

**Education for Sustainable Development:
The Role of the Humanities and Social Sciences**

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This paper is a work of self-reflection. The four of us, all faculty in the humanities and social sciences at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, have taken this opportunity to consider the challenges each of us face in integrating the concept of sustainable development into our courses. We have no empirical data to review, no research findings to report. However, our experience teaching at a university where sustainable development is a central element of the university's mission has led us to collectively recognize the need to make the very concept of sustainability problematic.

We argue here, from the perspective of our own disciplines, that sustainability is fundamentally a moral and political question. The meaning of the term is a function of the values of the social actors who deploy the term in political debate. Many corporations are embracing themes related to sustainable development in order to demonstrate that they are good corporate citizens; at the other end of the spectrum is a radical social ecology that sees capitalism as inherently unsustainable. Education for sustainable development must first acknowledge the value-laden nature of the concept, and then make explicit the particular values that are to be taught. This is a task for which the humanities and social sciences can make a major contribution.

An Historian's Perspective [Chad Montrie's primary teaching and research interests are in U.S. environmental, labor, and social history]

Oftentimes, as an historian, I am challenged to defend the utility and social relevance of my discipline. This is a challenge put to me by the general public, students, and other academics, including members of the community educating and building toward "sustainable development." Most people recognize that study of the past is

somehow important but rarely think of it when dealing with the present, such as confronting a social, economic, or environmental problem. Last year, for example, I traveled to a meeting of state university faculty on environmental initiatives and found myself the only historian (as far as I could ever determine) among the many hundreds of people talking about toxics reduction, green campuses, and the like. During one session I suggested that we could use the insight of more scholars from the humanities and social sciences. A sociologist from my own campus then made a more eloquently impassioned plea for incorporating both areas of study into the various environmental programs. Participants nodded their heads in agreement, but the commitment ended there.

Why, then, is study of the past important? And more to the point here, what is the role of historical interpretation in the larger project of “sustainable development,” particularly educating for sustainability? First, studying the past can (depending on the quality and intent of a given investigation or interpretation) provide a better understanding of the present. In fact, I would argue that we cannot understand who, what, and where we are without knowledge of who and what came before us. As Karl Marx once wrote, the traditions of dead generations weigh like a nightmare upon the living. We, and the society around us, are products of the past, whether we want to be or not. Equally important, studying history is critical in any endeavor we make to shape the future. Because the past is always with us, weighing us down so to speak, circumscribing our choices, we must either work within the constraints it imposes (which requires understanding) or at least be fully aware of them if we seek to chart a new path, free of the old shackles.

As for sustainable development, it is simply impossible to have a full understanding of interrelated economic and environmental problems without knowing their history. Study of the past, for example, puts the ongoing, industrial transformation of nature by people in perspective, situating it as part of a larger process of change and continuity over time. In this way, historical investigation can draw attention to aspects of modern environmental problems that were previously unseen in the usual myopia of the present. It can also give them a new significance, making clearer the shaping force of political structures, economic systems, and cultural frames. And finally, while this does not exhaust the contributions of the discipline, historical knowledge can provide us with a better sense of what can and should be done about the development problems we face. It can make more evident the ways in which apparently obvious solutions are unworkable or need to be modified, and perhaps suggest other responses yet unconsidered.

For our students—whether they are enrolled in environmental studies or science programs, exploring a minor interest, or merely fulfilling a general education requirement—a history course that sheds light on modern economic and environmental problems is critical to their full understanding of sustainable development. It is also essential to students' future participation in solving problems that arise. To send graduates out into the world to monitor water quality, plan urban development, design production processes, or whatever they choose to do, without an historical sensibility, is to do them a great disservice. It also impedes the larger effort of building a sustainable society. When an engineer, public official, or activist confronts the issues of toxics, brown fields, or genetic modification of crops, without some inkling of the historical and social factors that have shaped them, they are crippled in making an adequately

sophisticated response. We cannot expect our graduates to be the generation that finally begins to reorganize society on a sustainable basis if they are not properly trained for that task.

One practical example of the application of these abstract arguments is the debate over strip mining for coal in Appalachia. At present, coal is the primary source of energy for running our factories and illuminating, heating, and cooling our homes. Most of that coal comes from strip mines, many of which are located in the coalfields stretching from northern Alabama to Pennsylvania. The coal operators and energy conglomerates who own these mines insist that the mineral does and must continue to play a critical role in supplying our energy needs as a nation. They claim that strip mining can be done in an environmentally sound way, by restoring the landscape to an equivalent or sometimes better condition than before the blasting and digging started. In Appalachia, where flat land is at a premium, the former mine sites can also be used to build hospitals, schools, and prisons (although stability of the repacked ground has proven to be a problem for this purpose). Finally, the operators maintain, stripping provides badly needed jobs and stricter regulations or tighter enforcement of existing control legislation threaten those employment opportunities.

On the other side of the debate, some residents of the Appalachian coalfields vehemently object to strip mining. Active mines and the many poorly reclaimed sites cause erosion and siltation of streams, they say, which harms aquatic life and, along with more rapid surface runoff, exacerbates flooding. Acid mine drainage pollutes groundwater, deforestation removes important wildlife habitat, and unstable slopes and “valley fills” also threaten disastrous landslides. As for the economics of stripping, coal

companies and energy conglomerates have not been known to give back as much as they take from the region. Their payrolls are relatively small and tax payments insufficient to sustain local and state infrastructure and services. Meanwhile, the critics argue, the coal surface mining industry ruins good farmland and destroys the scenery that would draw tourists and help alleviate the region's chronic unemployment problem.

Looking to history for insight on this, it becomes clear that addressing the concerns of besieged coal companies and strip mining opponents is not simply a matter of technical or regulatory action. For decades, the coal industry has been steadily, and very intentionally, mechanizing operations and shedding jobs. Surface mining was and is particularly attractive to mining companies because it so dramatically lowers labor costs, requiring many fewer miners per ton of coal extracted than deep mining. In West Virginia, for example, there were 100,000 union miners at mid-century, but now there are less than 19,000 miners in the state, and only about half of those are members of the United Mine Workers of America (Vollers 1999). This decline has not caused a drop in production, however, which has continued to rise. At the same time, the shift to strip mining has had a dramatic impact on the environment, affecting the land, forest, and streams of Appalachia. Evidence of this damage is scattered all about the region, in abandoned and so-called "reclaimed" mine sites, as well as in scientific studies and reports, congressional hearing testimony, and newspaper exposes.

Starting at mid-century, states did attempt to regulate the strip mining industry to deal with some of the worst of the environmental damages, but those control laws proved inadequate. In 1977, Congress also passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA), which set weak national standards for stripping and established a federal

regulatory agency yet left primary oversight in the hands of the states. Considering how devastating strip mining has been to the economy and environment of Appalachia, and other parts of the country, how did individual operators and growing energy conglomerates get away with such minimal restrictions on their business? And how have they managed to keep the debate over stripping a question of tweaking this or that part of regulatory legislation, rather than abolishing strip mining altogether (which a majority of residents in the Appalachian coalfields once supported)? The answer to these questions lies in the balance of power, which has always been decidedly in favor of the coal industry.

One thing historical investigation can do is identify the importance of social divisions and the conflict those divisions sustain. Once aware of these critical elements of the social fabric, it should be apparent that very few environmental problems could be solved simply with new technology, a better law, or the dedication of business and political leaders to greening industry. In the case of surface coal mining, the struggle between coal operators and strip-mining opponents runs deep. Developing plans for improved replacement of overburden and revegetation, insisting on strict adherence to provisions in environmental control legislation, or spouting rhetoric about a commitment to balancing both jobs and the environment, all fail to engage what is really at issue. Each of those responses ignores firmly-held interests. And, I would argue, the coal companies know this. One of the reasons “sustainability” is so prominent is because it has been watered down to mean just about anything, including inadequate control of strip mining. Even Arch Coal can embrace most definitions of the concept these days—while the number of mining jobs continues to decline, forests disappear, streams are buried, and

coal slurry pounds break and release millions of gallons of toxic sludge into local waterways.

If we were to present the issue of strip mining in the classroom, leaving out discussion of the history behind the dispute between the industry and its opponents, our presentation would be incomplete. Students would miss the opportunity to investigate the decades-long degradation of the environment and chronic unemployment caused by stripping as well as the ease with which coal operators have avoided meaningful regulation. This would make it impossible for them to weigh the validity of the claims both sides now make. Yet that is often how we engage current economic and environmental problems, in programs dedicated to instructing students about “sustainability,” when we neglect to make the humanities and social sciences prominent parts of that course of study. This is not a plea for supplementing what we do now, or even an argument for balancing the natural sciences with other disciplines in a compensatory way, but rather an insistence on the need for a qualitatively different type of education.

A Sociologist’s Perspective [Daniel Egan’s primary teaching and research interests are political sociology, social inequality, and globalization]

In many ways, sociology is ideally suited as a means of teaching undergraduates the concept of ‘sustainability.’ Sociology emerged during the 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to massive social upheavals that began in Western Europe centuries ago and that have since become the characteristic features of modern society. Karl Marx examined how the development of capitalism enforced the brutal subordination of all

social relationships to the cash nexus, which led to such ‘unsustainable’ conditions as alienated labor, social inequality, and ecological destruction. Max Weber’s critique of the ‘iron cage’ of bureaucracy pointed out that while modern society was impossible without the thorough rationalization of all social institutions, such rationalization inevitably resulted in a dehumanized world in which all moral or social responsibilities are constrained by the goal of efficiency. Emile Durkheim argued that traditional forms of community, characterized by what he called a strong ‘collective conscience,’ have largely given way to more fragmented moral systems that emphasize individual rights at the expense of collective responsibilities, thereby making social disintegration more likely. While the specific events that stimulated the rise of sociology have receded into the past, the problems that sociology was designed to answer are still the defining problems of contemporary society.

In addition, from its origins a fundamental component of sociology has been a commitment to progress. While this commitment has taken many forms, such as Marx’s revolutionary praxis and Durkheim’s conservative program of moral education, sociology is a science that not only sees progress as a defining feature of modern society, but also sees as its goal the creation of solutions to the problems it uncovers. C. Wright Mills (Mills 1959) wrote that sociology should help people see the personal troubles in their daily lives as public issues; rather than experiencing unemployment, poor housing conditions, boring work, and so on as purely individual failures, Mills saw the job of the sociologist to help people see how these personal troubles are the result of the historical period and the social institutions in which they live. Once this ‘sociological imagination’ has been cultivated, there can emerge active ‘publics’ capable of changing history and

social structure to produce a more liberating, fulfilling life. This dialectic of biography, history, and structure is particularly relevant for education for sustainability. It simultaneously asks us to see the social forces constructing the types of problems people face and the possible solutions available to them, and the central role that people play in creating and shaping their world.

Sociology would thus appear to be a very sympathetic setting from which to convey to undergraduates the ecological, social, and economic goals of sustainable development. Indeed, one could argue that ‘sustainability’ is the very core of sociology in both its substance and its methodology. However, there are a number of problems that sociologists must face in this project. First, most undergraduates enter the university without any prior exposure to the sociological perspective. Because sociology is unfamiliar territory, the value of sociology has to be demonstrated to them. This puts an extra burden on sociology that other disciplines do not face. This is a specific example of a more general identity crisis that sociology faces among the public; I have lost count over the years of the number of times that people, upon learning that I am a sociologist, ask if I have an LICSW or tell me that some family member is ‘also’ a social worker. Despite the central role that questions of public policy play in sociology, the profile of sociologists as actors in political debates is understated. If there is confusion over what sociologists do, then their effectiveness in educating for sustainability will necessarily be problematic.

In addition, we must be aware that what we teach and what students hear may be two different things. All of my classes are organized explicitly around Mills’ dialectical framework, and present a critical political economy approach to understanding U.S. and

global capitalism. Students readily accept the substantive details of this perspective – they have no problem seeing how the corporate pursuit of profit devastates workers, communities, and the environment, for this is consistent with the reality of their lives - but I have found that the broader meaning of these details is much harder to grasp. Students hear what I present in the classroom through social filters constructed by media, economic, family and other social institutions. The biggest challenge I face in my teaching is to prevent students from breaking down the systematic critique I present in class to fit into the more individualized market culture in which they live. For example, when I ask students to use Marx’s analysis of the labor process to analyze their own experience as workers, I am regularly chagrined to find that the lesson many, if not most, students draw from this analysis of exploitation is that they hope to escape this in the future by being the boss! Given the reality of their class situation, they have taken away something very concrete from my class; it is just not exactly what I was hoping for.

The fact that even the most passive students play this active role in processing what is presented in the classroom means that ‘sustainability’ cannot be presented to students as if it is an objective set of socially responsible criteria for economic activity. The term is a contested terrain that reflects a particular balance of political forces, and any process of education for sustainable development must make this recognition a central feature. The problem with the term ‘sustainable development,’ I believe, is that it is so broad that it opens itself up to reinterpretation through the cultural filters referred to above. ‘Sustainability’ encompasses both the mission of UML and, more specifically, the work of CITA, as well as efforts by corporations and their political allies to put a ‘green’ face on their activity. While we may argue, convincingly, I believe, that the latter is

simply a political strategy developed over the past thirty years or so to maintain corporate hegemony in the face of challenges from social movements, we must recognize that the culture in which students hear our words is more supportive of the latter interpretation of ‘sustainability.’ Thus, we cannot say ‘sustainability’ and expect that students will hear what we want them to hear. What I take from this is the central role that language and values must play in our teaching. The political uses of language have to be directly acknowledged and addressed if our sense of ‘sustainability’ is to prevail. This would mean making explicit the class forces that seek to socialize the costs of their profit-seeking behavior, and identifying how the call for sustainable development has been co-opted by these forces to ensure their continued domination. Only then can we hope to successfully present a counter-hegemonic understanding of ‘sustainability.’

Finally, we must recognize how the social organization of educational institutions themselves is also an important filter through which students interpret what we present to them in class. If students encounter ‘sustainability’ here and there, depending upon the particular professor or course, then it will be relatively easy for students to compartmentalize what they learn in that course. After all, if a university is a great marketplace of ideas, then students should expect to encounter diverse ideas and approaches; why should this particular one (sustainability) be expected to assume a privileged role in their lives as students and citizens? Indeed, given the economic necessity imposed by the market as well as the hegemony of market culture, it would be surprising if students who encounter ‘sustainability’ in a piecemeal manner came away with that as a defining principle in their lives. If sustainable development is to be a central theme in the university and not just one of many ideas students encounter in their

education, then it must be presented in an integrated format that extends throughout students' tenure at the university.

A Political Scientist's Perspective [Vanessa Gray's primary teaching and research interests are Latin American politics and global environmental politics.]

Drawing on the subfields of global political economy, comparative politics, and policy analysis, the political scientist can bring to sustainability debates a useful perspective and valuable specialized knowledge. From the outset, the term “sustainable” calls for scrutiny. Political analysis, like any other rigorous inquiry, begins with explicit definitions and the expectation that the object of discussion will be clearly delineated. Ecological sustainability was an incipient concept at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, but the broader term “sustainable development” comes from the World Commission of Environment and Development chaired by Gro Brundtland. The definition in the 1989 Brundtland report—“development that seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future”—left much room for interpretation. Whose needs and what kind of aspirations are we talking about?

Over a decade ago, scholars were already noting the slipperiness of the sustainability concept (Redford and Sanderson 1992). They pointed out that the lack of a clear definition had allowed economic interests to smuggle in their various agendas, draining the term of its ecological content and its intellectual integrity. Nowadays, as Chad Montrie says, even a strip mining company can embrace the notion of sustainability, thanks to its vagueness. Hence when we set out to “teach sustainability” it

is crucial that we start by asking, what exactly are we seeking to sustain? Is it our use of a certain resource? A way of life for a particular group of us? Viable populations of other species?

The best approach for attaining one of the goals just mentioned will not necessarily advance the other goals. Worse, numerous studies of so-called sustainable development projects in South America's tropical forests have shown that sustainability goals often collide. Researchers have found that it is exceedingly difficult to raise the living standards of forest dwellers, or to harvest forest products, without seriously endangering local plant and animal communities. In other words, the highly desirable goals of alleviating poverty, maintaining indigenous traditions, and protecting biodiversity are rarely achieved concurrently.

When we introduce a time horizon—for how long do we hope to sustain such-and-such?—more conflicts of interest emerge. The residents of a settlement located within a protected area may currently practice environmental stewardship, but one cannot guarantee that it will always be thus: that is, without denying the community its right to self-determination and autonomy. Positions fragment still further when we inquire about the motivations behind a goal. Are we pursuing this particular attempt at sustainability for pragmatic reasons? Due to moral beliefs? A commitment to social justice? Aesthetic preferences? Security concerns?

Defining what we are seeking to sustain, for how long, and why we are doing so exposes the underlying values being privileged by a given sustainability effort, and may reveal inconsistencies and conflicts within the sustainability project itself. This kind of “truth” is not always welcome. Some groups perceive that their interests are better served

if goals and motivations are not made explicit. Other groups believe that they advance a broader mission by minimizing internal discord. Policymakers (in public or private entities) generally have strong reasons for at least appearing to support multiple goals. Yet sustainability projects with ill defined and contradictory goals cannot produce substantive change. They may also worsen environmental degradation.

Insisting on definitions is one way for the political scientist to be the skunk at the sustainability garden party. Another way is by calling attention to existing and potential conflicts. Given that “Who wins?” and “Who loses?” are time-honored questions of the discipline, the political scientist is inherently wary of the “win-win” scenarios heralded by some sustainability advocates. It is relatively easy to arouse skepticism toward, say, a policy aimed at promoting both trade and environmental protection, or a research program on the health of marine ecosystems funded by the shrimp industry. In contrast, challenging win-win scenarios like the rain forest example above is controversial and joyless. To the student of politics, the world is not a place where all good things go together. The view is instead, that competing interests are ever-present and tradeoffs unavoidable. It is not that every situation must be seen as a zero-sum game in which one side’s gain results in another’s loss, but we are inclined to seek out the ways in which a policy (or the status quo) favors some interests while disadvantaging others. And, as ecocentric environmentalists and animal welfare advocates assert, some of those interests may be non-human.

Using the word “stakeholder” to describe the parties relevant to a given issue—as is currently the fashion—tends to gloss over major differences in the relative capacity of different groups to defend their interests. Political science cares not just about conflict,

but also about power. A sensitivity to power differentials is indispensable to understanding how environmental issues play out because groups vary tremendously in what is at stake for them, and also in what resources and capabilities are available to them. Consider, for example, the power disparity between an impoverished indigenous tribe in the Ecuadoran Amazon and a transnational oil company with wells in the vicinity. The national government, strapped for foreign exchange and rife with corruption, is also ill equipped to compete with the oil firm or to advance state interests. Meanwhile, the local wildlife may have no defenders at all. In such a scenario, it is no surprise whose interests ultimately prevail. Whether the commodity in question is oil, cocaine, diamonds, gold, tropical hardwoods, or wildlife products, attention to the forces of global demand highlights the complicity of consumers around the globe.

Paying attention to conflicts of interest and power disparities can also demystify the failed promise of many recommendations of economists and technical experts for “saving” the planet. Such innovations could surely alleviate one or another environmental problem if only they were adopted, but alas, good ideas do not bring about social change on their own. The political scientist can explain—and sometimes predict—opposition to environmental initiatives by identifying vested interests marshalling resources to protect their positions. (To understand change-resisting behavior that is irrational in the sense that it is clearly contrary to the group’s own interests, insights from anthropologists and psychologists are needed, though Marxist and Gramscian concepts such as “false consciousness” “hegemonic ideology” are also helpful in this context.)

Pass a law? Forge a treaty? The rich and growing literature in the field attests to both the difficulty of implementing environmental policy at every level, and the lack of

positive biophysical outcomes, even in cases where the political obstacles were overcome. On the occasion of a policy success, such as the Montreal Protocol (the ozone treaty), political scientists were quick to note that the case was unusually amenable to change. As it turns out, the dominant manufacturer of ozone-destroying chemicals had already developed an affordable substitute and was therefore keen on international sanctions against producers using anything but the new substitute. The follow-up story, however, includes the treaty's loopholes, which allow massive production of CFCs by Third World industrial giants; and the thriving contraband trade, in which U.S. consumers play a key role.

The news from comparativists offers no panaceas, either. Are strong civil societies and democratization the answer? Yes and no. While transparent, responsive institutions and empowered communities are excellent checks on some environmental abuses, the record shows that the public tends to respond more to the dramatic crisis than the creeping scourge. Nor are high levels of citizen empowerment and environmental concern (such as in Japan and Scandinavia) sufficient to bring about major shifts to ecologically sustainable practices. Environmental outrage helped bring down authoritarian regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe, but since then, environmentalism has had little impact in those countries. Moreover, some notable examples of the successful implementation of sustainability policies were carried out by authoritarian regimes (China's one-child policy, Cuba's shift away from an oil-dependent economy, and Thailand's ban on disposable plastics are examples).

Where does all this leave us? Has the political scientist anything positive to contribute to students who are learning about sustainability? My answer is an emphatic

yes. If our project is to promote genuine and enduring social change in the form of a more ecologically sustainable society, then we must first persuade students of the gravity of the ecological crisis. The best source materials for the task, in my opinion, are the result of multidisciplinary collaborations of social and natural scientists. After (hopefully) convincing students of the need for change, we should use cases from real life to illuminate the pitfalls of facile remedies and to temper any zeal for draconian measures. History and political science offer an abundance of these cases; the trick is make students more prudent but not immobilized. Next, we should help students to recognize their own role in the problem—without alienating them. Finally, we must give them the tools to discover what people have already learned in other societies, academic disciplines, and periods in history.

The last step is essential if we are to avoid reinventing wheels and repeating errors, and begin to mount a meaningful response to the ecological crisis. To say that these teaching goals require creative pedagogy is an understatement, and my own classes are, at best, works in progress. The most hopeful part of my global environmental politics course is the section devoted to what I call “alternatives,” which draws on both current events and new concepts in my field. For example, recent work by Conca, Princen, and Maniates (2001) on consumption and counter-cultural trends helps me guide students to recognize how topics such as voluntary simplicity, at-home dads, and community-supported agriculture fit into a larger scheme. Or Keck and Sikkink’s (1998) study on transnational activist networks provides a framework for explaining the success of the Uwá, a small indigenous group in a Colombian cloud forest that managed to get Fidelity Investments to divest in Occidental Petroleum, and Oxy to withdraw from Uwá territory.

The topics we cover in the alternatives section give students opportunities to engage in political analysis. More importantly, they offer reasons to have hope and suggest avenues for getting involved for change.

A Philosopher's Perspective [Whit Kaufman's primary teaching and research interests are ethics and philosophy of law]

My goal here is to raise some questions about the concept of "sustainability" from the perspective of value theory. In particular, I would like to discuss the issue of the place of values in education and in public discussion generally. As an ethicist, I am concerned about the role of moral values in the debate about sustainable practices.

Let us consider the World Commission on Environment and Development definition of "sustainability": "Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." It can hardly be questioned that such a shift in priorities is a welcome one: a call for attention to the long-term effects of our current practices, a shift away from short-term thinking, a concern for the effects of our actions on future generations, and so on. Far too many of our current practices are unsustainable in the strict sense: they cannot be kept up at current rates for very long. Noteworthy for example is overfishing, where virtually every major commercial fish species is being removed at a faster rate than it can reproduce. Numerous other examples are available, for instance agricultural practices that result in topsoil erosion, such that on world farmland, the rate of soil erosion is thirty times higher than the rate of soil formation

(Eisenberg 1998 p.30). A coordinated effort to address such practices is in our own best interests, even aside from the interests of future generations.

There is then at least a relatively clear core meaning of “unsustainable”: a practice that cannot be continued at the same rate very long before destroying the resources on which it depends is clearly unsustainable. Nor do we need to appeal to much more than economic self-interest in order to motivate a shift away from such practices (though of course there are notorious problems in coordinating the self-interest of potential “free riders”; this is the well-known “tragedy of the commons”). However, things get much muddier very quickly. Take the issue of renewable versus nonrenewable energy sources. By a strict definition, a renewable source of energy is (or at least can be) exploited in a sustainable, whereas a nonrenewable source (such as fossil fuels) cannot be. But such a position leads to unacceptable implications: shall we cease immediately (or even gradually) the use of oil and coal? The question is not just the massive economic disruption such a shift would cause. More fundamentally, what is wrong with using a resource even if it is unrenewable? The removal of coal and oil deposits in itself (that is, if a minimally-polluting way of utilizing them could be found) will not substantially impair the functioning of the ecosystem nor human ability to survive (unlike say the destruction of topsoil) nor even the aesthetic or spiritual values of nature for future generations. Moreover, that an energy source is wholly renewable and sustainable does not necessarily make it desirable: consider the use of dams to generate hydroelectric power. Such a use is renewable yet extremely destructive from an ecological standpoint.

The larger difficulty with the concept of “sustainability”, I would suggest, is a lack of attention to or even an avoidance of the underlying value questions regarding our

relation to the environment. The concept of sustainability can be all things to all people, because of deliberate ambiguity as to the ethical basis of the concept. For some, sustainability has a wholly pragmatic, prudential sense: it counsels us not to be foolishly shortsighted, but to attend to the long-run implications of our actions. Such a view requires no ethical content at all, merely an attention to long-run self-interest. A slightly more demanding interpretation of “sustainability” interprets it as applying specifically to issues of intergenerational justice. That is, our primary duty is to ensure the availability of resources for future generations; a practice that may be sustainable for our lifetimes may not be prudent for the indefinite future. Indeed, on this view even a practice that can be sustained indefinitely in an economic sense might be impermissible because it is unsustainable in a moral, aesthetic, or spiritual sense (e.g. because it eliminates species which are of little importance biologically or economically).

Other advocates of sustainability however interpret the concept in an even more rigorous and demanding sense, as requiring intra-generational justice as well as intergenerational justice. That is, some have read the World Commission definition as a mandate to meet the needs of all people at the present, while also ensuring that the needs of future generations are not compromised. While this is no doubt reading more into the definition than the World Commission intended, still other groups have explicitly endorsed social justice as a key component of sustainability. Thus the World Business Council for Sustainable Development has defined the concept as the “integration of economic development with environmental protection and social equity” (Payne and Raiborn 2003: 373). Needless to say, the introduction of social justice into the equation would enormously complicate matters, and require radical rethinking of the current

distribution of wealth and resources in the world. Indeed, this could also create a rift within the sustainability movement, between those who favor the social justice program and those who favor environmental protection even at the cost of social justice. Just to take one example, how should we respond to the enormous gap in lifestyle between the wealthy countries and the poor ones? Should we try to raise the level of welfare of poor countries until it reaches that of the wealthy ones, even at a substantial cost to the environment? Or should we require that wealthy countries reduce their impact on the environment, perhaps lowering living standards substantially as a result?

The sustainability rubric thus encompasses an enormous range of meanings, from the minimally demanding interpretation in terms of economic sustainability, to the interpretation in terms of social justice, or even to the maximally demanding position of ecocentrism or to Murray Bookchin's conception of sustainability as entailing a lifestyle free of "domination." (The most minimalistic interpretation I have seen is contained in the "Dow Jones Sustainability Index," which creates financial products "linked to economic, environmental, and social criteria," but always with a "clear focus on long term shareholder value creation" (i.e., profit). See <http://www.sustainability-index.com/>.) But the concept is limited in its usefulness, absent a resolution of these widely divergent possible interpretations. How can we reconcile the competing values of economic sustainability, environmental protection, and social justice? There can be no formula for resolving these; there is no substitute for entering into a debate about fundamental values, and how they are to be traded off one against the other. But this debate is just what the discussion about sustainability has seemed to lack so far, or even to deliberately avoid. And

this is where I see the role of the humanities in the university as having special importance. This brings us to a discussion of the teaching of values in the humanities.

In the 20th century, two distinct trends contributed to an increasing reluctance in the university to teach values. One is the rise of the movement called positivism, in which the goal was to emulate science in every discipline by adhering to a strict distinction between facts (considered “objective”) and values (considered as “subjective”). The rise of the social sciences in particular reflects a concern to follow a neutral and value-free study of human beings. To discuss or debate values, in this view, would be unscientific; one can do no more than record values or preferences as simply given facts about human beings. Values are neither true nor false in themselves, and hence cannot be the subject of a scientific discipline. The other trend is the political view known as liberal pluralism, of which John Rawls is the most well-known advocate. In this view, a liberal democratic society is one in which each individual chooses his ultimate values for himself, and no one imposes values on anyone else. In the liberal society, the goal is a state which is neutral as between competing ultimate values. As Rawls says, in a democracy, citizens “cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls 1999: 132). Remarkably, both of these philosophies end up with the same position: that the notion of truth or falsity in the area of values must be abandoned: thus for Rawls the idea of “truth or right [must] be replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable.”

The result is that for the better part of a century, university professors have become increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of teaching values in the classroom. Social goals became increasingly focused on economic growth as a means of avoiding

difficult questions of values; the idea was to satisfy as many preferences as possible rather than have to make difficult choices about which values are to outweigh others. Indeed, this emphasis on relentless social and economic growth is no doubt partly to blame for our current environmental crisis. However, it appears that we are now finally emerging from this positivist/pluralist consensus, and from the naïve idea that growth is the solution to all our problems or a way of avoiding difficult tradeoffs and choices (indeed, as we recognize that uncontrolled growth itself is part of the problem).

As we outgrow the scientism that so dominated 20th century academics, I see a central role reemerging for the humanities in particular in rediscovering the necessity of discussion of values, indeed that perhaps the central importance of the humanities is education in human values. Such an education takes many forms, including the explicit consideration of moral theories and moral principles as takes place in an ethics class, the historical training in the cultural and religious traditions that have shaped our current debate, and the implicit consideration of values that is so central in the encounter with great works of literature. Further, we need to get beyond the dichotomy according to which on the one hand values are fixed and determinate, and need simply to be “instilled” in youths (call this the Authoritative Model), or on the other hand the Pluralist Model according to which values are subjective or relative and must be left wholly to each individual to choose for herself. An alternative to these two extremes we could call the Deliberative Model, in which values are chosen by a process of open discussion aimed at reaching democratic consensus. In this view, values are objective and rational in that they can be the subject of reasoned debate, yet they are not the sort of thing that can be simply read off the structure of the world like a law of nature. Values are a product of

individual commitment, but that commitment always takes place within a social and cultural context, and values are constantly subject to development and renegotiation within a community. But it is the humanities which provides the ideal forum in which to raise and debate such questions.

The humanities departments in the universities must thus play a central role in the debate over sustainability. The very concept of sustainability is at best a starting point for consideration of the multiple conflicting values at stake: the standard of living of the current generation, social justice, preservation of resources for future generations, and respect for other living things and for the integrity of ecosystems. A central goal must be the developing of habits essential to citizenship in a democracy: the willingness to engage in good faith in debates about values, even ultimate values, the resistance to dogmatism of all sorts, the virtues of intellectual humility as well as moral commitment, and respect for other citizens as equal participants in the construction of the good society. All of these will be essential to the debate over sustainable development, a debate that is only beginning.

Conclusion

Our narratives provide strong experiential support for giving to the humanities and social sciences a major role in education for sustainable development. If the university is going to make sustainable development a central part of its mission, there must be an explicit discussion of the values that inform sustainability and, more specifically, what *type* of sustainability is to lie at the heart of this mission. Making the concept of sustainability problematic raises the potential for considerable conflict within

the university, as there will necessarily be a range of perspectives on what sustainable development means. In the absence of such a struggle over the nature of sustainability, however, its educational value will be ineffective; without addressing the moral and political context of sustainability, we will be left with a collection of technological fixes that can be easily absorbed by the same economic system that produced the problems of ecological destruction, economic insecurity, and social inequality that sustainable development is supposed to resolve.

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