
Cultural implications of sustainability

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Presentation to the Coastal Sustainability Forum hosted by the Victorian Coastal Council at Atlantic South Wharf, Melbourne.

Two things struck me about the letter confirming my agreement to speak at this forum. The first was the date and the second was the last phrase of the opening descriptive paragraph - 'change the way we think'.

What better day than Bastille Day to ponder on changing the way we think.

The storming of **that** prison was preceded by half a century of profound thought change.

Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' was published 42 years ago, so perhaps institutions will be surrounded by barricades and 'Sustainability' banners in your lifetimes.

Who knows, perhaps our actions will catch up with our thoughts before too long.

We live in a society that, as far as I can see, can **only** be sustainable with ever increasing consumption. This is obvious. As is the internal contradiction. Our culture cannot survive unless we change the way we behave.

This is so obvious that it's reasonable to wonder why **everyone** doesn't get it - and change their behaviour accordingly.

Well, perhaps most everyone **does** get it. But feel removed enough from the action to have become disengaged, or have tired of butting their heads, or have had to pull their heads in for economic reasons. It's far easier to imagine why people **don't** act on their appreciation of their unsustainable behaviour than it is to assume that most of us have actually embraced the beliefs that underpin consumerism, just because we behave as if we have.

To a significant degree, we don't act according to our beliefs.

Perhaps that initial descriptor, 'change the way we think' could have been 'change the way we behave' or at least 'how does thought influence behaviour?' What turns thought into action? Incentives? Penalties? Education? Public discourse? Voting?

All of the above. But some try to bypass thought entirely (do this and I'll beat you, do that and I'll give you sugar), or shift the focus (this other person says that they'll sort it all out for

you), or load up an existing set of values to inform behaviour (the Ten Commandments, for example - and more of these later).

In a culture in which the concept of democracy has some authenticity, I'd think it almost mandatory to have 'public discourse' at, or near the top, of any list of ways to influence behaviour. Apart from anything else, it's an effective way of making it possible for behaviour change to be a two way street. If consultation became a shade more interactive - tending towards negotiation, we'd be moving.

As someone who has spent a deal of his life entertaining crowds, I'm aware that perhaps the biggest challenge with the public discourse option is the lack of animation left in most traditional modes. Public meetings can sometimes be enthralling, engaging and vital but these would be rarities. If public discourse is to be taken seriously (and I believe it must), it has to be re-invented. This is where art can be an enormously useful tool (and I'll come back to that in a moment).

A slight digression.

One implication of the 'change the way we think' phrase is that behaviour change is dependent on thought change. There are many who would argue the opposite (Skinner and Pavlov amongst them) and most public policy steers a middle course.

Now Rousseau wrote 'Discourse on Inequality' 35 years before the Bastille was stormed. The one followed the other? Therefore what?

Well, he certainly didn't cause the revolution. What he did do was develop a language in which new ideas - liberty, equality and fraternity - and new arguments supporting their universality could be used in public discourse and achieve common understanding.

Which is to say that I don't know about action being 'dependent' on thought, but there's no doubt that thought is influential. And an influence to be utilised.

The poets and philosophers of sustainability are among us (aren't they?). It would probably be useful to find them platforms, but enlivening and democratising the debate has to be a key issue.

It may be enough to modify behaviour through coercion (positive and negative) - particularly if success is to be measured on relatively immediate quantifiable scales. Add in

an advertising campaign, and some school programs and we should be home. But we're not. More coercion? More education? For industry perhaps, but for the citizenry, 'we' (the people who design, decide and implement public policy) need, as has been suggested, to change the way they (which includes 'we') think.

In recognising that sustainable attitudes and behaviours need to become as widespread and as habitual as putting on a seat belt, we need to also recognise that sustainable behaviour goes far beyond car pooling, buying green energy, growing natives and using grey water. These are individual actions that, in aggregate, will get us some of the way there (and can probably be achieved through coercion ploys). But, as you all know, there are much more difficult and necessary behaviour changes to be contemplated. These will need informed, enthusiastic and vocal public support for there to be any hope of achievement. That sort of support can't be built through coercion. The sort of commitment needed will have to be underpinned by strongly held collective values. And the connection between the values and the behaviour will have to be clear.

I don't think that this state can be reached without the rediscovery of engaging communication by the leadership and the public service. And I don't mean a sexy advertising campaign.

I've raised these issues for two reasons. First because they are fundamental questions that anyone concerned with the implementation of public sustainability initiatives must address - changing behaviour, at the very least, voting behaviour. And second, because they are fundamentally cultural questions.

That is, they address a society's values and attitudes. They're about the dynamics that shape public meaning, public values. How these manifest in behaviour. This is the substance of culture.

I'm in front of you because I wrote a book with both sustainability and culture in the title.

The book recognises that the triple bottom line is an improvement on the traditional balance sheet. But not all that much of a one when one notes that at the end of the day the new bottom lines are translated into the language of the original. We are now able to put a dollar value on environmental degradation, on social fragmentation. They can therefore be

legitimately brought to account. This sounds more like economic thinking imperialising every other form of thought, than it does like a sea change in public policy making.

Simply turning those questions upside down – how do we express the effect of the economy on the environment, how do we express the effect of the economy on society – in terms that are ‘of’ the environment and ‘of’ society, rather than ‘of’ the economy, is challenging enough.

I’m suggesting in *The Fourth Pillar* that we need to do another somersault – that as well as evaluating policy as to its effect on society (‘outcomes’, I believe they’re called, today), we need to consider the effect of society on policy. That is, the processes through which the communities that inhabit this country actively participate in negotiating the plans (who we want to be, where we want to go, how we want to get there, who’s coming with us). This is the fourth perspective: ignoring the social production of meaning and purpose (that is, culture) in the mix out of which public policy emerges is to perpetuate myths. The myth that there are a set of immutable universal values, independent of human intervention, that govern our way of life; the myth that constructed institutions have emerged through ‘natural’ laws – that can only maintain their ‘natural’ integrity if, once again, there is no human intervention.

So, those that argue for the introduction of a fourth pillar into the sustainability framework are saying that we need to develop an environment in which there is constant, vigorous, lively and widespread debate about what matters.

Lately there’s been much heated talk about values and little illumination. An EXCEPTION was the article in Monday’s *Australian* describing Phillip Cam’s primary school philosophy programs. He is quoted as saying, ‘One of the great mistakes in the teaching of philosophy is for adults to set out that values are to have a set of rules, and then to try to drum them into kids. In philosophy education, what kids are doing is learning to value – they’re learning to value their own ideas, and they’re learning to value one another as members of their community’.

This makes a lot more sense than accepting our Treasurer’s contention that having no other god than his, not worshiping images, not blaspheming, and doing nothing on Sundays are universal values which we should all embrace.

And one cannot but wonder how he dovetails his old testament universals with his economic fundamentalist universals. Perhaps all universals are relative in the coming-up-to-an-election environment.

How and what we think shapes the world and our behaviour in it. The world and our behaviour shape how and what we think. This dynamic is culture in action.

Keeping this dynamic energetic is the precondition of cultural vitality.

And the chief obstacle to vitality, and to sustainability, is disconnectedness. This is not a new idea; it's been with us for ever: alienation, marginalisation, disempowerment, non-engagement. It manifests in the attitude 'why should I care?'

This is obviously a cultural state – an expression of belief, of meaning, or, in this case, lack of meaning. As such, it is most effectively negotiated in a cultural context.

Attitudes are cultural manifestations and can be most fruitfully and positively affected through cultural action.

Which is to say that rediscovering connectedness is more a cultural challenge than an environmental, social or economic one.

And its probably only through experiencing connectedness that one can fully embrace sustainability – 'not compromising the future'.

Sustainability has tended to be applied simply to notions of waste reduction, alternate energy sources, preservation of natural resources and so on.

But it is a much wider idea than that. A sustainable world is as much dependent on sustainable cultures as it on sustainable environments, economies or institutions. Unless we can develop a culture that engages all its citizens, that embraces and cherishes all its members, no amount of recycling will save us.

And achieving sustainability in its widest sense, that is, embedding the notion of sustainability in our way of life, is a cultural process.

And changing the way we think (and, this time, by 'we', I mean our selves, our communities, our governments, our world) needs to be recognised as an imperative – a cultural imperative.

It seems to me that if, and only if, the connections we have misplaced are re-discovered will widespread 'sustainable behaviour' be achievable.

And I think that the best place to start is in the mirror. Those wishing to engineer widespread behavioural change should first look to their own behaviour. That is, the first 'we' in the changing thinking frame should be the engineers.

Do their policies and programs (particularly, the latter) embody the attitudes and behaviours they are promoting?

Often, what is actually being communicated is utterly different from what is intended – not because the rhetoric is confused but because the manner in which the message is delivered tells a completely different story.

And what of the messengers? Do staff 'own' the ideas they promote? How engaged were they in their development? How able are they to trust, listen, excite, enthuse and build confidence in the publics with whom they interact? How good are they at assisting people to discover their own ownership of the ideas being advocated?

What I've been talking about is applying a cultural perspective to the challenge of encouraging more sensitive attitudes and behaviours towards environmental matters in our citizens.

But the connections between culture and sustainability go far beyond being able to use cultural initiatives to develop 'environmental consciousness'

We need to recognise that it is a sense of commonly held meanings and values that hold us together. And that these require constant public examination, play, discourse both to remind ourselves what they are, and to check their current validity, imagine alternatives, show them to our children, newcomers, neighbours.

We need to exercise our values, to use them in practice, to externalise them, to recognise them, to talk about them freely, enthusiastically and publicly – and to be able to recognise which are keys to sustainability and wellbeing and which are locks.

When described like that, it is difficult to imagine what practical activities might embody this airy-fairy notion.

WHICH FINALLY BRINGS ME TO

Why the arts are so valuable (and how great participatory arts can be in the achievement of 'social policy' objectives)

The easiest, most enjoyable and most productive way to make the airy-fairy real, to shape meaning together, is with arts practice.

The arts have paramount value:

- as a practice through which all humans have the right and capacity to express themselves;
- as a uniquely important means through which we interact with our heritages (the cultural environment, so to speak);
- as the primary symbolic language through which we generate meaning; and,
- as a channel for outbursts of creativity.

Arising out of these fundamental attributes, are enormous instrumental values, that is, the application of arts practices can achieve a wide range of other goals (but we should never let this recognition dilute the importance of the fundamental values).

There are an infinite range of ways that the arts make 'non-artistic' contributions to our society, but it is a particular sort of arts that I wish to draw your attention to: collaborative and participatory arts practice in communities. That is, empowered and hands-on community involvement in the process of making the symbols that express the values of the participants. This practice embodies the principle that we are all creative and that we all have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making our own culture. And that if we don't, it is inevitable that we will become alienated, disconnected and mightily pissed off.

Employing an expert to fix the plumbing is perfectly reasonable. But developing identity is not something to be out sourced. For our own health and wellbeing, we need to take this on ourselves.

'Participatory' arts are fabulously effective avenues through which to enhance:

- community building;
- community discourse;
- community expression; and,

- communications with, from and between communities.

And these are exactly the avenues along which sustainability strategy should be travel.

In conclusion, the cultural implications of sustainability, or rather, the issues that arise out of juxtaposing culture and sustainability are:

- Cultural change is a precondition to achieving sustainability
- An effective way to achieve cultural change is through cultural action (particularly actions that utilise participatory arts)
- Achieving cultural sustainability is as important as any other sort of sustainability

Thank you.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning is published by the Cultural Development Network in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from www.theHumanities.com

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