Sustainability and Democracy: A Deweyan Perspective

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“Sustainability is the simultaneous pursuit of human health & happiness, environmental quality, and economic well-being for current and future generations.”

The University’s commitment to sustainability arises from three interconnected scientific and ethical principles:

Principle 1:

The recognition of the fundamental ethical right of all humans, both now and in the future, to basic needs such as healthy food, clean water, dependable healthcare, a living wage, and affordable education.

Principle 2:

A scientific appreciation of the interconnections between human prosperity and ecological health.

Principle 3:

The necessity of providing the economic means for addressing human needs, and supporting human flourishing, while insuring the long-term health of ecosystems.

Higher education institutions have in the 21st Century come to embrace a commitment to ‘sustainability’ in their curricula, research priorities, and operations, as vital to their contemporary social mission. In Land-Grant Institutions (LGUs) this commitment has typically emerged from a revisionary agriculturalism within their colleges of agriculture, which constitute their historical and philosophical core. While now very visible, if not necessarily influential, in colleges of engineering, architecture, and life sciences (among others) it could be said that the sustainability movement has its roots in what Jeffrey Burkhardt has called “neoagrarianism,” which he characterizes as: 1) an increasing interest in sustainable or alternative agricultural techniques and technologies; 2) an attempt at the “humanization” of the research and instructional agenda of agricultural (and natural resource units), especially in the form of curricula in agricultural ethics; and (3) a growing belief that agricultural colleges and, and LGUs in general, be socially accountable (Burkhardt, 2000). This schema of traits has been translated into other disciplinary contexts, where an emphasis on sustainable design—“design thinking”—in engineering and architecture and even information sciences has rapidly taken hold. Recently, the accelerated convergence and integration of these technologies in transforming industrial systems with astonishing implications for the way we live our ordinary lives has suggested the possibility of an emergent discipline of sustainability studies to be dignified by the creation of a college or school. This to date is an approach my own university, Penn State, has not adopted, but the proliferation of minor degree programs in aspects of sustainability and even the
development of an intercollege minor in sustainability leadership can be seen as an indication of the perceived need to educate students in the need to span the boundaries of disciplines to effectively navigate a world whose knowledge domains are increasingly synergetic and mutually transforming, as a well as a globe increasingly interconnected technologically, economically, and politically. Among these are not only scientific disciplines but those in social sciences, and humanities, especially ethics. Thus, in following the neo-agrarian model, sustainability studies generalize the integration of technical expertise and normative understanding spanning multiple disciplines within a globalized context.

My argument takes inspiration from Jeffery Burkhardt’s insight that neo-agrarian visions, which reject traditional agriculturalism with its valorization of positivist science and large scale agribusiness in favor of a model rooted in sustainability and humanistic concerns, are pragmatist at their core:

*Without explicit reference to American pragmatist philosophers, much of the neo-agrarian vision is best understood in terms of pragmatist, in particular, Deweyan notions of science, ethics, education, and democracy...Admittedly, there are differences among various neo-agrarianisms in focus or intent. However, what ties together the various neo-agrarianisms in a unified critique of a land-grant mission purportedly gone astray is a vision or ethical philosophy which is fundamentally Deweyan: to humanize and democratize the land-grant institution.* (Burkhardt, p. 280)

I argue that Dewey’s democratic theory is a compelling framework for interpreting the normative, technological, and strategic dimensions of sustainability, understood as the complex interplay of social, moral, and environmental ecologies inseparably global and local. Specifically, I will make the case for the following claims:

1. Sustainability should be seen as a way of thinking, feeling, and doing—in other words, what Dewey calls a habit (or an interrelated set of habits) of individuals and communities—that constitutes means to certain ends, that is, sustainable localities.
2. Habits of sustainability are responses to morally problematic situations in the lived experiences of individuals and communities. Sustainability is not primarily a scientific or dialectical inquiry that emerges within a University (or other expert knowledge industry) and results in solutions handed down to the public.
3. Sustainable communities require and promote democratic engagement; a search for consensus about shared values through deliberation and a common life, as well as the harmonization of expert and local knowledges. The primary competencies embodied in local knowledge are moral and temporal.
4. The ‘sustainability movement’ can be seen as the contemporary stage for Dewey’s enduring insights into democratic method.
Sustainability as Habit

Because of a tendency to think of habits as specific, fixed pattern of behaviors, Dewey’s account of habit might at first seem unfamiliar. “Not to be thought of as mechanical, rote responses, habits for Dewey are dynamic response patterns that help to focus behavior and attention…A habit can show up in many practices and activities. Its character and meaning can be determined only in light of its role in an activity or practice and its connections to other habits. The fact that habits can only be interpreted in light of such a holistic context makes it difficult initially to characterize their meaning in abstraction from their function in particular contexts.” (Lekan, 2008, p. 27) Among traits that might be considered Deweyan habits are:

- intercultural sensitivity as an instructor in the classroom (manifested in students of different linguistic backgrounds feeling included)
- deference to authority (resulting in a tendency to rationalize injustice)
- loyalty to home-town sports teams
- meeting deadlines while procrastinating until the last minute
- skill in tying complex knots
- a commitment to shopping with re-usable bags
- a tendency for single-issue voting

Habits, in Dewey’s sense, are transactions, or functional interactions with multilayered environments. The habit of adjusting one’s posture and breathing when walking up a hill is an example of the transaction of a biological organism with its physical environment. The lungs and air, legs, and ground modify each other continuously over time. However, socially learned habits, such as planting a garden, depend on both physical and cultural environments. The method of cultivation and what can be grown reflects the nature of the soil, rainfall patterns, hardiness zone, as well as dietary preferences, ethnic food traditions, and knowledge of nutrition. Habits are thus dynamic, interpenetrating practices—organizations of individual and social energies functioning with other habits in a holistic context—in constant adaptation to changes in multiple environments. This interpenetration is both synchronic and diachronic (Lekan, 2003). It is synchronic in the sense that complex practices such as urban gardening are set within wider habitual ecologies, such as communities’ commitment to social justice and empowerment of underserved publics. In any given season these are reflected in the energy of individuals and the allocation of resources necessary for cultivation. The interpenetration is diachronic in the sense that it reflects traditions of practice sustained, transmitted, and altered over time.

The advantage of viewing sustainability as a complex of habits in Dewey’s sense is two-fold. In the first instance, it overcomes the idea of sustainability as a fixed, end-state with antecedently determined traits. Sustainability thus, is always contextual and dynamic, a local and temporal end-in-view, flexibly varying as the boundary conditions of the interpenetrating social, moral, and environmental ecologies change. A second advantage, related to the first, is that habits of sustainability can be considered responses to morally problematic situations within a particular community (which may be common to other communities locally and globally), for example, the problem of harmonizing the need for economic growth, including meaningful employment and
living wages, with environmentally responsible development. That is to say, sustainability must always reflect indigenous knowledge and practices, even as these habits of thinking, feeling, and doing interpenetrate with expert knowledge and systems. For Dewey, certain habits of sustainability may function within “action plans” intended for the solution of morally problematic situations. “Action plans mediate habits…they are ‘answers’ to situations that are problematic in part because old habits fail to work in new circumstances…they take us from unsettled to settled situations. In a sense, action plans are attempts to recontextualize conduct by framing a situation in terms of new possibilities.” (Lekan, p. 33)

One such example of an action plan related to a morally problematic situation is the Serenity Soular Initiative in North Philadelphia. A collaborative between faculty, staff, and students of Swarthmore College, and community residents, the initiative is a response to chronic conditions of under-employment, gentrification, environmental racism, and energy-inefficient housing stock. The action plan involves leveraging public and private resources to create a solar industry within affected neighborhoods to provide workforce development and, ultimately, skilled jobs on the one hand, and affordable housing renovation with renewable energy sources for residents on the other. In the context of failed habits of urban systems: capital disinvestment, gentrification, segregation, the Serenity Soular Initiative’s commitment to “just sustainability,” a “triple bottom-line” model of local economic development and housing development can be seen as a means to achieve an end-in-view informed by habits of valuing underserved urban citizens as worthy of dignity and as efficacious agents in the positive transformation of their communities. The plan embodies as well a rejection of failed habits of response to post-industrial urban realities: the tendency to view these problems as the result of impersonal, inevitable market forces, themselves at once morally neutral and thus not subject to moral evaluation, and at the same time, morally autonomous in the sense that the rewards and failures of the market determine moral merit. It rejects as well a conventional response to these problems: the habit of using state-sponsored welfare or private charity as exclusive remedies. Thus the Serenity Soular action plan mediates habit of sustainability that indicate new possibilities for underserved urban neighborhoods and failed habits of urban economics by recontextualizing the relationship between communities, environments, and markets.

**Sustainability as a Habit of Democracy**

Dewey’s philosophy can be seen as sustained and multi-layered effort to foster a democratic culture (Stuhr, 85). This effort informed a long life of theorizing about not just social and political matters, but morals, logic, metaphysics, and education. For Dewey, democracy is not fundamentally, or primarily a political matter, a type of government; it is a way of “associated living,” an ideal relation between individuals and community:

> From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in informing and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are in common. [LW 2:327-28]
In this sense, democracy as a way of life is inseparable from the life of a genuine community (Stuhr, 86), just as human individuality itself indissolubly social. Dewey readily admits that this notion of democracy, as a community whose collective habits avail to unlock the potentialities of individuals who harmonize their unique skills and perspectives with the values and ends-in-view of the group is idealistic, but he saw no choice:

For what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of persuasion, of discussion, in the formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the intelligence of the common man to respond with common sense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective communication? [LW 14:227]

This is a credo which the Land Grant University especially must affirm. LGU’s have as one of their primary missions the public good, and possess agency in multiple communities, from those contiguous to their campuses, and served by their extension services, small business development centers, technology transfer arrangements, to those across the globe in developing countries affected by the engagement of their faculty and students, including in projects with a sustainability focus. This is not merely to say that LGU’s have an impact in various communities; LGU’s are communities and function organically within manifold others. They serve in various capacities within communities (e.g., sources of employment, cultural opportunities, workforce and economic development) but perhaps most importantly, as sources of expert knowledge. It follows from Dewey’s notion of democracy that the communities to which LGU’s belong, to be authentic, must involve the harmonization of local and expert knowledge in the inquiry pertaining to problematic situations, “deliberative events,” that lead to action plans providing a resolution (always local and provisional) to what is indeterminate (Lekan p. 149). Moreover, it is impossible to think of sustainable communities which are not democratic in Dewey’s sense. Habits of democracy are integral to sustainable communities, and habits of sustainability reflect a commit to democratic practices. One of those practices is the habit of criticism, inquiry in which members of a community work together to produce deliberative events that resolve common problems, in light of “effective communication” and deliberation that involves all relevant publics. For members of the university, participation in the deliberative event can be considered “public scholarship.” One of the democracy-sustaining habits of criticism is the practice of giving all members of a community voice in helping to formulate the rules that govern the making of rules by which the collective will abide. It is an article of faith in democracy for Dewey that such habits of criticism are norms that make possible self-correction and self-control.

The core competencies for sustainability developed by the Penn State Sustainability Institute can be considered habits of sustainability in Dewey’s sense that nurture democratic communities:

These core competencies are (1) systems thinking, or the ability to analyze complex systems across multiple domains and at different scales; (2) temporal thinking, or the ability to draw upon and anticipate states and narratives of past and future societies; (3) interpersonal literacy, or the ability to comprehend, motivate, enable, relate to, and communicate across diverse individuals, political systems and organizations; (4) ethical
literacy, or the ability to identify, assess, reconcile, apply sustainability values and goals; (5) creativity and imagination, ability to develop and apply innovative and strategic solutions, frameworks, etc. in order to adapt to changing and challenging solutions (Engle et al., 2015).

Of these competencies/habits, 1, 3, and 5 appear to define expert knowledge, though to be sure an expertise far removed from typical traits of engagement between university personnel and the members of a community with whom they are engaged in deliberative action regarding problematic situation. Interpersonal literacy, in particular, represents something of a departure from traditional habits of university-public interaction, which has emphasized a dyadic relationship: the community is where the problem resides and the university is where the solution resides. Interpersonal literacy encompasses an understanding that the problem is a problem of the university in which the community exists and has agency; that local knowledge and expert knowledge have parity in the deliberative event that produces a solution to the problematic situation. It involves as well habits of “effective communication” in the context of cultural understanding and sensitivity and an awareness of the social and political dynamics of the university and the environing contexts.

I would argue that 2, temporal thinking, is a competency shared by both expert and local knowledge. Laurie Grobman’s contribution to this volume is an excellent example of the interpenetration of temporal understanding as narrative of lived experience in the voice of those who have lived it and a theoretical self-reflection on the ways of constructing history and meaning across boundaries of race, class, and place. Temporal thinking, as a habit of sustainability, involves the facility to create transactional narratives, shared communication across such boundaries. However, I would locate ethical competency primarily within local knowledge. The lay person, Dewey’s “common man,” is no expert, but knows the values and norms of the community in which she lives and the effects of being sick from pollution, economic insecurity, malnutrition, and injustice (Lekan, 2003). This knowledge is inherently practical, and involves the creation of action plans that reconcile norms of a common life over time with shared goals through deliberative events to reimagine a community built around sustainable values (though a kind of expert, the community activist, is often required to facilitate such action plans).

The problems of democracy in the 21st Century are the problems of envisioning, and creating sustainable communities. The consonance between habits of sustainability and Dewey’s democratic ideal is striking, and not accidental. The work of democracy in our time is the work of realizing human localities, and transnational sites of community and solidarity, where human flourishing coincides with the health of ecosystems.
Sources


*http://sustainability.psu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/SustainabilityStrategicPlan09102013.pdf*