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Community and Sustainability: Towards a Discursive Approach

JUDITH ROGERS

Abstract: This paper outlines a method for engaging with community and sustainability, not as fixed categories, but as subject to on going re-invention and change. It draws on narrative policy analysis and positioning theory, highlighting the storied nature of sustainability discourse. It argues that storylines are continuously negotiated through discourse where meanings can change through the emergence of new storylines that reorder understandings. Dominant storylines are, however, often so powerful that they are difficult to disrupt or to challenge, and so they take the place of evidence and proof ‘because their tightly storied characterizations, metaphors, and emplotments continue to underwrite and stabilize assumptions for decision-making’ (Bridgeman and Barry 2002, p. 142). The paper demonstrates how dominant discourses about sustainability structure limits the way in which the concept can be spoken and written about, highlighting in particular how the use of generalized language and cultural stereotypes masks underlying conflict. The aim of positioning theory is not to define new characters and new storylines but to reveal how positions, storylines and cultural stereotypes limit what can be spoken and written about.

Keywords: Sustainability, Sustainable development, discourse analysis, sustainability storylines, narrative policy analysis.

1. Introduction

This paper begins with two key observations about ‘sustainability’ and by extension what the term means when considered in relationship to the equally problematic concept of ‘community’. Firstly, far from being self evident, many texts on sustainability begin by acknowledging that sustainability is a contested concept with multiple meanings. As Becker (*et al.*) observe, ‘the only consensus on sustainability appears to be that there is no shared understanding’ (1999, p.1). As an inherently contested concept, sustainability refers to a process or processes of change towards a more ecologically sound, just and essentially unknown future. The second key observation is that rather than having a fixed meaning or practice that can be easily ‘known’, sustainability is essentially discursive (Dryzek 2005, Hajer 1995). The paper begins with a brief overview of how the term sustainability is currently framed in discourse, before turning to a discussion of the method outlined in this paper. A brief analysis of environmental storylines will follow to demonstrate the usefulness of the approach not only for analyzing sustainability talk and text but also as a way of intervening in and challenging dominant approaches to community ‘involvement’ in efforts to move toward sustainable futures. Here, the question of ‘whose future’ is pertinent. The paper argues that rather than being fixed and immutable both sustainability and community

are subject to on-going re-invention and change but that there is a need to examine ‘our’ storylines if ‘we’ are to imagine a future.

2. What is sustainability?

Sustainability is a concept, like liberty, justice, democracy, tolerance and freedom that lacks a clear and agreed on definition. It is, however, seen as ‘one of those obviously right, intuitively essential, and fundamentally significant ideas’ (Cooper and Vargas 2004, p. 21). The ‘problem’ of sustainability is, however, for many commentators, one of implementation (Cooper and Vargas, 2004). Framed in terms of urgency and the ‘common interest’ there ‘is a palpable pressure to conform’ and ‘questioners are immediately labeled as being less committed to the cause of sustainability than those who do not question’ (Onwueme and Borsari 2007, p. 49).

Sustainable development is seen as a ‘metafix’ that will unite everybody, everywhere (Lele 1991, p. 613) because embedded in the concept is an understanding of a common shared future. The use of the pronouns ‘our’ and ‘we’ and the insistence on this common shared future—*Our Common Future*—all serve to reinforce that sustainability and the global ecological crisis are essentially apolitical—that there is no choice and that ‘we’ are all in this together. As Rydin explains,

‘... if sustainable development can be demonstrated, it must be a positive feature. The type of closure to argumentation that is used adds strength to all these argumentative devices by emphasizing urgency, crisis, and the absence of an alternative path. The leadership provided by the discourse is both essential and the right way. This, again, precludes any argument against sustainable development. In these ways, sustainable development becomes a very powerful argument for a common interest in global environmental issues, an argument that is based on the lack of inherent disagreement between people’ (Rydin 2003, p. 9).

What Rydin is indicating here is that while sustainability discourse refers to concerns about the biophysical environment and the future of both people and planet, the way in which these concerns are framed in discourse has the potential to shut down rather than open up possibilities for imaging, talking and writing about ‘sustainable’ futures. Discourse is here understood as ‘a shared way of apprehending the world. Embedded in language, it enables those who subscribe to it to interpret bits of information and put them together into coherent stories and accounts (Dryzek 2005, p. 9). A discourse is therefore not a text or mode of communication, it is a social practice. Understood as such involves a ‘shift from the usual focus of interest in the phenomena to which the discourse refers to a focus on the discourse itself’ (Wood and Kroger 2000, p. 8). Understood as social practice, discourses shape understandings, influencing what is considered both legitimate and illegitimate knowledge(s) but also what is considered to be a problem. And so within the context of environmental discourse, Peet (*et al.*) point out that these discourses ‘are typically constituted from clusters of well-cemented concepts that circulate through the global media and in common understanding. This makes unthinking them very hard indeed, since it is difficult to imagine outside of the categories already at your disposal’ (2011, p. 35).

Sustainability can therefore be understood as being based on well-established discourses and well-cemented concepts that reflect a regularity and uniformity and where, ‘actors adhering

to the discourse participate in various degrees to its production, reproduction and transformation through written and oral statements' (Adger *et al.* 2001, p. 684). These shared understandings both enable and constrain what can be spoken and written about. This is not to argue, and none of the authors cited above would argue, that environmental phenomenon does not exist or that environmental concerns are not 'real' but rather the concern is with how one makes sense of that phenomenon and how this sense-making is discursively produced. The focus is, therefore, on language-in-use, which, according to Hajer and Versteeg is well suited to the study of environmental policy and politics because,

'Concepts such as sustainable development or the precautionary principle, are not and cannot simply be imposed in a top-down way, but are continuously contested in a struggle about their meaning, interpretation and implementation. In trying to make sense of this struggle, discourse analysis has three particular strengths; the capacity to reveal the role of language in politics, to reveal the embeddedness of language in practice and to illuminate mechanisms and answer "how questions"' (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, p. 176).

The approach to discourse analysis adopted in this paper focuses in particular on the storied nature of sustainability discourses. It draws on both narrative policy analysis and positioning theory as a way of analyzing not only how sustainability is framed but also what effects this framing has on efforts to imagine alternative futures. In what follows I provide a brief overview of the analytical approach adopted in the paper before turning to a discussion of how storylines have, and continue to be employed in environmental discourse. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of the approach for thinking about community and sustainability and how processes could be developed that harness divergent, local or often illegitimate visions of alternative futures.

3. Storylines and positioning

According to Stone (2002) two broad narrative stories dominate policy discussions—the story of decline and the story of control where the story of decline serves to set the stage for management and control procedures to be put in place. The story of decline,

'usually ends with a prediction of crisis—there will be some kind of breakdown, collapse, or doom—and a proposal for some steps to avoid the crisis. The proposal might even take the form of a warning: Unless such-and-such is done disaster will follow' (Stone 2002, p. 138).

The story of control, on the other hand, suggests that while a situation is bad and perhaps getting worse it can be brought under control. But this means that a choice needs to be made. As Stone suggests, '[s]tories of control offer hope, just as stories of decline foster anxiety and despair. The two stories are woven together, with the story of decline serving as the stage setting and the impetus for the story of control' (Stone 2002, p. 138).

A similar argument is echoed by Emery Roe who argues that policy narratives 'describe scenarios not so much telling what should happen as about what will happen—according to their narrators—if the events or positions are carried out as described' (Roe 1994, p. 37). For Roe, the objective of policy narratives is 'getting their hearers to assume or to do something' (Roe 1994, p. 37). This emphasis on the storied nature of policy discourse has been

developed within the field of environmental policy, particularly in the work of Hajer, (but also including Bridgman and Barry 2002, Fischer 2003, McBeth *et al.* 2010, Petersen 2007) who argues that sustainable development should be analyzed as a storyline that has created ‘the first global discourse-coalition in environmental politics’ (Hajer 1995, p. 14). This coalition shares a way of talking about environmental matters ‘by virtue of its rather vague story-lines’ (Hajer 1995, p. 14).

Storylines, according to Hajer, (1995) hold fragmented or contradictory positions and ideas together through suggesting a common understanding. They are narratives on social reality that provide a way of simplifying and unifying a complex range of information, ideas, values, ‘facts’ into a plot, a story that ‘sounds right’ allowing for discursive closure (*ibid*, p. 63). Discourse coalitions’ group around specific storylines, even though those involved might interpret the meaning of the storylines differently according to different interests, or social and cognitive commitments (*ibid*, p. 13). Hajer (1995) argues that these differences need to be looked at closely. Dominant storylines are, however, often so powerful that they are difficult to disrupt or to challenge, and so they take the place of evidence and proof ‘because their tightly storied characterizations, metaphors, and emplotments continue to underwrite and stabilize assumptions for decision-making’ (Bridgman and Barry 2002, p. 142).

Storylines are continuously negotiated through discourse, and meanings can shift; they are, according to Hajer, ‘the prime vehicles for social change’ (1995, p. 63) and this change occurs through the emergence of new storylines that reorder understandings. What this suggests is that ‘discourses are inconceivable without discoursing subjects or agents that interpret, articulate and reproduce storylines congruent with certain discourses’ (Backstrand and Lovbrand 2006, p. 52).

In order to engage in a particular discourse individual actors adopt subject positions which are made available through the storyline, and,

‘Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned’ (Davies and Harré 1990, p. 46).

Subject positions are therefore different from roles or categories that remain fixed. From the perspective of positioning theory, ‘[a]n individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate’ (Davies and Harré 1990, p. 46).

Positions can be presumed, adopted or ascribed (Harré and Slocum 2003) and ‘[i]n carrying on disputes it is an enormous advantage to be occupying the ‘moral high ground’ (*ibid*, p. 129) where positioning opponents in disadvantageous ways can reduce the scope of their actions. So positioning involves not only positioning oneself in a discourse but also the strategic positioning of others.

According to Harré and Slocum ‘a position not only delimits the speech acts available ... but also serves to preinterpret what the person says or does’ (*ibid*).

Positions often appear as cultural stereotypes or characters ‘in all sorts of stories’ so the storyline ‘can be interpreted as a vehicle for stereotypes’ (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 134). According to van Langenhove and Harré,

‘A storyline or narrative style incorporates not only a conventional flow of events—such as “hero undertakes quest”; “hero is tricked by villain”; “hero receives magic help”; “hero triumphs”—but also characters ... [t]hese are, of course, stereotypes’ (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 134).

Cultural stereotypes are, according to van Langenhove and Harré ‘rhetorical devices that people use in order to position themselves and others ... they are best viewed as located in the rules and conventions of the discursive practices of distinct cultural worlds from which they can be appropriated’ (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 137). These cultural stereotypes, because they are so central to the dominant storylines, are also difficult to challenge or resist and as van Langenhove and Harré point out,

‘change in the way people view one another under categories has nothing to do with either exposure to the “right” stimuli or with correcting false images. Instead, change of stereotypes can be achieved by changing the discursive conventions by which a self-positioning and the reciprocal positioning of others is achieved on a local basis. In short change requires attention to storylines, allowing “new” or alternative characters to emerge’ (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 137).

The aim is not to define new characters and new storylines but rather to reveal to participants how positions, storylines and cultural stereotypes limit what can be spoken and written about in discourse, so that they can in turn disrupt those understandings. To do otherwise is to position oneself as a ‘convincer’, ‘the wrong position to achieve change (van Langenhove and Harré 1999, p. 138).

But why does all of this matter? According to Hajer,

‘Storylines are devices through which actors are positioned, and through which specific ideas of “blame” and “responsibility”, and of “urgency” and “responsible behaviour” are attributed. Through storylines actors can be positioned as victims, as problem solvers, as perpetrators, as top scientists, or as scaremongers’ (1995, pp. 64–5).

Storylines are therefore more than shared narratives. Positioning one-self within a dominant storyline also involves the positioning of others and who is positioned as victims, villains or perpetrators and problem solvers has important implications for the distribution of blame and responsibility.

The following discussion focuses on the deeply storied nature of environmental and sustainability discourse, effectively putting the method of analysis outlined to use. It briefly traces the emergence of sustainable development discourse and demonstrates how it drew on (some would say co-opted, see McManus 1996) the language and the storylines of early environmentalists and reinterpreted them so that they became not only more palatable for environmentalists and the general public but for industry, business and policy makers. Offering a vision of the future without division and where catastrophe has been avoided the discourse has gained in power and credibility because of its ability to harness support and to

draw on and incorporate differing perspectives through a shared storyline. The discussion also reflects on the way in which images of the 'planet' encapsulated in familiar slogans including 'save the planet' and 'think globally, act locally' function to suggest storylines about global planetary responsibility and traces shifts in the cast of actors—the victims, villains and heroes in those storylines and reflects on what the implications of these shifts are particularly in terms of the way in which blame and responsibility are distributed in the discourses. What becomes clear is that storylines follow a similar plot, involving ideas of collapse or recovery, or decline and control (Stone 2002), whereas the definition of the problem or problems, the causes and proposed solutions, and the characters—the victims, villains and the heroes—often differ. All share a tendency to reduce the environmental 'crisis' down to a single 'root cause' so that priorities can be established 'and a definite agenda determined' (Ellis 1995, p. 267).

4. Environmental storylines: The emergence of the global view

According to Garforth, ever since the beginning of what has been described as the 'modern environmental movement', '[e]nvironmentalist rhetoric has insistently framed its arguments about how societies do and should live with nature in relation to the twin tropes of catastrophe and ecotopia' (2006, p. 8),

'On the one hand, dystopian narratives extrapolated issues of pollution and resource depletion into future scenarios of environmental degradation and social collapse, which challenged modernity's ideological frameworks of progress and unlimited economic growth and urgently argued for the delegitimization of the technocratic exploitation of nature ... On the other hand, hopes and visions of emancipated and unalienated futures in the right relationship with nature promised an alternative culture of ecological integrity and human well-being beyond growth and domination' (*ibid*).

These alternative narratives or storylines are clearly evident in environmental writing in the 1960's and 1970's encapsulated in apocalyptic metaphors like Carson's '*Silent Spring*' (1962) and Boulding's '*Spaceship Earth*' (1965). These were followed by Ehrlich's '*The Population Bomb*' (1968), Hardin's '*Tragedy of the Commons*' (1968) and, his *lifeboat allegory* (1974). While Carson's text warned that use of pesticides would lead to a dystopic 'silent spring' due to the death of birds, Boulding described the earth as a spaceship,

'Earth has become a space ship, not only in our imagination but also in the hard realities of the social, biological, and physical system in which man is enmeshed. In what we might call the "old days," when man was small in numbers and earth was large, he could pollute it with impunity, though even then he frequently destroyed his immediate environment and had to move on to a new spot, which he then proceeded to destroy. Now man can no longer do this; he must live in the whole system, in which he must recycle his wastes and really face up to the problem of the increase in material entropy which his activities create. In a space ship there are no sewers' (1965, p. 1).

Boulding's message was clear; the Earth was finite, 'a tiny sphere, closed, limited, crowded, and hurtling through space to unknown destinations' (*ibid*).

Other commentators, including Hardin drew heavily on the work of Thomas Malthus, and in particular the concept of exponential growth, and the dark side of Malthus was also not entirely absent. In the first edition of the *The Ecologist Magazine*, Allaby for instance argued that, ‘the trouble with Thomas Malthus is that he was right’ (1970, p. 24) and in his seminal article *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968), Hardin argued for a change in human values and morality because there was no technical solution to the population problem. Drawing on both Malthus and Lloyd, he argued the tragedy of the commons was the result of each individual ‘rational being’ pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of the collective. The end result of each of these individual decisions was ‘ruin’,

‘Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all’ (Hardin 1968, p. 1244).

In order to avoid the ‘tragedy of the Commons’ humanity needed to relinquish the ‘freedom to breed’ (Hardin 1968, p. 1246). In the opening to his 1974 essay ‘*Living in a Lifeboat*’ which built on ‘*The Tragedy of the Commons*’, Hardin pondered the use of metaphors,

‘No generation has viewed the problem of the survival of the human species as seriously as we have. Inevitably, we have entered this world of concern through the door of metaphor’ (Hardin 1974, p. 1).

And because metaphors were so central to environmental discourse at the time, he argued for the replacement of the spaceship metaphor with that of a lifeboat, suggesting the possibility of a new storyline. The spaceship metaphor he argued was based around an ethics of sharing, without responsibility—a situation that would lead to the tragedy of the commons or ‘suicide’. Lifeboat ethics, on the other hand, acknowledged the fact that the carrying capacity of the earth had been exceeded and that no amount of distributive justice—in the form of immigration or food aid to developing countries could overcome this.

In his apocalyptic book *The Population Bomb* first published in 1968, Paul Ehrlich reiterated these predictions and argued that, ‘[t]he battle to feed all of humanity is over’ (1971, p. xi) and that,

‘[U]nable to avoid mass starvation humanity had no choice but to regulate the numbers of human beings before ‘our planet is permanently ruined’ (1971, p. xi and xii).

For Ehrlich the planet was ‘dying’ because there were simply too many people and the world could wait, do nothing and face the inevitable ‘death rate solution’. Ehrlich describes three possible scenarios or stories about future possible worlds—the ends of the road. In the first scenario by the mid 1980’s climate change had led to massive food shortages, food rationing, riots, and then finally nuclear war. Scenario two tells the story of a global pandemic that reduced the worlds population by at least 1.12 billion, including half of the worlds children by 1974, and the final scenario, the most appealing of the three, is set somewhere far into the future. It details measures taken in 1978 to redistribute food to underdeveloped countries and the establishment of a World Commons Control System to regulate internationally, overpopulation, resources and the environment. In this story these measures did not stop one billion people from dying from starvation, and hence Ehrlich concluded that despite the decisions being ‘the most heart-rending mankind as a whole has been forced to make; their

memory has infused our species with a determination that such dilemmas will never again have to be faced' (1971, p. 77). Ehrlich's proposals (because stories of catastrophe always sit side by side with stories of hope or control) involved amongst other things the establishment of 'drastic' policies to bring America's population under control via a system of penalties and rewards (1971, p. 130). Once America had its 'house in order' Ehrlich proposed denying food aid to those countries that were 'so far behind in the population-food game that there is no hope that our food aid will see them through to self-sufficiency' (1971, p. 147).

While Hardin and Ehrlich focused on overpopulation as the root cause of the environmental crisis (Ellis 1995), other commentators like Commoner, argued that the problem, and hence the solution lay elsewhere. In his book *The Closing Circle* (1971), Commoner challenged both Hardin and Ehrlich, arguing that their focus on a single cause of the environmental crisis would lead to 'barbarism' and political repression (1971, p. 214). Describing the ecosphere as a 'machine' Commoner argued that the cause of the environmental crisis lay in the application of linear thinking rather than in terms of ecological cycles. For Commoner the environmental crisis, which he described as a 'crisis of survival', was inextricably linked to issues of social justice and poverty. Highly critical of 'ecological crusaders' who failed to take this into account he argued,

'To resolve the environmental crisis, we shall need to forgo, at last, the luxury of tolerating poverty, racial discrimination, and war. In our unwitting march towards ecological suicide we have run out of options. Now that the bill for the environmental debt has been presented, our options have become reduced to two: either the rational, social organization of the use and distribution of the earth's resources, or a new barbarism' (Commoner 1971, p. 296).

So here once again we have a choice between alternative futures, the difference being in the definition of the 'cause' of the ecological crisis. And again, Commoner's book was based on a narrative that began with

'[T]he ecosphere, the setting in which civilization has done its great—and terrible—deeds. Then it moves to a description of some of the damage we have done ... by now such horror stories of environmental destruction are familiar, even tiresome. Much less clear is what we need to learn from them, and so I have chosen not to shed tears for our past mistakes than try to understand them. Most of this book is an effort to discover which human acts have broken the circle of life, and why' (Commoner 1971, p. 13).

The 'solution' for Commoner lay in identifying 'why we have come to our present predicament and where the alternative paths can lead' (1971, p. 298). This was a cause for optimism, however that understanding would require more than identifying a singular fault and developing a specific plan, a blueprint or a clever scheme. It would require change on such a scale that it would 'change the course of history' (Commoner 1971, p. 300).

For all of these commentators 'humanity' could not continue on its current trajectory without confronting global collapse. What was needed was a vision of the future that not only avoided catastrophe but also provided some hope and stability. One publication that attempted to do this was *Blueprint for Survival*, a manifesto for a sustainable society published in 1972 by *The Ecologist*. The introduction to the *Blueprint* begins once again with a choice between alternative futures,

‘The principle defect of the industrial way of life with its ethos of expansion is that it is not sustainable. Its termination within the lifetime of someone born today is inevitable—unless it continues to be sustained for a while longer by an entrenched minority at the cost of imposing great suffering on the rest of mankind. We can be certain, however, that sooner or later it will end (only the precise time and the circumstances are in doubt), and that it will do so in one of two ways: either against our will, in a succession of famines, epidemics, social crisis and war; or because we want it to—because we wish to create a society which will not impose hardship and cruelty upon our children—in a succession of thoughtful, humane and measured changes’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 2).

Industrialization and continued economic growth are here seen as the ‘root’ cause of the environmental crisis, and the alternative, a stable society, can be realized if the ‘right’ choices are made and for which ‘the rewards will be as great as the penalties for failure’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 5). To not make this choice would result in catastrophe, ‘against our will’. The impacts of industrialization and economic growth manifest in population growth and resource consumption, both of which, the authors argued, are growing exponentially. The end result: ‘failure of food supplies and the collapse of society’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 3). Here, disorder is associated with the continuation of industrialization and economic growth, and order can be restored through change based on thoughtful and humane decision-making in response to, ‘the dawning recognition of the earth as a space ship, limited in its resources and vulnerable to thoughtless mishandling’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 5). The intention of the blueprint was to outline a strategy for change,

‘[T]o create a society which is sustainable and which will give the fullest possible satisfaction to its members. Such a society by definition would depend not on expansion but on stability. This does not mean to say that it would be stagnant—indeed it could well afford more variety than does the state of uniformity at present being imposed by the pursuit of technological efficiency. We believe that the stable society, the achievement ... as well as removing the sword of Damocles which hangs over the heads of future generations, is much more likely than the present one to bring the peace and fulfillment which hitherto have been regarded, sadly, as Utopian’ (The Ecologist 1972, p.6).

Change would be led by an ‘open style of Government’ which would inspire the ‘trust and the co-operation of the general public’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 8). This would involve decentralization of political power as a precondition for ‘full public participation in decision-making’ because the ‘larger the community the less likely this can be’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 14). Self-regulating and self-sustaining small communities were also seen as the antidote to ‘individualism’ and consumerism. And in a clear statement of the storylines of decline versus control, or despair versus hope the manifesto ends with the hope for future generations that ‘the legacy of despair that we are about to leave them may at the last minute be changed to one of hope’ (The Ecologist 1972, p. 22).

So, alongside stories of collapse and decline; there existed stories of hope, these stories were presented as a choice between alternative futures, one dystopian and the other utopian. This choice was also clearly expressed in the highly influential report *Limits to Growth*, published in 1972. In this report the authors used a computer model ‘of the world’ to track five major trends of global concern—accelerating industrialization, rapid population growth, widespread

malnutrition, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and a deteriorating environment (Meadows *et al.* 1972 p. 21). While Meadows (*et al.*) accepted it was ‘imperfect, oversimplified and unfinished’ the report concluded that based on current trends, the limits to growth will be met sometime in the next 100 years unless ‘the world’s people’ alter these trends and ‘establish a condition of ecological and economic stability that is sustainable far into the future’ (1972, p. 24). Only a ‘stabilized world model’ would avoid ‘overshoot’ and ‘collapse’. In the report *The World*, was given a choice. Either continue on its current path and face local crises, disasters, disintegration, economic decay, overshoot and collapse or choose a path leading to global equilibrium, stability, survival; all of which would require ‘a supreme effort of understanding, imagination, and political and moral resolve’ (Meadows *et al.* 1972, p. 193). Here stories of decline exist and give moral force to the story of hope.

Images of a fragile earth from space that graced the covers of countless magazines and books at the time served to reinforce these stories of immanent collapse and recast them as global in nature. Other images conveyed similar messages based around the storylines of hope or despair. The cover of the 2 February 1970 Time Magazine for instance, depicted two side-by-side images of these alternative futures, superimposed over Barry Commoner’s face with the lead article titled ‘Fighting to Save the Earth From Man’ (see *Figure 1*).



Figure 1: Fighting to Save the Earth from Man

Source: Time 2 February, 1970

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,878179,00.html>

What this image so clearly depicts is two alternative futures—one of industrialization, leading to pestilence and doom (and deeply grey), while the other promises a future living in harmony with ‘nature’.

The word ‘sustainable’ had a great deal of currency in the environmental literature of the early 1970s but it carried with it connotations of being ‘against’ industrialization, consumption and growth. Those involved in or supportive of continued industrialization were therefore clearly identified as the villains, along with those who continued to breed. The

heroes were clearly those who led the environmental crusade and the victims—the planet and future generations. The linking of sustainability with ‘development’ in ‘sustainable development’, not only transformed the meaning of the term, but also transformed the terms of the debate, leading to the marginalization of previous discourses on sustainability (McManus 1996). Sustainable development became the key-mobilizing concept around which consensus and agreement could be reached. As Fischer suggests:

‘Because the earlier environmental storyline, “limits to growth”, proved to be a non-starter for the industrial community ... there was a need to innovate a new storyline capable of working for both environmentalists and industrialists’ (2003, p. 88).

Sustainable development provided a ‘conceptual bridge to bring together environmentalists and industrialists’ allowing them to engage in ‘an effort to rescue and protect economic growth from its environmental critics. Formulated in this way, the approach is a concrete expression of corporate environmentalism’ (Fischer and Black 1995, p. xiv). No longer were industrialists seen as the villains in the storyline and while the sense of urgency and of a global or common future remained, the aim from the outset was to reach agreement and consensus so that priorities could be established. Concerns about limits also lingered, and linger on, but reframed and depoliticized.

In *Our Common Future*, a text that served to popularize the concept ‘sustainable development’ is harnessed to link resource use, resource distribution, economic development, and social equity within a framework of biophysical limits. The whole ‘world’ becomes part of the agenda for change to avoid ‘ecological disaster’. The opening paragraph of the report is telling and demonstrates how it drew on earlier environmental discourses and transformed them by re-framing them within the need for management and greater control:

‘From space, we see a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery and soils. Humanity’s inability to fit its doings into that pattern is changing planetary systems, fundamentally. Many such changes are accompanied by life-threatening hazards. This new reality, from which there is no escape, must be recognized—and managed’ (WCED 1990, p. 1).

The report’s message was not, it claimed, based on a story of decline nor was it ‘a prediction of ever increasing environmental decay, poverty, and hardship in an ever more polluted world among ever decreasing resources’ (*ibid*) but rather that its message was framed as a story of hope and of control, where ‘people can build a future that is more prosperous, more just and more secure’ (*ibid*). The story of decline lurked in the background as an alternative dystopian future if global action was not taken.

The report posed the question—how are individuals in the real world to be persuaded or made to act in the common interest? The answer lays partly in education, institutional development and law enforcement:

‘All would be better off if each person took into account the effects of his or her acts upon others. But each is unwilling to assume that others will behave in this socially desirable fashion, and hence all continue to pursue narrow self-interest. Communities or governments can compensate for this isolation through laws,

education, taxes, subsidies, and other methods. Well-enforced laws and strict liability legislation can control harmful side effects. Most important, effective participation in decision-making processes by local communities can help them articulate and effectively enforce their common interest' (WCED, 1990, p. 91).

In this re-telling of the 'tragedy of the commons' the task of implementing sustainable development does not rest with government alone, but through local communities 'enforcing their common interest' through 'effective participation' in decision making. In her analysis of the report Rydin examines how the notion of a 'common' interest is constructed rhetorically, arguing that the metaphors employed within the document are quite specific:

'drawing on parallels for the environment with a home for the family or habitat for a species. These invite personal association, the identification of the reader with the broader issues being discussed. But further, such metaphors make disagreement and an emphasis on conflict more difficult. Everyone knows that families can be sites of conflict but their use as metaphors in an exhortatory, normative discourse, such as this, is meant to highlight the positive, nurturing side of family life, the family as safe haven' (Rydin, 2003, p. 7).

According to Rydin (2003) other rhetorical devices in the text emphasized this appeal to commonality while playing down the existence of conflict or competition including synechonic reasoning. The argument makes a leap from focusing on a specific group to a conclusion about humanity; ethos where the characterization of the speaker is one of leadership, speaking to and for all people in a visionary manner, the use of the first-person plural and finally the use of metonymy in which 'people' and 'planet' are used interchangeably (Rydin 2003, pp. 8–9).

This idea of a shared vision or storyline of the future also encapsulated in the appeal to 'Our Common Future' is seen as one of the major outcomes of the WCED; a vision and storyline that has been since supported at other international forums. The vehicle to achieve this vision was dialogue 'as if sustainable forms of development would best emerge from education, enlightenment and information' (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, p. 215).

5. Sustainability and community

What we see here is a shift in the way in which blame and responsibility were allocated towards a focus on the individual and individual behavior. According to Wall, this focus on individual attitudes and behaviour 'was becoming a predominant theme in all areas of environmental discourse by the late 1980s' (2000, p. 258) and consequently, 'the definitions of problems themselves shifted from that of environmental degradation to that of lack of responsibility on the part of individuals for their own health' (2000, p. 259). This 'narrowed the possibilities for critical public understandings' (Wall, 2000, p. 250). Rather than singling out any one group or even individual, sustainability becomes the concern of everyone and because of the emphasis on commonality, agreement and individual restraint the need for 'community' participation is seen as central to the achievement of sustainable development. Who precisely that community is and what form that participation will take is rarely specified. The use of the first person plural, so entrenched in sustainability discourse means that 'we' all should be involved and so non-involvement becomes a matter of concern; awareness raising and education are the primary tools to ensure compliance (Lafferty and

Meadowcroft 1996). The villains here become those individuals who do not heed the sustainability message.

In her analysis of sustainable development policy implementation in Norway, Straume has noted ‘a current, general trend of authorities to appeal to the public in a way that reduces sustainable development to a private matter for individuals and households [and] ... an accompanying tendency to downplay political dialogue’ (2005, p. 196). Locating this tendency in the Agenda 21 process, she argues that this process of individualization centres on a common shared ‘villain’ that can be blamed. In the process an understanding of individuals as citizens is lost:

‘Official admonitions of the need for individuals to change have an aura of common sense because they fit with much that is taken for granted in a consumer-orientated society. Environmental problems are portrayed as unwanted off-spring of this society, which threaten its promise of a good society. At the same time, however, these very problems serve to justify central institutions of the society. The continuous generation of environmental problems helps to legitimize administrative paternalism, while keeping the public passive with guilt. What remains obscured is the possibility that solving environmental problems would require a structural change that would replace the production of consumers by the development of active citizens’ (Straume 2005, p. 203).

What Straume is suggesting here is that processes of community engagement requires more than simply ensuring increased levels of involvement and inclusion. There is a need instead to consider the way in which sustainability and environmental problems are framed in the first place. As Young points out ideas of inclusion are based on ‘questionable assumptions’. She argued that:

‘To the extent that norms of deliberation implicitly value certain styles of expression as dispassionate, orderly, or articulate, they can have exclusionary implications. Such a focus on a narrow deliberative style, moreover, ignores the important role other forms of communication play in furthering inclusive democratic outcomes’ (Young 2000, pp. 6–7).

To advocate inclusion or simply adding more voices is not enough in itself, without considering the processes by which or through which inclusion is understood and operationalized. According to Young, ‘inclusive political processes should not be thought of as enfolding its participants in a single public with a single discourse of the common good (2000, p. 12). Inclusive democracy, ‘requires openness to a plurality of modes of communication, and ... inclusive political discussions should recognize and attend to social differences in order to achieve the wisest and most just political judgments for action’ (Young 2000, p. 12). Inclusive democracy therefore involves more than simply evoking inclusion and calling for the involvement of marginalized voices if such a call:

‘[P]resupposes an already given set of procedures, institutions, and terms of public discourse into which those excluded or marginalized are incorporated without change. In this image of inclusion, the particular interests, experiences, and ways of looking at things that the formerly excluded bring to politics makes little difference to its processes or outcomes. On this image, bringing about political equality consists in extending already constituted institutions and

practices to people not currently benefiting from them enough, and thereby expecting them to conform to hegemonic norms' (Young 2000, pp. 11–12).

What Young is suggesting here is that processes need to be developed that harness divergent, local, often illegitimate visions of alternative futures. These stories and the possibilities they imagine may not be linear, overarching meta-narratives that focus on recovery after decline. Their scope could be situated and contextualized rather than global and universalizing. And the characters could and should be different too. But above all else they will be spoken and written about in a way that acknowledges rather than negates conflicting perspectives, values, beliefs and life situations rather than simply attributing and/or deflecting blame, because maybe the issues and conflicts cannot be resolved through consensual means?

Conclusion

The paper argues that two broad storylines or meta-narratives dominate discussions about sustainability and the future, based around stories of decline and control, despair and hope. These storylines both enable but also constrain possibilities for thinking about sustainability and the future. The current emphasis on individual behavioral change as a key to addressing environmental concerns, by extension, can best be addressed through 'community' education and awareness-raising. This effectively writes out the possibility of thinking about the future in a way that is not constrained by these dominant storylines. Attention to the storylines 'we' tell ourselves about the future and the processes 'we' adopt is an important first step towards imagining sustainable futures for all.

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