PEER-REVIEWED HIPPIES

Remarks occasioned by the

**Education for Sustainability** conference

Canterbury Christ Church University, July 7, 2016

Peter Harper



With some diffidence, I am going to make some critical outsider’s remarks about the Conference and the Education for Sustainability (EfS) community as a whole.

The cartoon above sums it up. The joke is that the proposed treatment is wildly inappropriate to the situation. We all understand that emergency medicine is quite different from everyday healthy living along with the various ‘extras’ (like aromatherapy) that we use to enhance it.

By analogy, there are two forms of sustainability: everyday low-impact living, and vigorous, rapid, co-ordinated, highly technologized mass transformations aimed at preventing incipient irreversible changes to the physical support systems. In spite of some overlaps, they are *dramatically different*.

As a relative outsider to the academic field of Education for Sustainability represented by this conference, it is immediately obvious that you are all offering *only the first of these forms*, essentially aromatherapy in an emergency situation. I find this surprising. How can it be?

Let me go back a few steps. The very wide range of themes, activities and projects I saw at the conference were nearly all explored by the activist environmental movements in the 1970s. I know, I was there: I have been doing it since the sixties. The general aim was low-impact lifestyles that also delivered fulfilment. In spite of some egregious mistakes, most elements were well-chosen, and it could be argued that if everybody had adopted such practices earlier, we would now have a physically sustainable world. But of course they didn’t, and a generation later we are in a completely different situation that calls for quite a different approach.

What seems to have happened is this. The explosion of eco-lifestyle initiatives in the seventies and eighties was patchily adopted by the broadly green community, and some elements were also adopted by trend-setters in the mainstream, giving rise to a substantial market in eco-chic. Young enthusiasts grew up, got jobs, entered the more amenable institutions and cast around for ways to embed and propagate their good ideas. One important result is that environmentalism and convivial lifestyles eventually emerged as *bona fide* academic disciplines in universities, replete with courses, departments, journals, research and chairs. And the students love it: there’s a huge hunger for this kind of thing; and if you can get a degree and a job out of it, what’s not to like?

But – to judge from what I saw at the Conference – the focus is entirely on green lifestyles. Of course these are important and I applaud the fact that they are now being theorised and researched (and thereby improved) and also taught (and thereby propagated). It’s all brilliant in its own terms and if it had happened back in the seventies and eighties we’d have been overjoyed. But it misses the crucial fact that times have changed, and *we now have a completely different problem on our hands*.

Perhaps some of you would argue that this problem – of preventing catastrophic risk – is a different subject; in fact ***so*** different, it is none of your concern. Then whose concern is it? You have explicitly adopted the term ‘sustainability’ but have failed to examine its potential meanings. Surely the physical meaning of ‘unable to be sustained’ should take precedence? What I saw at the conference was an unexamined assumption that anything vaguely cuddly and agreeable or green-sounding would be termed ‘sustainable’, while the more brutal physical meaning is simply ignored. I am shocked. This is not scholarly. You have run off with a perfectly explicit term and confounded its public meanings.

It is perhaps not surprising that some academics would shy away from the seriously wicked problem of transformation and go for more tractable problems easier both to teach and research. But from what I can see it’s not just a few: you’ve all done it. There is nobody left willing to focus on the emergency situation we are now faced with, and the *really* radical changes it implies. If not us, then who?

I am sorry to say this, but it amounts to a kind of *trahison des clercs*. From my perspective, what you seem to be doing is essentially ‘aromatherapy’, and producing a new generation of peer-reviewed hippies. Would have been very welcome in the 70s. Ideal for the 22nd century. But not what we need right now.

Argue me out of this.

MICRO- AND MACRO-SUSTAINABILITY

A COMPARISON OF PHYSICALIST AND NON-PHYSICALIST APPROACHES

This table has emerged, at least in part, as a result of correspondence with Professor Stephen Sterling of Plymouth University, arising from the previous set of comments. I have argued that ‘education for sustainability’ is actually the reverse: *sustainability for education*, that is, the use of sustainability themes and practices to produce well-rounded, fully educated, and strongly-motivated students. While this is entirely admirable, it is quite a different matter from the rapid transformation needed to decarbonise the world in at most two decades, the UK much faster.

 My gripe is that all this ‘micro-sustainability’ has captured and eviscerated the starker underlying meanings and implications of the word sustainability, and acts as a smokescreen obscuring the clarity of vision that is now needed. I am now arguing for quite a different, and far more physicalist approach, which for the time being I shall call ‘macro-sustainability’. It won’t happen without someone making a fuss and calling a spade a spade. Here’s me throwing down the gauntlet.

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|  | MICRO-SUSTAINABILITY | MACRO-SUSTAINABILITY |
|  | NON-PHYSICALIST | PHYSICALIST |
| Tends to attract | Social scientists, educators, humanities teachers | Physical scientists |
| Time horizon | Long: 100+ years | Short: 20-50 years |
| Ethical perspective | Humanistic values maintained; aversion to ranking | Emphasis on sequencing of action, ranking of processes and activities; ‘temporal Rawlsianism’ |
| Style | Holistic, wide/soft focus, both-and | Quantitative, logical, either-or |
| Logical frame | Using sustainability patterns to educate students | Using educational techniques to communicate sustainability patterns |
| Aim | To produce better citizens with humanistic sustainability values and skills | To produce critically informed graduates and professional fuss-makers |
| Attitude to ‘triple bottom line’ framework | The factors are co-equal: ‘Trinitarian’ | Physical factors primary: ‘Unitarian’ |
| Operating space for humanity | Raworth doughnut | Rockström radar |
| Mode | Bottom-up, ‘leading by example’ | Top-down, ‘democratic dirigisme’ |
| Focus | Political/economic/social response to physical challenges | Physical response to physical challenges; social and economic factors considered secondary |
| Status | Orthodoxy, embracing a widely-understood meaning of ‘sustainability’ | Minority: Conception of sustainability too literal for widespread acceptance |
| Structural basis | Highly theorised; academic ‘cult of complexity’? | Based on simple, basic ‘Piagetian’ concepts |
| Locus | More common in new universities | Uncommon |