interconnected processes, relationships and contexts. It is not easy to pare off discrete aspects of it to question and analyze, and I am not sure that such an approach would be especially fruitful, either.   A potential critique of the ESD movement might weigh the competing major environmental discourses (of which sustainable development is only one) or else examine the nebulousness of the concept itself, which allows for both creative expansion and the calculated co-opting of the term "sustainable". It might explore how electronic media and the Internet are being used to spread the message of sustainability to global youth audiences in the developed and developing world, by analyzing the rhetoric used to tell this feel-good story, and the various actors behind the rhetoric.   It might examine the part that Western non-governmental

organizations (NGOs), in partnership with international govermental organizations (IGOs), take up in this process - specifically, how civil society actors such as these have assumed a leading role, after registering that national governments (particularly the U.S. government) have failed to either follow through on the promises of Rio or moderate a pernicious, unchecked surge of economic globalization. It might - I would argue it *must* - contemplate the political, cultural and social ramifications inherent in teaching a global youth audience to establish an "ecology of mind", to (in Gandhi's words) "be the change you want to see in the world" - as is typical of the popular rhetoric of sustainability, as disseminated through ESD media materials. Flowing from an assemblage of (primarily Western, industrialized-nation-based) IGOs and NGOs coordinating with grassroots activists, under the imprimatur of the U.N., these might be subversive ideas. The world may indeed need a lot of subverting, but we ought to carefully consider the positives and negatives in relation to some or all of the contextual factors mentioned above.

That is not an easy, or easily-designed task, and this piece is not a methodical analysis upon any of those scores. My objective here, looking out over the wide-ranging sustainable development discourse, is only to acknowledge the potential poltical, as well as technological and cultural dimensions of sustainable development, to note some basic tensions and problems inherent to it and relating to ESD, and to briefly illustrate the kind of sustainability topics championed by a few ESD campaigns. But it is only a turn in the direction of the first step in which a critique of ESD must go.

Influential to my thoughts here are the writings of contemporary political scientist John Dryzek, especially on subjects such as the field of competitive environmental discourses, and theories of discursive, transnational and green democracy. Green democracy may be read as an ecologically-inflected version of the more generally "deliberative", discursive alternative to traditional liberal-constitutional democracy - an alternative which Dryzek theorizes upon and advocates. Not all of the sustainable development discourse is explicitly predicated on green or deliberative democratic theory, but connections do emerge, and my strong intuition here is that more should be made of them when we discuss ESD. We need a way of understanding the

underlying political program of sustainable development. Dryzek writes that "a defensible theory of deliberative democracy must be critical in its orientation to established power structures, including those that operate beneath the constitutional surface of the liberal state, and so insurgent in relation to established institutions" (Dryzek, <u>Deliberative Democracy and Beyond</u> 2); I would argue that a phrase like "insurgent in relation to established institutions" here is telling, and all the more salient as long as the invocations of structural change are obscured by the more consumer-friendly, feel-good aspects of sustainable development. These latter aspects, it seems, currently carry the discourse.

Take a look, for instance, at some things which are - or soon could be - part of our everyday lives.

A small home wind turbine, powering a home while feeding energy back into the grid. A gas-electric hybrid SUV. A cup of Fair Trade coffee. A non-toxic, naturally produced bathroom cleaner.

Steeped in contemporary ideals such as a heightened environmental consciousness, social justice and the reduction of excess consumption, these very different consumer products and objects are invisibly linked. Each is associated in some way with the broad concepts of sustainability and sustainable development, popular (if casually-used, oft-misunderstood) buzzwords in recent years. This tiny sampling of emergent products, practices and ideas marks how sustainable development has become, within a relatively short time period, "arguably the dominant global discourse of ecological concern" (Dryzek, <u>The Politics of the Earth</u> 123). This, despite the argument (also noted by Dryzek) that the basic essence of "sustainable development" - that it is indeed *sustainable*, and that it signals *effective* development - has not been demonstrated or proven, but only asserted.

That last little detail does not seem to matter much, practically speaking. We notice the shelves and showrooms of post-industrialized societies displaying ever more products aligned to putative "conscious values", at least partly so that some consumers can mitigate inner anxieties over their complicity with and dependence upon global capitalism.   For those so inclined, and

whom can afford it, there is much to like about this consumption-level "sustainable development". It offers concerned consumers (to paraphrase oft-heard advertisements), "an everyday way to change the world, " while preserving their lifestyle at the status quo.

 In an equally significant, perhaps even more material way, sustainability has taken hold on the level of the spaces and places we live and work in over the past few years; the architecture and engineering industry has seen the greenbuilding movement reach "a new stage of maturation," (Cassidy 6) marked by the establishment of standards such as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) accreditation, their acceptance by thousands of development and real estate professionals, and an ongoing technological revolution in the manufacture of building materials and supplies; as one industry publication recently put it, "if it can be said that any market has been 'transformed' by the sustainability movement, it is the building products industry." (Cassidy 6)

While we might laud the pairing of economic growth with planetary consciousness, we should also acknowledge how far it is from being truly impact-less; the "eco-friendly" SUV will still require environmentally damaging industrial practices (at least until "sustainable" automobile plants, such as Ford's highly-touted River Rouge plant, are fully operational, in about twenty years time (Fuller)), will still encourage destructive suburban sprawl (though those subdivisions may be built with more energy-conserving materials), and will still end up on a junk heap - probably in less than two decades. We still drink the organic Fair Trade coffee from chemically bleached cups. The seemingly limitless scope and often contradictory aims of "sustainable" products and practices, and the daily paradoxes that come with attempting to live a "sustainable" consumerist lifestyle, reveal something problematic about the whole concept - its lack of definition, and thus the ease with which it can be co-opted ideologically and commercially.

Less than twenty years ago, the United Nations Brundtland Commission report, entitled *Our Common Future,* defined sustainable development as

"Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (World Commission on Environment and Development)

It may not get more vague and nebulous than that. In fact, Dryzek notes the reported existence of some 40 definitions of sustainable development within five years of the Brundtland Commission convening (Torgerson 303; Dryzek, <u>The Politics of the Earth</u> 124).. We can only expect that number to have increased sharply since then, as various entities promote concepts of sustainable development aligned with their own interests (and perhaps that plasticity of definition has been somewhat useful, in allowing so many varied, opposing groups and entities to enter into the discourse.)

I would argue that the most expansive take or takes on sustainable development involve much more than discrete products and practices which impact ecosystems piecemeal, and more than just state-mandated measures such as conservation and recycling programs. In other words, it is more than just environmentalism as we know it, and more than just high-tech attempts to feel better about holding the consumerist line.

This sustainable development is inextricably bound to politics and power structures, to agency and participation at the level of citizen, society and state (with an emphasis on the former two), to the notion that non-governmental actors – international, regional and local organizations, and conscious individuals – can and must take the lead role in shaping future development, from land-use planning and the management of resources to the rights of women and indigenous peoples. Advocates of this kind of sustainability propose that now more than ever, coalitions of small and large, global and local organizations and agents must inevitably circumvent plodding, obstinate governments if they are to avert environmental and social disaster.

  The guiding image is of a web of informal structures, organizations and media – educational programs developed by NGOs in concert with IGOs, grassroots organizations led by empowered ordinary citizens, especially youth and the disenfranchised – community media, and so on, emerging from below, reflecting the efforts of and interacting with technological innovators and established power structures, but circumventing them too, when they must. As Dryzek writes,

"sustainable development is a discourse of and for global civil society." (Dryzek, The Politics of the Earth 131)

This, I think, is a valid encapsulation of *a* sustainable development, one among the many competing to lead the discourse, and one which can be feasibly linked to the established, sanctioned movement for Education for Sustainable Development. Who is driving this ESD movement? At the highest level, IGOs such as the UN, as well as UNESCO, UNICEF, the UNDP and UNEP all support the movement. Here is some significant irony; though these IGOs may be one step removed from the nation-state power structures which a politically-engaged sustainable development would undermine, their active promotion of the sustainability concept (exemplified by ESD) has radiated *into* those state structures (Dryzek, The Politics of the Earth 127). Sustainable development has become part of the lexicon of national politics in numerous countries, with many not just talking about it, but formulating national sustainable development plans, devising ESD initiatives, and so on.

 But if the base concept of sustainable development is hard to pin down, then it follows that the formula for educating the world's youth about it is hardly any more explicit. For instance, UNESCO's website states:

"There is no universal model of education for sustainable development. While there will be overall agreement on the concept, there will be nuanced differences according to local contexts, priorities and approaches. Each country has to define its own priorities and actions." (UNESCO, United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development Home)

 Again, we note the free fluidity of the concept, for better or worse. Each country has the right to define its official path towards sustainability, or to declare that it has already hit its target, for that matter. Nevertheless, these IGOs in turn partner with or sponsor an assortment of NGOs of varying size, regional and topical focus, which promote sustainability through integrated and issue-driven media products, as well as through associations with and support of grass-roots organizations. Not to be forgotten, either are the great and good of art, science, entertainment and academia who lend their names, images and popularity to the cause.

What, then, are some of the topics and ideas being promoted in Education for Sustainable Development media materials?

UNESCO offers an online teacher's guide to teaching sustainable development entitled "Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future"; among its curriculum themes are "culture and religion for a sustainable future", "indigenous knowledge and sustainability", "women and sustainable development", "population and development", "understanding world hunger", "sustainable agriculture, tourism, and communities" (UNESCO, "Sustainable Future"). A student-directed action kit from the NGOs Global Vision and Peace Child International, is designed to accompany (apparently yet-to-be-produced) short films centering on some of the same topics, along with others such as "human potential", "religious pluralism", "corruption", and "substance abuse" (Global Vision). A note of holism resonates, as does an insistence that the environmental, social, cultural, political, technological and economic aspects of life are all interconnected, in keeping with the holistic attitude of the sustainability discourse.

Empirical study into the reception and effects of these media messages, their effectiveness in "selling" sustainability are not in the scope of my work here, though I would certainly draw attention to the potential ideological, political and cultural ramifications that might follow the promotion of sustainable development and empowerment to youth audiences, particularly by Western-based non-governmental actors. This appears to be an area of potential research interest. Would the stirrings of environmental empowerment and global civil society under the internationally-vetted concept of "sustainable development" be viewed simply as the spread of Western, capitalist, individualist values by some in the world?   Is it not easy to imagine where themes such as "religious pluralism" and "population and sustainable development", could be read as "insurgent" and subversive to existing power structures in numerous developing and developed countries? For that matter, could the emphasis on organizing power outside the state, in global-local networks be read as equally subversive right here in the United States?

Apart from the issue of definition, other potentially problematic issues linger around sustainable development, media, and ESD.

The first is the issue of community. A politically-engaged concept of sustainability is greatly dependent on citizens taking community interest as seriously as they do self-interest. It is dependent upon individual and communal participation in decision-making processes. Electronic and digital media add new layers of complexity on to existing structures of "community", "association" and civic engagement which even industrialized societies have not come to terms with, as lamentations over America's lost front porches and lonely bowlers demonstrate.

The issue of consumption can be broached by asking any number of questions, most having to do with the discourse's status as an assertion, not fact. Why should developing nations be indoctrinated into a "sustainability" paradigm that other nations were spared from, in their headlong rush into becoming consumer societies? Is this not, as some allege, simply a rationale for dominance? Alternatively, what if global sustainable development does not adequately conserve what remains of the earth's resources as developing societies grow? What if it is simply not strong enough medicine for ecological ills? The issue of feasibility reflects the fact that there are some places in the world so desperate, they are beyond sustainability at the moment, and may be for some time to come, in the grip of mass famine, desertification, pandemics, natural disasters, and other horrors; the issue of spreading sustainability through unsustainable means acknowledges that the new media technology, particularly computers, have a wide ecological footprint at the stages of manufacture, use, and disposal; it means considering the impact of adding millions of computers, televisions, etc. to developing areas, and of the increased energy generation necessary to power them.

These issues should not take away from the potential of sustainable development. We ought to be cautiously inspired by the thought of technologies that generate as much energy as they consume, while simultaneously enabling more people to have a better standard of living, to shape their political destinies, while living in cities and towns which are less environmentally and socially wasteful. The promise of self and community empowerment, of more participatory democratic structures, the forging of multidimensional, local-regional-global networks based on

respect for our environment and one another – these all arouse thoughts of a brighter future. A constellation of actors and organizations big and small, organized along local, national and international lines, have managed thrust the concept of sustainable development to the foreground of global environmental thinking in a very short time, and now are poised to reinforce it and fertilize its future growth, through programs of education. But of the complicated political facets embedded deep within the sustainable development discourse and the processes of spreading it to the world's youth, much more needs to be said.

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