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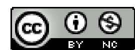

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Civil Capital, Adult Education and Community Sustainability: A Theoretical Overview

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Abstract: *As communities struggle to overcome the negative impacts of corporate globalization, they are searching for ways to maintain or achieve sustainability in an era that values economic efficiency above community life and interests. Adult educators can support communities in their search for sustainability by helping to resist corporate globalization and by building civil capital.*

Introduction

Adult educators have a long history of involvement in community life, working with people in their own environment for social justice and democracy. Their work has helped to build the dream of a more inclusive civil society – one that has a place for all people. That dream is now threatened by the insatiable demands of corporate globalization. We are entering what Susan George (1997, p. 1) calls the "Age of Exclusion," a time when the market, which increasingly determines political, social and economic priorities, has "no place for the growing number of people who contribute little or nothing to production or consumption." Faced with the loss of jobs, resources and land, as well as publicly-funded health care, education and social services, increasing numbers of people are becoming unemployed, homeless and defeated. Such exclusion undermines both urban and rural communities, leaving them vulnerable to fragmentation and collapse. Can adult education help to break the cycle of exclusion and build sustainable communities?

Community Sustainability

The rise of corporate globalization has thrust the issue of community sustainability to the forefront of public discussion. The restructuring that characterizes corporate globalization has resulted in such dislocations as hospital closings, school closings, factory relocations, and the privatization of public services, seriously affecting the sustainability of many communities.

Communities, as social networks of interacting individuals, usually concentrated into a defined territory (Johnston, 1994, p. 80), have always experienced sustainability problems. However, the competitive pressures of the global market have intensified these problems, while at the same time eliminating the means to deal with them. Environmental legislation, minimum wage laws, equity legislation, health and safety regulations, food safety, welfare and unemployment coverage, and universal health, education and old age security now all stand as barriers to international trade.

The concept of sustainability itself, although widely used, is vague and ambiguous. While not all things to all people, it means many things to many people, forming the basis of understanding for terms such as sustainable development and sustainable communities. Originally an environmental term, sustainability now justifies a myriad of policies and projects – from environmental plans and community activities to loan schemes and structural adjustment programs.

In addition, the concept of sustainability is often understood in terms of continuing economic growth (Daly, 1996, pp. 193-4). However, economic growth, as expressed through corporate globalization, is grounded in a set of values that does not select for decisions of civil or environmental sustainability. Based on a monetized system of gain and loss, these values block recognition of life itself as a value, resulting in decisions that select against any option that does not turn a profit or remain accountable to stockholders' expectations (McMurtry, 1999). Such values are driving the transition from welfare-state capitalism to the "cancer stage of capitalism" (McMurtry, 1999), with important repercussions for community sustainability.

However, a new understanding of sustainability can rescue it from the narrow confines of econometric thinking and allow it to serve community interests. Instead of an end-point that maximizes economic efficiency to benefit the very few, sustainability can be seen as a means of making group decisions regarding community viability – in other words, a social learning process.

John Sewell (1998, p. 37-38), former mayor of Toronto, sees sustainability as a process of small changes

in the right direction. It is not an add-on, but an approach and a never-ending process. Sewell points out that decisions about sustainability made by the public realm increase the chance of getting those decisions right.

Röling and Wagemakers (1998) also understand sustainability as a public process. They see it as

> the outcome of the collective decision-making that arises from interaction among stakeholders ... The formulation of sustainability in this manner implies that the definition is part of the problem that stakeholders have to resolve. (p. 9)

In formulating sustainability as a collective decision-making process, Röling and Wagemakers (1998) follow Habermas' argument that

> society can overcome the momentum of what we have constructed in the past ... only by reaching consensus about what action to take next, i.e. not on the basis of controlling things (instrumental rationality), not on the basis of beating competitors or opponents (strategic rationality), but on the basis of shared learning, collaboration, and the development of consensus about the action to take (communicative rationality). (p. 13)

In this way, sustainability as a social learning process provides an opportunity for communities to come together to negotiate the terms of their continued existence, and to devise the action agenda to realize it. Moving sustainability from the scientific/economic realm to the hermeneutic realm still allows a role for expert knowledge, but, more importantly, highlights and centralizes community negotiation, decision-making, knowledge creation and agency. In this way, both urban and rural communities can become learning communities – sites of social learning, resistance and change.

Sustainability is incremental, and can start with the smallest of steps. Even coming together to oppose the closure of a local school or the loss of local jobs to a low-wage "free-trade zone" helps to define what people think a sustainable community includes: public school centres and productive employment.

Such opposition is built on a common cause, sustainability in the face of corporate globalization, which can promote common values while still allowing for dynamic community difference. As feminist Betty Friedan (in Smith, 1999) asserts:

> The new human challenges may not be organized around gender, race, or class, but around the economy, not just because the economy is now irrefutably and irretrievably global in its fundamental reach and character, but because not one soul on the earth today can escape its impact. (p. 115)

Friedan's view is echoed by Lynch (1998, p. 155), who reports that the literature of the International Forum on Globalization, a constellation of social movements and individuals, states that its initial goal is the introduction of the concept that economic globalization is the central factor affecting people's jobs, communities and the environment.

The common values that spark opposition to corporate globalization can be summed up as life values, that is, values that promote life first and foremost. Philosopher John McMurtry (1998, p. 298) calls such an orientation the life code of value, which preserves or extends life (organic movement, sentience and feeling, and thought) through the input of means of life (e.g., clean air, food, water, shelter, affective interaction, environmental space and accessible learning conditions). Holding these means of life at their established scope reproduces life-value; widening or deepening them to a more comprehensive range increases life-value.

Opposing the life code of value is what McMurtry (1998) calls the money of value, which enables money to be preserved and extended, first and foremost. In this code of value, money, not life, is the "regulating objective of thought and action" (p. 299). In other words, "the more money that returns to the investor of money, whatever may happen to life, the better the investment" (p. 299). Thus, money is not used for life, but life is used for money. From this code of value, it follows that more money is always better by definition.

An understanding of these value orientations has enormous consequences for community sustainability. Depending on which value orientation is chosen (whether consciously or unconsciously), the outcomes will be very different. Choosing the money code of value promotes sustainability as continuing economic growth that benefits the very few. Choosing the life code of value promotes sustainability as a social learning process that involves group decision-making regarding community viability and agency.

Civil Capital

Community opposition to corporate globalization can build civil capital, civil solidarity that contributes to actions that enhance community sustainability (Sumner, 1999, p. 81). Otherwise stated, civil capital can be seen as community-group agency that blocks or challenges unsustainable activities. While conceiving of community solidarity as a form of capital development could be seen as not only legitimizing capitalism, but also instrumentalizing human relationships, there are good reasons for using this term.

Capital in the generic sense means "wealth in any form used to help in producing more wealth" (Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 334). This meaning is reflected in the roots of the word capital itself, which is connected etymologically to the words "cattle" and "chattel." Capital, understood as wealth that creates more wealth, has enormous potential as a concept for the sustainability of communities as they try to accumulate the kind of wealth that will help them to survive the destructive forces of corporate globalization.

However, the econometric thrust of the corporate globalization agenda ties all meanings of capital to the money values of the global market. Thus, the *Harper Collins Dictionary of Economics* defines capital as "the contribution to productive activity made by investment in physical capital ... and in human capital," which makes a "significant contribution toward economic growth" (Pass et al, 1991, p. 256). This linkage forms the basis for theory and practice about human capital and, to a large extent, social capital. But, in reappropriating the deep meaning of the concept of capital from the superficial meaning of economists, civil capital can put it to work on behalf of communities struggling against the bottom-line imperatives of the global market by creating forms of community wealth that sustain themselves and grow over time - the essence of any good form of capital.

Dependent on alternatives to values based on money, civil capital situates itself outside the market and inside the community, as one of its deeper resources for community sustainability. This location rules out civil capital's worth in the eyes of the global market because it does not directly maximize profits. In other words, civil capital cannot have positive value in the global corporate market system because it is used to promote life, not money.

Unlike social and human capital, which carry a veneer of political neutrality but work to promote money values, civil capital promotes life values. Overtly political, civil capital is based on the understanding that politics is the process in which a community confronts a series of great issues and chooses between opposing values (Lipson, 1981). The greatest issue facing both rural and urban communities today is corporate globalization. It ultimately forces them to choose between the life code of value and the money code of value. Choosing the life code of value promotes civil capital development, which can protect and enhance community sustainability.

The power of civil capital is shown not only in communities that take a stand against the corrosive effects of corporate globalization, but also in situations like the opposition to the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999. That opposition was civil solidarity *par excellence*, the demands of a global civil society made manifest to those who control the global economy. In spite of their myriad local concerns, the Teamsters marched with people dressed as sea turtles and the AFL-CIO joined with members of the Council of Canadians. All were there to promote life values over money values, whatever their specific interests. Such opposition and alliances provide prime sites of struggle and learning for adult education.

A New Role for Adult Education

Antonio Gramsci (in Hoare & Smith, 1999) maintained that

> Every relationship of "hegemony" is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field. (p. 350)

For Gramsci (in Hoare & Smith, 1999, p. 12), hegemony involves the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group. The greatest hegemonic force in the world today is corporate globalization, legitimated by tacit consent in the form of public capitulation to a fallacious inevitability, but backed by enormous force (e.g., the Asian meltdown, Kosovo). In spite of this consent (tacit or overt), however, hegemony is always contested, always opposed. And it is in this opposition that adult education can find a new role by supporting civil capital development for community sustainability.

As Mayo (1999, p. 84) notes, adult education "can serve to consolidate as well as challenge the existing

hegemony," or in Habermasian terms, can either serve the system or promote the lifeworld. Historically, it has done both, but the unparalleled force of corporate globalization demands an unprecedented response from adult educators. And while civil society

> is regarded as an area that, for the most part, consolidates, through its dominant institutions, the existing hegemonic arrangements, ... [it] also contains sites or pockets, often within the dominant institutions themselves, wherein these arrangements are constantly renegotiated and contested. (Mayo 1999, p. 7)

Adult educators have long been community activists, promoting a life-rich, sustainable civil society. In fact, they have been building civil capital for decades by their involvement in community issues. Now is the time to recognize and encourage their contribution to community sustainability. Whether it's a campaign against opening a Walmart store or demands for labelling genetically modified foods, adult educators can be part of the opposition that builds civil capital and enhances community sustainability. Working with community groups of all kinds – farm women, parents' groups, labour organizations, environmental coalitions, church groups – adult educators can take a stand against corporate globalization, break the pattern of tacit consent and join the counter-hegemonic force that values life over money, and community sustainability over corporate globalization. They can also help to formulate and develop "a normative stance that seeks to negate the power of market ideology and promote an alternative" (Lynch, 1998, p. 155).

Realistically speaking, opposition to corporate globalization is not sweeping through urban and rural communities. Adult educators are well aware of the sort of community inertia that is encompassed in Bourdieu's (1990, p. 53) concept of habitus – systems of durable, transposable dispositions. Created and recreated as objective structures and personal history converge, these systems of dispositions express the idea of predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination (Bellamy, 1994, p. 125-6).

Habitus is both a limit and a site of resistance. In this way, while the tendency of many people might be tacit consent, there is also a history of shared civil concerns that balks at the commodification of public goods, at pricing the priceless, that is the new colonialism of corporate globalization. That shared history is what McMurtry (1999b, p. 1) calls the civil commons – "any co-operative human construction that protects and/or enables the universal access to life goods." McMurtry (1998, p. 25) describes the civil commons as "the vast social fabric of unpriced goods, protecting and enabling life in a wide and deep seamless web of historical evolution that sustains society and civilization." Universal health care, environmental regulations, libraries and public education are all co-operative human constructs that form part of the civil commons. The shared history of the civil commons can form the basis of a community site of resistance to corporate globalization. Adult educators can acknowledge that shared history and build on it, promoting civil capital and building community sustainability in the resistance to the effects of corporate globalization.

Conclusion

Little has been written regarding the political-economic dimensions of community sustainability and the work of adult educators within that arena. Civil capital introduces a working general concept for sustainable community action and the contribution adult educators can make to that action. Grounded in life values and based on the generic meaning of capital, civil capital can maintain and build a life-rich civil society that involves more than just money values. Civil capital can provide a tool in the fight against corporate globalization. It removes the veneer of "neutrality" from all forms of capital development and reveals a political-economic dimension that is always covertly present, but never admitted, in concepts like human capital and social capital. It also represents a social, not an individual, approach to both capital development and adult education. And, finally, it appropriates capital from the system and moves it to the lifeworld, thereby providing an opportunity for the lifeworld to colonize the system. Working from a life-value orientation, adult educators can encourage civil capital development by joining communities in their resistance to corporate globalization and their search for sustainability.

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