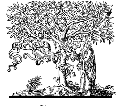

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Sustainability and the Childe thesis – What are the effects of local characteristics and conditions on sustainable development policy?

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The Childe thesis is fundamental to the urban ecology theoretical framework, explaining the development of communities as a result of the interplay between the dynamics of population, organization, environment, and technology. This perspective is consistent with sustainability, ecosystem, and bioregional principles that recognize the importance of local response to local conditions. In the face of globalizing forces that enable communities to expand their range of exploitation beyond local carrying capacity, how relevant are these concepts? This study provides evidence that communities in the US do respond to local signals and that such response is conditioned by levels of education and political mobilization. It also identifies factors that are related to increased levels of adoption of sustainable development policies.
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Introduction

Sustainable development has become firmly established in the community development and planning literature. Drawing from science and built on such universal values as environmental protection and social welfare, it has been characterized as having clear relevance to public decision making in virtually all of its dimensions, from process to policy (Campbell, 1996).

Still, when it comes to practice, sustainable development remains largely outside the mainstream. While many communities in the United States profess to the adoption of policies that are consistent with its theoretical framework, few have been shown to have integrated it into their planning, policies and operations in a comprehensive and meaningful way (Jepson, 2004a; Portney, 2003; Berke and Conroy, 2000). This is certainly largely related to the fact that, while perhaps conceptually convincing, sustainable development remains politically problematic due to the continuing dominance of the alternative expansionist worldview (Jepson, 2004b; Rees, 1995). Nevertheless, there are some communities that stand out from the rest in the extent to which they have adopted sustainable development policies and practices. This selective pattern of adoption suggests two possibilities: Either (a) there is something about sustainable development that makes it relevant only in certain, limited cases or (b) there is something about communities that either constrains or enhances their capacity to recognize its relevance and then act accordingly. If the premise of its being grounded in universal values is accepted (giving it a potentially universal relevance), then it is only the latter possibility that merits attention.

There has been little research about the reasons behind variation in sustainable development policy adoption among communities. Portney (2003)

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identified 24 cities that were notable in their level of commitment to sustainable development as reflected in their adoption of certain public policies. When he subjected them to statistical analysis, he found some significance of correlation between a few characteristics of population (primarily age and education) on an individual basis. However, many of these relationships broke down in his multivariate model, leading to his conclusion of a "general lack of a pattern" between demographic and place characteristics and the adoption of sustainable development policies (p. 237). Similarly, in my study of 103 communities, I could find no significant statistical relationship between how actively sustainable development policies are initiated and location, population size, or educational attainment (Jepson, 2004a).

It is my purpose in this paper to expand the scope of this type of inquiry to include not just demographic characteristics, but also specific community conditions, capacities, and opinions and attitudes. Such a query can contribute toward determining the extent to which communities, in this age of large-scale, carrying capacity appropriation and permeability of effects (in which problems are transported into and out of municipal boundaries), are still inclined to recognize problems and take action to *do what they can*, even if such action will contribute in only a minor way toward their resolution. The conceptual basis for the study draws primarily from three sources: the Childe thesis, which proposes community development to be the product of the four interrelated factors of population, organization, environment and technology; and bioregionalism and ecosystem theory, with their concepts of localization, feedback and adaptive innovation.

Underlying concepts

To a significant extent, the form and substance of sustainability as it applies to community development can be traced to two pioneering documents: *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987) and its derivative document, *Agenda 21* (Sitarz, 1994). While *Our Common Future* can be (and has been) criticized for a variety of reasons related to omissions and assumptions (Jepson, 2004b; Martinez-Allier, 1994; Skirbekk, 1994; Daly, 1991; Rees and Roseland, 1991; Ekins, 1989), the two documents also contain many important points about which there is considerable agreement. One of those is that for sustainable development to succeed it must be rooted in local activism and community-level policies. The following statements reveal this proposition (italics my own):

> "Only a *strong local government* can ensure that the needs, customs, urban forms, social priorities and environmental conditions of the local area are reflected in local plans for urban development" (WCED, 1987, p. 247)

> "Mechanisms must be created or enhanced which allow for the active involvement by all parties concerned in decision-making regarding land use, particularly communities and people at the local level; whenever possible, policy-making should be delegated to *the most localized level* of public authority" (Sitarz, 1994, p. 65)

While debate about the issue of top-down versus bottom-up decision making continues, it tends now to be mainly focused on the question of how much and under what circumstances guidance should be imposed from above rather than on whether or not decisions should be made from below (McDonald, 1996; Rees, 1990).[1] Indeed, local decision making is considered by many to be a requirement of good public policy primarily for three reasons: (a) conditions that inform public policy vary by locality (Martinez-Allier, 1994; Rees and Roseland, 1991), (b) the involvement of local people is both preferred (due to their better understanding of local conditions) and necessary due to the likelihood of their being directly affected (Voisey et al., 1996; Roseland, 1994; Smit and Brklacich, 1989; Stone, 1973); and (c) effective policies depend on consensus and direct involvement, both of which are more likely to occur at the local level (Voisey et al., 1996; Maser, 1997; Berke and Kartez, 1995).

Under the Childe thesis of urban ecology, the growth and development of a community is the product of the interplay of four inextricably linked factors: Population, Environment, Organization and Technology (i.e., POET). Essentially, this model holds that the ability of a community to sustain itself is rooted in how well it adapts to changing conditions (Environment), which is the result of the *ability* of the residents of the community (Population) to react collectively, that is, through their *institutions* (Organization), to develop *appropriate* artifacts, tools and techniques (Technology) (Phillips, 1996; Berry and Kasarda, 1977). This model is – and was intended to be – most applicable under "primitive conditions", i.e., before the inter-dependencies and interconnectedness created by the development of advanced transportation, communication and control technologies (Berry and Kasarda, 1977, p. 15). Clearly, it is no longer necessary or even appropriate for communities to depend solely upon their intrinsic talents and their local regions to survive. Products, knowledge and resources (including financial) can all be imported.

However, there is a dark side to globalization that has become increasingly apparent. One aspect

[1] Justification for the proposition for some sort of upper level guidance can be found in systems theory, where the natural tendency is for constraint to be imposed by higher-level systems (e.g., state and federal government) on lower-level systems (e.g., municipalities) (Allen and Starr, 1988 (1982)).

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