

On Civic Environmentalism

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We, as a society, are often perplexed when we consider critical meta-issues of global environmental and economic sustainability. The endless complexity of intricate connections and conflicts between human and earth economics makes many feel insignificant and powerless. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that any participation at the local level is a more productive way of getting involved in environmental action. At this immediate level, individual awareness and will contribute to the power of collective action of a community. All of a sudden, ordinary people no longer feel overwhelmed and incapable, but instead, draw on the reservoir of shared local knowledge, technology and initiative in order to care for their place of living.

Civic environmentalism is based on the idea of many stakeholders in a given community coming together in an open political process to participate in planning and devising sustainable methods of maintaining the environmental, economic, cultural and social health of their community. The concept of civic environmentalism draws on the essential principle of subsidiarity, which reaffirms the strength and viability of social capital. Social capital is a process of forming trust, communication, political engagement and association between diverse members of a community. Indeed, “civil society is an expression of the basic human desire to socialize with others through voluntary association”¹. It is deeply entrenched in the importance of an ecological place, where people join together in an inclusive and transparent manner to care for the immediate human habitat – inner cities and suburbs. This allows participants to broaden their

action span and avoid exclusive focus on idealized notions of preserving the distant wilderness. Indeed, there is growing consensus that urban planning must be long-term, holistic and open for public debate in order to build ecologically clean and aesthetically pleasing communities.

The community-oriented emphasis of civic environmentalism is the fundamental pre-requisite of a vibrant and effective democracy. Many social thinkers, like Alexis de Tocqueville and Robert Putnam, have argued that civic solidarity and participation of citizens at the grassroots level form the foundation for a functional democratic society.² Genuine adherence to these core democratic values requires perseverance and a willingness to accept change and to revise cultural norms and beliefs. Long-standing traditional American values of individualism and self-sufficiency must yield to restoring communal cohesiveness that is built on trust, mutual help and collective struggle for the sustainable well-being of human beings and nature.

However, the power of the government, incremental policy making processes, election-cycle mentalities and budget constraints at the local level give rise to a different kind of environmentalism: one that is elitist and paternalistic in its core principles and policies.³ The long reach of political actions committees (PACs) that represent powerful corporate interests also perpetuates this current system of environmental regulation. This type of environmental activism is rooted in earlier progressive notions of preservationism, as advocated by John Muir, Horace McFarland and others. It also

¹ David Skidmore, *Civil Society, Social Capital & Economic Development* (University of Kent at Canterbury: Global Society, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2001), p.55

² This is a reflection on the discussion of value of an ecological place, local self-governance and civil democracy, which were introduced in William A. Shutkin, *The Land That Could Be: Environmentalism & Democracy in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA & London, UK: The MIT Press, 2001), pp.28-34.

³ This discussion draws on the issues of public policy cycles in a pluralistic democratic society. Zachary A. Smith, *The Environmental Policy Paradox* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 2000), pp.42-56.

maintains an emphasis on conservation, as put forth by Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and James Garfield. The dominant influences of these two strands of environmental consciousness are still evident today.⁴

Preservation enabled the American society to express its love of nature and passion for protecting wilderness and endangered species and to care about national parks and land reserves. Conservation embraced the idea of a disciplined and professional public management of natural resources, based on *sound science*, efficiency and a strong legal framework. These historic influences have led to a highly technocratic and legalistic brand of environmentalism. As a consequence, environmental consciousness has often been seen as catering to and being accountable to the sentiments of white upper and middle classes. Needless to say, over the years such a top-down approach contributed to the decay of civic participation in environmental policy making process, and instead focused on dealing with government agencies and private economic interests.

Indeed, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) relies heavily on a professional approach towards environmentalism by hiring economists, lawyers, engineers and experts from other fields. At the same time, many NGOs, including the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Fund, the National Audubon Society and others, have followed the same professional route.⁵ This approach to environmental issues leads to a balancing act resting upon compromise and tradeoffs between public environmentalists and private corporations. Both of these political groups have tried to influence federal, state and local governments by conducting research, participating in

⁴ For the purposes of this essay, this is the brief outline of the history of the environmental movement. Smith (2000), pp.14-18. Shutkin (2001), pp.91-99.

all stages of policy making process, creating competing models and, of course, making donations to election campaigns in order to achieve maximum results. The outcome is that “environmental regulations are not designed to prevent pollution per se, but only to control it according to health-based standards”⁶.

Many uniform national environmental policies deriving from diverse regulatory models that include both command-and-control and free-market mechanisms have been quite successful. They include: the Clean Air Act of 1963, the Clean Water Act of 1972, the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, the Clean Air Act Amendment of 1990 and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, & Liability Act of 1980, otherwise known as the Superfund Initiative, among others. Despite the rich history of political action, many examples of past and new legislation have maintained a short-term perspective based upon an exclusive ideological bias towards economic growth and have excluded general public from any planning and decision-making processes.⁷

As an undesirable side-effect, many regulations essentially bypass and ignore specific and unique local pollution problems. Professional environmentalism involving market-based solutions, such as emission standards and pollution permits, has been effective in dealing with large and visible *point sources of pollution*, such as power and chemical plants, industrial complexes, oil refineries, factories, etc. However, it has done

⁵ Shutkin (2001), p.110

⁶ *Ibid*, p.100.

⁷ Discussion on various government initiatives vis-à-vis enforcement of environmental standards, Smith (2000), pp.34-37. Further information is based on the study of each specific legislation. Smith (2000), pp.83-92; 122-129; 56; 190-192.

little to fight local and less obvious *non-point pollution sources* – air pollution and toxic water runoffs from farms, auto-body shops, cleaners and gas stations, among others.⁸

The problem of limited jurisdiction also extends to many negative environmental effects of land use and urban sprawl. These issues have immediate economic, social and health effects on a sense and a value of place for all inhabitants residing in affected areas. Local communities are underfunded and can only utilize local zoning laws and health regulations to protect their inhabitants. Needless to say, these measures are hopelessly inadequate to combat environmental degradation at the local level.

Civic environmentalism denounces technocratic approaches toward environmental problems which have produced a dichotomy of nature – “*worthy*” wilderness vs. “*unworthy*” urban environment.⁹ This is a strong tradition in western intellectualism that takes its roots in Greek philosophy, which affirmed a dualism of mortal body and eternal soul.¹⁰ Such dualism has become quite commonplace and it has permeated the world of politics, science and culture. Western society, in general, became trapped in these notions of polarity, which have been used to justify inequality, domination, neglect and oppression. For many centuries humankind has seen its destiny shaped by a system of socially constructed relationships – humans vs. nature; western civilization vs. indigenous culture; men vs. women; core vs. periphery, etc.

⁸ These are the negative side effects that are produced by the broad uniformity of environmental regulations, which are enforced by EPA on the federal level and by state environmental agencies at the state level. Shutkin (2001), pp.101-105.

⁹ This discussion draws on William Cronon’s insights regarding modern ideology that tends to value sublime and uninhabited wilderness over urban environment, which has been transformed by industrialization, urbanization and consumerism. William Cronon (editor), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1996), pp.69-90.

¹⁰ The origins of the concept of spiritual and physical dualism dates back to the work of Athenian philosopher Plato. In the compilation of his writings “The Dialogues” Plato argued that the purity and divinity of an eternal human soul suffers under constraints and contamination of a human body, which is the source of passionate pursuits, irrationality and emotional fallibility.

The moral essence of civic environmentalism embraces holistic and inclusive approaches to community-based, local decision-making and development planning initiatives that are based on “face-to-face interaction among diverse stakeholders”¹¹. Such a transparent urban development paradigm embraces efficient business-like attention to planning and implementation. It facilitates communal interest and feedback and does so in an attempt to include and benefit all actors. In other words, local context provides a society with “the utilization of local institutions over which we (people) have some control, our homes, schools, churches, farms, and locally controlled businesses, as pilot projects of ecological living”¹². Such direct action allows communities to promote environmental awareness and address issues of environmental justice. It is imperative to focus on preventing the environmental blackmail of marginalized low-income and ethnic communities that are often forced to accommodate polluting industries in exchange for jobs and other economic benefits. Current problems of urban sprawl and environmental degradation demand local inputs and solutions. A community-based environmentalism is grounded in local knowledge, technology and direct involvement in all aspects of social, human and economic capital in a given place. Many ecologically-sound alternatives of economic growth draw heavily on specific local resources and are labor-intensive. In other words, “they are designed to accommodate the site’s ability to absorb waste, harvest energy and water and are built, where possible, out of native materials”¹³.

¹¹ Shutkin (2001), p.129

¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), p. 269

¹³ Steve Lerner, *Eco-Pioneers: Practical Visionaries Solving Today’s Environmental Problems* (Cambridge, MA & London, UK: The MIT Press, 1998), pp. 25-26.

Instead of passive acquiescence and consent to existing power relations, civic environmentalism must be realized through interaction and participation in local planning schemes in order to control and customize this process towards genuine community needs. By setting aside class and race differences, communities can engage in a democratic effort that counters the power of large corporations, election-driven government officials and the paternalistic views of professional environmentalists.

Traditional top-down environmental protection and advocacy that is done by EPA and powerful environmental NGOs prevents civic participation and enables private business interests to set the regulatory agenda and control its implementation. On the contrary, civic environmentalism takes a local systems approach by incorporating the views of all community actors – citizens, private business owners and local governments - in an attempt to achieve optimal results. It democratizes the political process by pressuring government to invest in public infrastructure and to include citizens in devising urban development plans, which have direct social, economic and health benefits to the people. Such political and social activism is bound to facilitate greater consciousness towards the immediate urban environment.

It would be a mistake however, to argue that civic environmentalism can exist in a political vacuum without any interaction with various federal agencies, government oversight committees and multinational corporations. We must reevaluate the customary juxtaposition of public and private interests. Instead, our society must develop a new ethic of environmental culture that is holistic and inclusive. This would further advance the ultimate goal of recognizing the most fundamental ecological

principal of physical and spiritual interdependence and interconnectedness between humankind and nature. The reality is quite simple – “environmental outcomes are the shared function of the many”¹⁴.

¹⁴ Shutkin, (2001), p. 129.