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# An Interview with Julian Agyeman: Just Sustainability and Ecopedagogy

## **Abstract**

This interview with Julian Agyeman, a key originator of the concept of just sustainability, engages Agyeman in discussion of how just sustainability evolved, and how its theoretical and practical dimensions relate to the principles of ecopedagogy.

## **Keywords**

Julian Agyeman, Sustainability, Ecopedagogy, Social Justice, just sustainability, environmental justice

## **Disciplines**

Environmental Policy | Sustainability

## **An Interview with Julian Agyeman: Just Sustainability and Ecopedagogy**

Salma Monani

Julian Agyeman is Professor and Chair of Urban Policy and Planning at Tufts University. He is also Adjunct Professor in Environmental Justice and Sustainability at the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies (HRISS) at The University of South Australia, Adelaide, co-editor of *Local Environment: the International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, a contributing editor to *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, an associate editor of *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, and a member of the editorial boards of *The Journal of Environmental Education*, *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, and the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. His scholarly publications demonstrate a rich range of research in geography, policy and planning, education, and their interdisciplinary intersections. His current four areas of research are “the nexus between the concepts of environmental justice and sustainability and, specifically, the possibility of a 'just sustainability;' the potential of the concept of 'spatial justice' to contribute to 'just sustainability;' the potential in emerging discourses around food justice/sovereignty to contribute to discourses around 'just sustainability;' and the extent, complexity and pervasiveness of 'rural racism' in Britain, its linkages to wider discourses of belonging, 'becoming', continuity and change in racialized spaces and ultimately to discourses of nationhood” (Agyeman, 2010).

I was first introduced to Julian Agyeman’s interdisciplinary scholarship when I borrowed a recent book that he had authored, *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice* (2005) from the University of Minnesota library where I was completing my Ph.D. dissertation. The book’s advocacy of *just sustainability* would influence my own research. At face value, just sustainability, which is “the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems” (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, 2003, 5), seems simply to reiterate the charge of environmental justice, emphasizing the need for equity concerns (racial, ethnic, gender,

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sex, and economic) within the domain of environmental concerns. However, the just sustainability paradigm, outlined in detail in *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice*, demands more. Evolving from a grounded examination of environmental justice and sustainability organizations in action, it advocates measures that seek to overcome shortfalls of both movements. Its theory is decisively positioned in practice, and it is keenly aware of the embedded and complex sociopolitical and cultural relations between humans and the environment as well as humans and other humans. Thus, it walks a compelling line, advocating a pragmatic path towards the long-term success of a utopian goal that envisions equity and ecological health for all, human and non-human alike, much like ecopedagogy's own agenda.

I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Agyeman in person when he visited Gettysburg College as the Fall 2008 Convocation speaker. After a visit to my Introduction to Environmental Humanities class, where his talk, "Redefining the American Dream," electrified my students, we had the chance to chat. Our conversation inspired this interview, which was conducted via Skype on January 12, 2009, and explores the similarities between just sustainability and ecopedagogy. I directed Julian to ecopedagogy's "General Principles" (Kahn, 2008, p. iii), asking him to comment on how just sustainability might intersect with and reflect these ideas. In my mind, ecopedagogy's third principle, which advocates "mounting creative and emancipator political action based on formative dialogue across a wide range of interested parties," seems to articulate a foundational component of just sustainability, which is *movement fusion*. This is where our discussion began.

**Monani:** As an example of "movement fusion" between environmental sustainability and environmental justice, just sustainability seems to lend itself to ecopedagogy's third principle. Can you tell us a bit more about the theory and practice of "movement fusion" since it involves dialogue across diverse parties?

**Agyeman:** Since just sustainability involves dialogue across parties, the idea of movement fusion really fits with ecopedagogy's third principle. That's certainly the case! Let me just backtrack first and tell you how I came to the idea of movement fusion. When I began my research on the environmental justice [EJ] movement I realized quite quickly that it was comprised of various discrete organizations that were very focused on local issues. The movement's initiatives were usually reactive because often the groups involved didn't have huge resources, either in terms of finances or formal education. Often they represented quite impoverished communities. In contrast, there were the more proactive, environmental sustainability sorts of green, nature organizations, bursting with confidence and well networked with State Senators and Representatives – completely different from the typical EJ group. I realized then that these were two extremes and while there were these two poles – the environmental justice groups and the sustainability groups - there was also every shade of organization in between these two. There were in fact many "cooperative endeavors" between members of the environmental justice and sustainability movements.

This concept of “cooperative endeavors”, which David Schlosberg articulates in *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism*, got me thinking about a nexus between the environmental justice and sustainability movements. Essentially, these nexus endeavors do exist when sustainability and EJ groups come together on common issues such as toxic use reduction or transportation needs. As I started to pay attention to these endeavors I noticed that they were more short-term marriages of convenience rather than longer term coalitions. Often with such endeavors, once the goal is met, then the coalition tends to fall apart. There was no fusion of movement or *movement fusion* as Cole and Foster would call it.<sup>1</sup> That is, there was no coming together of two or more social movements in a way that expands the base of support for both movements and develops a common agenda.

My thinking was, and it continues to be, that, if and when this [movement fusion] happens, the result could be a broad, integrated social movement to create just *and* sustainable communities. That was the inspiration for my book *Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice*. So movement fusion is the goal, if you like. I want to see these various movements come together. They may not be able to come together forever and always but the EJ and green sustainability movements certainly have enough elements for common ground that they can work together. Certainly, it’s not easy, and there are many books that question and problematize the idea of movement fusion. But really I think the point that Cole and Foster were making was that none of these movements individually have a large enough base of support to make the change that they envisage. So why not bring these movements together? After all, if there are so many people pissed off with the way things are, let’s all the pissed-off people get together and think about how we can utilize, *in a creative way*, our anger and our distrust of the system as it stands. So that, really, is the way I came to the idea of just sustainability, when I came across the concept of movement fusion.

**Monani:** You’ve provided some sense of how the concept of movement fusion helped inspire the idea of just sustainability. Were there particular professional and personal impetuses or influences that played a part in the process?

**Agyeman:** Yes, I think, the impetus was both a series of professional and personal realizations. Personally, I am living what I preach, in the sense that I am mixed race, a biracial person. I stand for two movements or two parts of society myself. And so in a sense, my thinking has always been integrative. I can see this integrative thinking in Barack Obama, and I believe that his potential for leadership is because of this [background], which is similar to mine. We were brought up as young mixed race kids in largely white societies. And we, then, had to find our own way in this multicultural context. We had to navigate the different worlds that we occupied, and I think we do this relatively effortlessly. So yeah, I do believe my personal background has helped me break down barriers, and reconsider the silo-based thinking of the environmental justice discourse on one hand and the sustainability discourse on the other hand.

In terms of professional influences, with the help of my students I began searching for examples around the country and the world and realized that, yes, in a lot of places around the

world other people *are* breaking down these barriers of silo-based thinking. Take for example, the grassroots response to the corporate- and government-run oil industry in Ogoniland, Nigeria. The Ogoni people in the Niger Delta don't get to see any of the benefits of oil extraction. This is a classic example of environmental injustice. What do the Ogoni do? Well, they form a 'human rights and environmental organization' recognizing that both human rights and environmental protection are at stake and together they've put up a fight against the oil industry. When you look around the world, a lot of organizations are doing just this. They've moved beyond the dichotomy of 'environmental justice *or* sustainability. They say, "No, we represent both." For me, seeing this was a particular valuable professional influence that has helped me articulate the concepts of just sustainability and movement fusion.

**Monani:** You say there are a lot of organizations that are breaking down these barriers and making connections. Would you say that there are also a lot of organizations that aren't making these connections? I know your books discuss this, but could you talk a little bit about this now? Has there been silo-based thinking, and what are its implications?

**Agyeman:** You are right, absolutely right to ask that question because maybe I am over-accentuating the positive here. There are a lot of organizations, as you and I know, that actively resist the call to combine social justice and environmental sustainability concerns. The resistance to movement fusion is real. There are a lot of organizations on both 'sides' who are skeptical about forming alliances, coalitions or partnerships. For example, some EJ groups are suspicious of working with organizations that haven't experienced the poverty of inner urban areas. Several organizations that I talked to, primarily green sustainability organizations, have a just sustainability index of 0.<sup>2</sup> These are organizations that often tell me that they are very sympathetic to the cause of social justice, but that it's just not within their mission statements. In some cases perhaps that's okay. In fact, in her co-edited book, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism*, Phaedra suggests that while movement fusion is a laudable goal there should also be opportunities for these groups to work apart when appropriate.<sup>3</sup> So I take your point absolutely, I think it's a good point to make.

But I also think it's imperative that we break away from silo-based thinking, which is really what has got us into the mess that we are in at the moment. As soon as we can get rid of the idea that ecological sustainability and social justice are two irreconcilable agendas, then I think we are going to be in a much better position to do what the Europeans call *joined-up thinking*. Joined-up thinking is thinking across policy boundaries. For example, it says housing policy is intimately related to energy policy. Why? Well, more and more people are living longer, and more people are living alone. That means that we are going to need more independent units. That's going to have implications on energy policy. But traditionally housing policy hadn't really overlapped with energy policy. Just sustainability advocates for the overlap. It asks us to look across the social, cultural, economic and environmental realms and realize that there is really no separate or isolated cultural, environmental, or economic realm. These are all part of the human experience and relate to each other intrinsically.

**Monani:** I suppose a good follow up question to that is, “how does one do that? How does one begin to think in less silo-based terms; how can we creatively think outside the boxes?”

Essentially, with an example or two, can you provide a sense of how just sustainability might be both creative and emancipating? The concrete example can help address the rest of ecopedagogy’s principle 3, which advocates for “the art of listening to and speaking with a collective of oppositional voices.”

**Agyeman:** Some organizations (especially green sustainability organizations) say to me that they support social justice but it’s not part of their mission; to include it would amount to “mission creep.” However, I respond by saying that actually, paying attention to social justice is integral as part of “mission support”: “You, as an environmental organization are not working outside a context, outside a set of relationships. These relationships—human, natural—are part of what you do. And whatever it is you do, it will be enhanced by a consideration of the social and cultural relations in which you work.” For instance, I did some work for the Massachusetts Audubon Society. I looked at two nature centers they have: one is in Boston, the Boston Nature Center. The other, Broad Meadow Brook, is in Worcester, Massachusetts. The Boston Nature Center is situated in the middle of low-income, minority communities in Boston. And their curriculum reflects the needs of the communities. They basically did a needs assessment; they went out to the communities and asked what nature conservation meant to them and what they wanted as part of the Nature Center. So their curriculum was very consensually built. It could be called a “community-informed curriculum.” For example, they have a community garden. In response to the diversity of the local community, the Center considers plants and animals from around the world that have found their home in Boston as community members shared ideas about their local foods and cultures. In a sense, their curriculum has organically but consciously adapted to the multicultural milieu in which the Nature Center finds itself. Such a paradigm of education for sustainability can be called “people and nature.”

In contrast, Broad Meadow Brook in Worcester took a very different approach, resulting in a paradigm which is what I call “nature and people.” They said, “This is the nature in your area. Come and look at it and be in awe of it.” Their approach is interesting because though Worcester is a very multicultural, multiracial place, the Nature Center was almost entirely full of white people, white kids, and hadn’t really engaged at all with the larger Latino community of Worcester.

Essentially, I noted that Mass Audubon has at least two paradigms in operation. The Boston Nature Center practiced a “people and nature paradigm.” That’s a paradigm which says ‘Hey, nature exists in a cultural milieu. We need to find out what nature means to people and we need to get people to work with nature and understand it and develop a curriculum that is meaningful to them.’ The Worcester Center took a very different approach. Theirs was the “nature and people paradigm” that was really a progression from early transcendentalist wonderment of nature. That’s the old paradigm, if you like. These two paradigms are both relevant to the mission statement of Mass Audubon but the first paradigm, the Boston paradigm,

was much more open to questions of justice, equity, discussion of race, class, privilege, culture and other social concerns whereas the Worcester Center's paradigm didn't provide a space for that kind of discussion.

In my recommendations to the Massachusetts Audubon Society, I pointed out that the two paradigms seemed mission appropriate. However, I also suggested that perhaps they have to decide which one they want to back. Maybe both paradigms can be operative within the organization at once; maybe that's the case. The organization is still working through the implications of my observations and recommendations. But one thing they do realize is that Massachusetts is changing, and it's changing rapidly. We are more multiracial and more diverse than ever before. Their organization needs to learn what nature means to new immigrants and adapt to the changing demographics of the area. Mass Audubon is going through a kind of transition realizing that for whatever reason; whether it's altruism or just plain survival, they've got to understand what the new population, of Latinos, Brazilians, Cape Verdeans, and Africans, think of nature. They've got to begin to creatively think outside their traditional box, which, understandably catered largely to Anglo and European understandings of nature.

But, to more specifically get to that last part of your question, where you ask "With an example or two, can you provide a sense of how justice and sustainability might be creative and emancipative?" I want to talk about the Clean Buses for Boston Coalition.

This "cooperative endeavor," this coalition was born out of the realization that groups are never all going to agree on everything! Strange, but true! But on a short-term "marriage of convenience" basis, everybody could sign up for Clean Buses for Boston—from the very prosperous, wealthy and well-heeled Conservation Law Foundation [CLF] in Boston, which is New England's biggest conservation organization, down to the environmental justice group called Alternatives for Communities and Environment [ACE]<sup>4</sup>—because everybody benefits. Also, disproportionately, the benefits go to minority communities. Because they were the ones that were being most overloaded by diesel pollution, the ones that have the highest asthma levels. So Clean Buses for Boston was a short-term coalition with an achievable measurable goal, a cooperative endeavor begun in 1998, and when it was achieved in early 2001, when 350 CNG [compressed-natural-gas] buses were installed, then the coalition dissolved, its mission accomplished. Despite being a short-term alliance, the coalition was of particular interest to me because it was a creative coalition. It was *not* an ideological coalition. ACE and the CLF would never be ideological bedfellows but they were able to form a coalition even if it was for short-term convenience. This was creative and thinking outside traditional agenda boxes.

There's another example I want to give of creative thinking as it pertains to just sustainability, and I think this really illustrates the tension between national organizations and their local counterparts. On a national level, the Sierra Club scores a just sustainability index of 2, which is progressive; they do understand and realize the role of social justice. Nationally, however, the Sierra Club would not necessarily be able to sign on to a big social justice platform. But the Sierra Club Boston chapter, a local chapter of the national organization, has very good working relationships with Washington Street Corridor Coalition [WSCC] and ACE, and was able to effectively support more radical environmental positions such as getting the fixed rail



system from Dudley Square back into Central Boston.

To give you some background on WSSC: what currently exists is the Silver Line, a bus line that was meant to replace the old Orange Line fixed rail system, which went right into the heart of minority communities at Dudley Square. When MBTA [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority] ripped out the Orange Line the community was promised another railway line, and then of course they didn't get it. They got this bus transit, which travels along roads. Maybe it's better than nothing, but it was not what the community was promised. The Sierra Club of Boston and the Washington Street Corridor Coalition and other groups all got a platform together to reinstate a rail line.

My point is that whereas national organizations like the Sierra Club might not be able to sign up for radical positions because of their support base, their local counterparts, largely through the empowerment of local individuals and through local networks, can. In essence, actions of just sustainability are creative and emancipating; they work across boundaries and prompt more traditionally perceived environmental "nature and people" groups such as the Sierra Club to be part of a more progressive agenda at the local level even if their national counterparts are more resistant to signing on.

**Monani:** Julian, can I clarify: was the Sierra Club Boston chapter's work with WSSC also a short-term marriage of convenience? If both Clean Buses for Boston and the Washington Street Corridor Coalition case are examples of short-term creative marriages, how does one go the next step and encourage coalitions that are long-term?

**Agyeman:** No, the local Sierra Club Boston Chapter's relationship with WSSC was a longer-term relationship, not just about achieving a specific goal, as in a short term marriage of convenience. I think personal empowerment and friendship led to a longer-term coalition between the Sierra Club Boston Chapter and Washington Street Corridor Coalition. There are two specific individuals in the organization, John Deakin and John Lewis, who came from Boston Community groups and Boston politics and were friends with some of the African Americans in the WSSC, especially Bob Terrell. There is much more cooperation of an ongoing nature between the Sierra Club Boston Chapter and Washington Street Corridor Coalition, so that's not a short term, that's a longer term, coalition. What such a coalition suggests is what you and I know: that friendship and personal connections build social capital and are critical to the success of just sustainability, and ecopedagogy also. We can have all the mission statements and all the brave agendas and work plans that we want but ultimately we need mutual respect and the Sierra Club of Boston and the Washington Street Corridor Coalition and their allies demonstrate this respect.

How do we make these connections and how can we inspire respect that can forge long-term relationships? Well, for example, I am a board member for the Center for Whole Communities in the Mad River Valley in Vermont. The Center for Whole Communities is all about building a bigger community for conservation, sustainability, and social justice. It holds retreats each summer and it brings together people from diverse groups; from arenas such as

those of affordable housing, environmental justice and antitoxins, land conservation, and from places such as inner Chicago and rural Arizona. These individuals all come together and participate in these consensus-building, values-clarifying, and privilege-understanding exercises. By the end of the week, you feel like you're part of a progressive movement, rather than part of an organization. That's the crucial thing. It's about developing empowered individuals within these organizations who understand the need for cross-party or cross-paradigm work. And that's really what I want to see more of. I want to see more movement fusion, and it's going to happen through development of understanding *across* personal and organization agendas. It's key to bring people together in situations where they realize that what they have in common is greater than what is different.

**Monani:** So it sounds like the groups involved in Clean Buses for Boston had some common ground. It's just that they never kept working at it?

**Agyeman:** Yeah. What the organizations working on Clean Buses for Boston had in common was the desire to lower diesel pollution loads in Boston. Everybody could sign up for that because it was something that was non-ideological. Everybody wants cleaner air. The ideological basis of cleaner air would be more difficult to campaign around, wouldn't it? For example, what if the Clean Buses for Boston coalition decided to suggest recommendations about the best ways of controlling diesel emissions, be they regulatory or market based? Then, you'd find yourself in more ideological discussions. I think by carefully structuring coalitions, we can achieve a lot. But we must realize that this careful structuring probably means that the coalition is of limited time. That's fine, if it eventually leads to better cross-organizational understanding because then the likelihood of moving towards movement fusion is further enabled. Through a series of these short-term marriages of convenience, these coalitions might consider a longer term project.

**Monani:** This reminds me of own research on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. That's a situation where you have a number of groups coming together and working together. They all agree that the Refuge should be preserved and that's their common goal. That coalition has lasted for over 50 years; for as long as the Refuge has existed. However, the groups have different ideologies that shape their reasons for preservation. For example, the native communities believe that the land is a home, whereas the traditional environmental groups see it first and foremost as a wildlife sanctuary, a wilderness. Those are two very different ideological ways of looking at the land. The goal though, is to say how we can preserve it.

In your work, do you see these ideological differences surface and is it hard to overcome these differences to achieve that common goal?

**Agyeman:** Every case is different. For example, when you were talking there about the Arctic case, I was thinking about ACE and their decision not to join the Massachusetts Smart Growth Alliance. Though SGA approached ACE, it became apparent to ACE that they were unwilling to really engage in a dialogue on equity even though that's obviously part of smart growth. So ACE

refused to join the coalition. That was, and is, an ideological logjam.

But I appreciate ACE's decision because you cannot have a discussion of smart growth without discussing equity. I'm pleased that ACE didn't dilute their requirement. And I think ACE's decision made the Smart Growth Alliance stop and think that maybe they do need to more fully engage equity issues. So, just by one organization refusing to compromise, there is a lesson for other organizations. I'm not sure what the status of ACE and the Smart Growth Alliance is now, but maybe ACE has joined the coalition because this group of pro-smart growth organizations has realized that equity has to be part of what they do.<sup>5</sup> The point is that, sometimes coalitions such as the Smart Growth Alliance set joining conditions that exclude, rather than include, as they have in this case. Again, we need to look at every case on its own.

**Monani:** It's evident from the examples you provide that the just sustainability paradigm encourages creative and emancipatory practice much as ecopedagogy does. I'd like now to turn to another area, where I believe just sustainability and ecopedagogy think alike, and that is in the way they challenge the current capitalist neoliberal agenda. In particular, you describe a "new economics." Can you elaborate on this idea?

**Agyeman:** This isn't my idea but one that I borrowed from The New Economics Foundation based in London. The classic case of neoliberal economics is that the environment isn't factored into models of growth or progress. GDP [Gross Domestic Product] treats the environment as an externality. For example, during times like Katrina, GDP went up because there was more money sloshing around in the system due to emergency expenditures and clean up. New economics says, "Let's measure *real* progress, let's not just measure the amount of money sloshing around in the system as we do currently. Let's have other measures like an index of the ecological efficiency with which countries deliver welfare or what is also known as the Happy Planet Index [HPI]." The HPI looks at how ecologically efficient countries are at delivering social welfare. It measures life expectancy and multiplies it by life satisfaction, measured on a scale of 1 to 10. Then it divides that by the ecological footprint of the country. For example, Germany and the United States have roughly the same life expectancy, largely the same life satisfaction, but the ecological footprint of Germany is half that of the United States. Therefore Germany is *twice* as efficient as the U.S. at delivering relatively long and happy lives.

Point number one about new economics is that it is about new ways of measuring and thinking about progress. Its focus is thinking about progress not just as *standard of living* but as *quality of life*. It's about trying to shift our thinking, so that we realize that *less is more*. We must understand that above a certain amount of income, we are not necessarily going to feel better, happier. It's been shown that in the U.S. an average worker's standard of living has gone up ever since the second World War, yet since the 1970s, on average we've not been feeling any better. In fact there's that great title from a 1995 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "If the GDP is up, why is America down?" That's a good point. We have more and more money in our pockets but actually we are less and less happy. New Economics asks, "Why is that the case?" The consensus seems to be that we are not really measuring progress we are measuring amounts of money and

these are not the same. We are not measuring things like happiness and well-being, which we really should be focusing on. Our education systems are not about producing flourishing individuals, they are about producing people who can pass tests. Just sustainability speaks to a new economics and this new economics is predicated around the quality of life, the well-being of present and future generations, justice, equity, and living within ecosystem limits.

What we are also looking at is how resources are allocated. For instance, the United States might have four and half percent of the world's population yet it consumes twenty-five percent of the world's resources. To me, that is the greatest source of insecurity on this planet. Not terrorism. Currently, and at least within the last fifty years, the US has had the biggest slice of the resource pie, and this historic precedence seems to suggest that it will continue to do so under the so called 'grandfathering' principle. There is a new idea called the Environmental Space Analysis, which identifies a "dignity floor" below which people should not fall in terms of resource consumption. This is roughly the UN \$1 per day. It also identifies a "profligacy ceiling" above which we should not (but do) consume. Between these minima and maxima there is a sustainable consumption space, which we need to bring the majority of the world's population into. We, in the U.S. particularly, are consuming way above our needs. Consequently, two or three billion people on this planet are falling below the dignity floor. The message here is that rather than grandfathering, we need to allocate resources on a *per capita* basis. The Environmental Space concept says, "if we calculate that in the year 2050, we'll have a world population of ten billion, every person on the planet should have access to, *but not an obligation to consume*, one-ten-billionth of the planet's resources." This equity goal may seem utopian but it's a way of ensuring that planners and policy-makers start *thinking about* allocating resources in more just and fair ways.

We are already beginning to see a whole host of *per capita based resource allocation strategies*. For instance, the Stockholm Environment Institute is now talking about a greenhouse gas carbon production allocation that allows for the need to develop among countries of the global South. The "greenhouse development rights" approach both takes climate protection seriously, while recognizing and supporting the need for human development. Within the next ten to fifteen years, I think environmental and sustainability discourses will be more imbued with this notion of per capita rights. Issues like environmental space, greenhouse development rights and to a lesser extent, ecological footprinting will begin to guide resource allocation policy.

**Monani:** While your example of climate change provides a good sense of global scale initiatives, can you provide an example where the practice of new economics challenges political and economic hegemonies and the status quo at the local level?

**Agyeman:** One city that I have been very impressed with is Bogota in Colombia. It has had a string of progressive mayors, and the one that I have been in most contact with is ex-mayor Enrique Peñalosa. His model for Bogota promoted public space, parks, public transit. He realized that a massive amount of money was being spent on roads when most people in his city did not even own cars. The city's planning around roads and cars was not doing justice to those people

who didn't have cars. So his predecessors and he came up with the revolutionary bus system, based on that of Curitiba, Brazil, called the TransMilenio, where the paradigm is not *mobility* but *access*.<sup>6</sup>

When you start thinking of *access* for low income communities then you think about improving quality of people's life. We need to start planning for access so that people don't need to necessarily get into their cars to get to the places they need to get to. Instead, they can cycle or walk or take public transport. Bogota's response is a very creative local solution that addresses social justice and environmental sustainability. It can be considered an example of new economics on the local scale.

**Monani:** As someone who lives in small town America, I wonder how these urban just sustainability initiatives translate to rural settings. Gettysburg, because it is a small historic city that was established prior to America's car culture, has pretty good mobility and access within the city limits but it doesn't have good access in and out of town or to its rural surroundings. We have a very limited public transport system, and most people need cars to get to places they need to go, such as the grocery store.

How does one work around these issues of access in rural settings? One thing we keep hearing about is Obama's plan to revitalize the economy by revamping the road infrastructure. How does one work with existing systems that limit social accessibility? Do you start at the local level, and if so how do you start at the local level? Do you start at the federal level?

**Agyeman:** Nationwide, this year, we are witnessing a six percent increase in ridership of public transport. I know that in Boston, which has the oldest public transit system in the United States, people have started looking for creative solutions to meet demand as the current system doesn't seem to have the capacity to cope with this increased ridership. There've been suggestions about taking seats out of some rail cars so that more commuters can be accommodated through more standing room. Some people are beginning to say that maybe this is the beginning of the paradigm shift that America needs toward public transit.

In terms of such solutions in rural areas, I am sure some local entrepreneur in Gettysburg could operate a shuttle around the town, like at my local university, Tufts. We don't have an MBTA bus stop outside the university, so we have a bus that the university pays for: 'The Joey' (after Joseph's, the company that owns the buses). This shuttle goes from the Davis Square MBTA station up to the university. I am sure that some subsidized or sponsored shuttle service could be possible in Gettysburg and could take ten to fifteen percent of the cars in Gettysburg off the road. But that's just a thought at the moment. It would have to be worked on with local input.<sup>7</sup>

Rural areas are definitely more complex in terms of transportation needs. It's the same in places in Europe where rural transportation routes are less cost-effective than urban routes. There has to be some form of subsidy, perhaps a federal subsidy, to help bus contractors operate routes in rural areas. Also, I'm not saying we get rid of everyone's car. There are people who don't need to drive, and some who need to. Suburban areas face similar challenges that can be met

creatively and collectively.

**Monani:** The reason I ask the question about the rural setting is because most often when we hear about environmental justice initiatives, we hear about them in urban settings. Could you provide another example, one that isn't transportation specific, that demonstrates just sustainability at work in rural settings?

**Agyeman:** I admit I haven't explored just sustainability in the rural context much. The scale of operating services in a rural environment raises a very different set of issues. So it is a challenge. But I think anyone who is researching rural environments can use the paradigm of just sustainability and apply its principles. After all, its ideals of quality of life, justice and equity, and living within limits are adaptable to any environment, even if the particulars of each environment are very different. I think one idea that we have lost through a neoliberal obsession with trickle-down effects is that of local creativity. One of the most amazing things that I have heard said about sustainable development is that [It] means using our *unlimited* mental resources, not our *limited* natural resources. We are only now beginning to realize the depth of human potential and creativity we can bring to sustainability discourse(s) and action(s). This means, as Sen and Nussbaum have argued in terms of 'capabilities'<sup>8</sup>, that we should be as interested in *enhancing human potential* as we are in *protecting environmental potential*. The classical case of this is the *green jobs* idea, which is about jobs *through* the environment, not the tired old binary, jobs *or* the environment. It's about unleashing the potential of young kids in the inner urban areas to protect our environment, our climate through what Van Jones calls 'Green Collar Jobs'.<sup>9</sup> How cool is that? And considering our current economic model, how creative!

I'd like to see local and global shifts towards social markets. At the moment our markets give us our values. I want to see a reversal: us re-imbuing markets with social values, so that markets work for the good of all people, not the current few. Shifting towards eco-taxes could initiate such a change. We could have a revenue neutral tax shift in which people pay taxes on the number of cars, the size of their homes, their gross consumption rather than paying taxes on their labors.

**Monani:** Is there a place that imposes such a tax? That is, is the concept of eco-tax already in effect or is it purely theoretical?

**Agyeman:** There are lots of institutes, from the Rocky Mountain Institute in the US to the Wuppertal Institute in Germany that are investigating the idea of eco-taxes. For example, we are starting to see carbon taxes, which are a creative way of changing people's carbon consumption behavior through the use of financial incentives. There are already progressive governments taking other such initiatives. For example, thanks to ME3 [Minnesotans for Energy Efficient Economy] or 'Fresh Energy' as it is now called, Minnesota was flirting with a tax incentive program where tax breaks would encourage the utilization of clean energy options. I've not tracked this so don't know where it is at present.<sup>10</sup>

The point to keep in mind, though, is that while initiating such programs can promote positive change, eco-taxes also have to consider issues of equity and justice. For instance, if we tax people on energy efficiency in households, people would start to buy energy efficient devices. But, this could be immediately regressive since people of lower incomes might have to field a larger expense in switching over. The system should be progressive, accommodating subsidies to people of low income, since they can be disadvantaged by eco-tax regimes. I guess this example suggests a commonality with the ecopedagogy movement—we've got our principles but we are struggling to clarify our praxis.

**Monani:** Since we are talking about principles, I'd like to ask how another principle of ecopedagogy intersects with just sustainability. Specifically, ecopedagogy believes in "understanding both education as politics and politics as education." Do just sustainability's efforts mesh with this principle? How?

**Agyeman:** Just sustainability believes that education should not be solely aimed to help individuals pass tests or get a job. Education should be about producing flourishing individuals who understand civic engagement and personal responsibility. And to that extent I think education is a development of political awareness; it's about producing well-rounded individuals who can flourish across curricula and play an active part in communities. In turn, politics is education in the sense that it is issue-based, and not just about things that are happening in distant places but about people getting involved in local issues, clarifying their values, and working together to resolve issues. So I fully support ecopedagogy's position on education.

**Monani:** Ecopedagogy also sees itself as "unabashedly utopian—not in the sense of idealistic daydreaming about the possibility of another sort of world, but rather ecopedagogy is uncompromising in its refusal to accept the suffering of anyone as de facto." Would you say the same for just sustainability?

**Agyeman:** The suffering of others is often considered to be simply "the way things are," but it's not the way things should be. I have been very impressed with the Swedish eco-municipality movement where 25 per cent of all municipalities in the country have adopted a common set of sustainability principles and have implemented these widely and systematically throughout their municipal operations and through larger community efforts. In this process, they use, among others, the technique of *backcasting* to help guide planning. Usually, when you go to planning school you learn about "forecasting." That means you get a load of data about today's reality and forecast that data into the future. Say car ownership is growing at the rate of twenty percent per year, forecasting would say we need to plan for more road space. Forecasting promotes expansionist thinking; it promotes "now" thinking into the future. But that's where it gets problematic as it projects our current unsustainability, our status quo, our dominant neoliberal paradigm into the future. In contrast, backcasting asks, what kind of future do we want, and then "backcasts" the steps to get there from where we are now. A typical backcasting might be

considered a type of community visioning. Just sustainability encourages this utopian visioning, believing that it can be a practical utopia, even if a practical utopia might seem like an oxymoron.

One thing that President Obama gave us through his campaign was this wonderful sense of hope and a vision of a new politics. Maybe this politics is about people, and maybe it can engage the grassroots, and maybe we can dream of where we want to be, and backcast the steps by which we are going to get there. So in a sense Obama gave us what we want. We were filled with hope of more utopian scenarios that we can work towards.

**Monani:** From our conversation so far, it's hard to deny the common ground between ecopedagogy and just sustainability's agendas. But how might the two agendas be helpful to each other?

**Agyeman:** I think this message of vision, the power of vision and story, is something that both the just sustainability and the ecopedagogy movements appreciate, and I think the two movements can be helpful to each other by highlighting this aspect of sustainability practice. In a sense, for a long time we've had the science of sustainability - we know scientifically what we need to do and how to do it. The big missing piece is the social science and humanities aspect of sustainability: how do we empower politicians and people to believe they can do it, and to do it?

I've just written a paper with a psychologist friend of mine and my research assistant about what are called "managed retreats."<sup>11</sup> Most of us know that climate change is happening. One of the big challenges for planners is deciding whether to put our energy into mitigation or adaptation. Mitigation is about coming up with policies to solve problems, to ameliorate the worst effects of climate change. Adaptation is adjusting to what is happening now because by the time mitigation kicks in, we'll still be feeling the effects of current problems. Managed retreat [the relocation of communities and ecosystems] is a type of adaptation. For example, the town of Shishmaref, Alaska is actively planning a managed retreat where a community of people is getting ready to physical relocate their village on the Chukchi Sea, which is threatened by increased storm erosion. My co-author, the psychologist, and I describe how while on a relative scale it's somewhat easy to *physically* relocate a community, there are all kinds of *psychological* traumas associated with moving people from cherished places. Our article points out that in all of these managed retreat plans we looked at, no one describes the psychology of managed retreats. Everybody talks about the science and the technical or practical details. As planners we've gotten so good at thinking about technical issues of climate science that we've missed the social science—the psychology, the anthropology, the sociology—affecting moving large populations of people. We aren't paying attention to the humanities either—the value of stories and the meaning of place. I think this is a where ecopedagogy and the concerns of the social sciences and the humanities can help just sustainability discourse and action. Together, we have to try to persuade decision-makers that we need to think more broadly and not just in terms of science/economics as has often been the case. We need to think outside the boxes, across disciplines, and holistically. The more of us there are that can articulate this, the more likely it is



that we'll succeed.

I think one thing that's worth mentioning is that in interdisciplinary studies such as ecopedagogy, just sustainability, post-colonial studies, we are all working towards a single end. It's fascinating to me how despite emerging from different disciplinary domains, our intellectual and activist pursuits are so similar. There seems to be an emerging consensus about how we should try to tackle our current social and ecological problems. Maybe this is just the way change happens. Maybe we are just a bunch of paradigm shifters.

### **Postscript by Julian Agyeman**

Reflecting on some of my optimistic thoughts about President Obama's paradigm shifting messages as candidate Obama, and his achievements now, one year on from this interview and his inauguration, I am reminded of a piece I wrote in October 2008 on the UK's 'Forum for the Future' website.

In the blog I said:

*"Obama has in many ways lifted us, filled us with hope and with a constellation of phrases that hint, but only hint, at an understanding of the real need for a new story. In one of those phrases he says: "together we will begin the next great chapter in the American story". My question to you Barack is this: are we going to simply read a prewritten chapter, or are we going to start afresh, writing the chapter ourselves along more sustainable lines? That, Mr President-in-waiting, is the really fierce urgency of now."*<sup>12</sup>

My worry, based on what I *currently* see is that the chapter was pre-written, there is no new story. However, I am still hopeful for change.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Agyeman is referring to Luke Cole and Sheila Foster's 2001 publication, *From the Ground Up: Environmental racism and the rise of the environmental justice movement* (New York: New York University Press).

<sup>2</sup> The Just Sustainability Index is a measure of an environmental organization's mission and program commitment not only to issues of ecological health but also to issues of equity and justice. The index categorizes organizations on a scale of 0 to 3, where 0 demonstrates no commitment to equity and justice and 3 explicitly couples environmental sustainability with intra- and inter-generational issues of equity and justice (Agyeman, 2005, 107-108).

<sup>3</sup> Agyeman is referring to Phaedra Pezzullo and Robert Sandler's 2007 edited collection (2007) *Environmental justice and environmentalism: The social justice challenge to the environmental movement*. (Boston, MA: MIT Press).

<sup>4</sup> CLF's "About Us" page explains: "Since 1966, CLF's tenacious advocacy staff has worked to solve the most significant environmental problems that threaten New England. CLF's advocates

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use law, economics and science to create innovative strategies to conserve natural resources, protect public health and promote vital communities in our region.” This is different from ACE’s mission statement: “ACE builds the power of communities of color and lower income communities in New England to eradicate environmental racism and classism and achieve environmental justice. We believe that everyone has the right to a healthy environment and to be decision-makers in issues affecting our communities.”

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, ACE is still not a part of the MA Smart Growth Alliance. More about SGA can be found on their website at [http://www.ma-smartgrowth.org/alliance/alliance\\_index.htm](http://www.ma-smartgrowth.org/alliance/alliance_index.htm).

<sup>6</sup> More about TransMilenio can be found on their website: [http://www.transmilenio.gov.co/WebSite/English\\_Default.aspx](http://www.transmilenio.gov.co/WebSite/English_Default.aspx). The National Bus Rapid Transit Institute of the Center for Urban Transportation Research at the University of South Florida published a report, *Applicability of Bogotá's TransMilenio BRT system to the United States* (May 2006), that suggests its relevance in the U.S. context. This report can be found online at the National Academy of Science website: [http://www.trb.org/news/blurb\\_detail.asp?id=6340](http://www.trb.org/news/blurb_detail.asp?id=6340).

<sup>7</sup> Gettysburg College does indeed have a free college shuttle service that makes trips twice a week (Tuesdays and Saturdays) to the local grocery stores and the Gettysburg Outlet mall. While its services are primarily for students of the college, the city borough with support from the Gettysburg National Military Park instituted a bus shuttle service in 2009 that can be used by residents, students, and tourists to access key landmarks such as the grocery store, downtown, and the Gettysburg battlefield visitor’s center. Unfortunately, the current limited schedule (once very hour on a circuit loop between 9am and 4pm in summer and an even more reduced schedule in winter) has proved the service ineffective. A borough bike path is also in the works. There are larger more complex feasibility issues that Gettysburg residents face when considering options to travel in and out of the borough. Despite being a prime tourist destination, the borough lacks any form of public transport that connects it to nearby towns or the larger cities of Harrisburg, Washington DC, Baltimore, and Philadelphia.

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, Martha C. and Amartya Sen, (eds.). 1993. *The Quality of life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

<sup>9</sup> Agyeman is referring to social and environmental activist, Van Jones whose ideas can be further explored through his organization *Green for All's* website and in his 2008 New York Times bestseller *Green collar economy: How one solution can fix two big problems* (New York: Harper Collins). Jones has been voted a Time Magazine 2008 environmental hero and his work has been lauded by Congressional senators such as Nancy Pelosi and Tom Daschle. This led to his being named as a Special Advisor for the White House Council on Environmental Quality by the Obama administration. Unfortunately, however, after a concerted right-wing attack upon Jones as anti-American, led by groups such as WorldNetDaily and Fox News (particularly its commentator, Glenn Beck), Jones was forced to resign his position in September of 2009.

<sup>10</sup> On 10 November 2008 Minnesota’s Governor Pawlenty did indeed announce a commitment to the “Green Jobs Investment Initiative.” More about the initiative can be found on the state’s

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Department for Employment and Economic Development website at <http://www.deed.state.mn.us/bizdev/GreenJobsIniative/GreenJobsInitiative.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Agyeman is referring to a 2009 article co-authored with Patrick Devine-Wright and Julia Prange, "Close to the edge, down by the river? Joining up managed retreat and place attachment in a climate changed world." (published in *Environment and Planning A*, 41.3: 509 -513)

<sup>12</sup> Online at: <http://www.forumforthefuture.org/blog/the-fierce-urgency-of-now>.

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