

KNOWLEDGE OF THE FUTURE AND THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN CREATING ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

William H. Boyer

Professor Emeritus in Philosophy of Education, University of Hawaii (now residing in Sisters, Oregon, USA.)

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Summary

Most institutional rules were established in a period of history where private and corporate profit dominated. Outright ownership of non-renewable resources pre-determined that they would be used for personal and corporate purposes rather than to serve the public interest, and future generations had no claim whatsoever. This period of history can be labeled as “pre-ecological” for it pre-determined that the entire ecology would be progressively degraded. Our 21st century consists of the inertia and lag of pre-ecological institutions, so the crucial need is to design and create institutions that give priority to the global life support system. This task impacts all institutions but places special obligations on educational institutions to help people create a sustainable future.

1. Introduction

Democracy has traditionally involved participation in community and electoral politics. However, as the present and the future now involve global interdependence, the concept of participation has taken on an extended meaning. Human history has reached a stage in which the earth’s life support systems, the ecology of the planet, will either be sustained or humanity will pass into history as just another extinct species. Knowledge

and understanding of this contemporary challenge now pushes the notion of democratic participation towards making sure that institutions that are retained in the present are not a threat to the future, and that those that threaten the future be transformed. A specific example of what this means is illustrated in the following description of how private and corporate use of finite natural resources in the present prevent their use by future generations. It is a descriptive case scenario that can be called “Global Takings” and it serves to introduce this essay on knowledge for a more ecologically sustainable future.

1.1. Global Takings--A Knowledge Scenario

How can institutional arrangements contribute to sustainability? If finite natural resources were claimed by *competition* between states or corporations, the outcome would be pre-determined—natural resources would be degraded and even liquidated. Such a competitive game plan is currently used throughout the world with results that are increasingly visible—corporations and nations race to cut down old growth forests (the most profitable), claims consider water to be private property, and there is a rapid exhaustion of petroleum and all other minerals. If blame is directed personally to the people involved in such resource depletion, there is little chance of achieving sustainability of resources since such a traditional moralistic explanation aimed at individuals does not explain causality nor does it provide a basis for a solution to unwanted resource depletion.

Perhaps Thomas Kuhn offers a resolution to this dilemma in his description of a paradigm shift (in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) in 1962 which referred to changes in natural science such as the theory of plate tectonics in geology. This idea was highly resisted by those who believed in fixed continents. But evidence finally shifted from support of the old paradigm to an acceptance of a new description of the geological world. Similarity exists between this paradigm shift and accumulating knowledge with respect to current institutional structure. Though a world where competition for finite resources is leading to disaster, this dominant paradigm persists due very much to resistance and intransigence among masses of people. There is time, however, through improved knowledge and understanding to rethink this current moment in human history and to create a new paradigm.

If competition for finite resources leads to planetary depletion, is there an alternative? Since ownership of finite natural resources are now largely claimed under private property rights, what would justify change? First, it is essential to look at the larger picture and recognize that the rights of ownership now trump everything else. It is assumed that people, corporations, and countries are merely doing what has been established as part of their rights, and that the world is following “established” procedures which determine the future. Unfortunately the future that is becoming increasingly apparent is deforested, desertified, with natural biodiversity undermined by the increasing extinction of species. It is a future which will experience the exhaustion of petroleum reserves and a possible greater use of coal which will contribute to increased global warming and reductions in human health. It is a future in which ownership claims over the wealth of natural resources will lead to conflicts involving war and terrorism. How can humanity unlearn and reeducate itself out of such a situation?

John Dewey and William James have pointed out that learning comes when humans can no longer continue on a habituated path because the path is suddenly “forked.” This means a choice must be made and so thinking must begin. The world is now in that very situation. Thinking, however, can consist of slight shifts in habits and beliefs that permit continuation in the same direction; or it can involve some basic reconsideration and redesign of institutions. But basic change is now the least likely and yet the most necessary, for an established order has enormous momentum and resistance to change.

To make matters more complicated, even if we redesign plans for the future so that it is sustainable, there is no guarantee that the proposed changes will actually take place. But if we do not begin with “what,” there is no basis for even considering the “how.” So the design of goals comes first.

In this new period of history the traditional institution of private property needs to be reconsidered, based on the question “What can be owned without injury to the public?” Surely things that are made by humans, whether they are commercial products or cultivated foods, are products of human labor and should be personally owned. In turn, they may actually benefit society and therefore the larger society should welcome and encourage such personal ownership. However, what if humans want to own something given by nature in limited amounts, but does not result from personal labor? What justifies a claim of ownership? And what happens to the larger society when humans claim ownership and use?

In the current world the most powerful instrument for the unilateral claim on resources, their ownership and use, is the corporation. It operates under rules of private ownership rights and is rewarded when it extracts resources and increases profits and wealth. There is, however, an ignored tradeoff built into the rules—future generations and much of the public lose out (over half of the world’s population do not directly participate in the benefits of modern growth and development). Furthermore, the use and subsequent disappearance of finite resources means that for the natural resource there is no second chance—the action is irreversible.

Should the traditional meaning of private property continue in this period of pre-ecological history in which private property rights put economic activity above the level of ecology? Which ought to be dominant—private property or ecology? If private property in our current period of corporate industrialism is dominant, the implicit plan for the future is short range, for the ecological life support systems of earth will be depleted for short range economic gain. However, if ecological sustainability is dominant, industrial activity and private property can still continue, but only within rules that protect the sustainability of ecological systems and natural resources. Moving to this level of thinking would be similar to the tectonic shift that Kuhn cites.

Resistance to such change would be based on the presumption of the legitimacy of current ownership rights—that if multinationals bought and paid for some old growth forests or oil reserves, they would not then belong to anyone else. But the new paradigm says they do belong to others—the larger public and future generations. The exploitation of these natural resources would then be a “takings,” in which there could hardly be any adequate compensation, for elimination of the resource would be

irreversible and would have effects above and beyond mere economic values. Something that had been given by nature but not earned would be permanently taken away for the self-interest of a few. The shift towards a design of a new paradigm would begin with a reverse presumption about ownership, namely that finite resources would be owned by the larger public in perpetuity. This means a claim for use is legitimate but not a claim for absolute ownership. As an example of this, a farmer who uses topsoil for raising crops may surely have a claim to ownership of his product, but if he has unqualified ownership of the topsoil he can legally consume it by outright sale or abuse. However, the claim is different morally for the crop than for the topsoil, which is finite and virtually irreplaceable (for hundreds of years). Use rights take account of the claims of the larger society and of future generations if the use conforms to standards of ecological sustainability. This distinction in law between use rights and consumption rights is needed world wide to prevent continued “global takings” from the earth’s life support systems.

2. Global Protests

The political struggle in many parts of the world between such organizations as the WTO and public protesters is often grounded in the failure to transfer moral claims into national and international law. Organizations representing states and multinational organizations such as the WTO, base their legitimacy on private ownership tradition. However, the world context of ownership has changed so the effects of unlimited ownership, when applied to natural resources, raises serious moral questions. Protesters often believe that the moral claim is primary. The corporate-connected world organizations believe that traditional legal claims are primary.

The legitimacy of claims is held by some to be based on transcendent and absolute principles, as though the rules on which institutions operate were immutable like the laws of nature. But the laws of nature are “given” while the laws pertaining to human society are “invented.” Because they were invented, they can be reinvented. The historical context of social rules can change their value, but rules at a particular time in history may serve one group more than another. The served group will argue on the basis of “rights” and “legitimacy” in order to preserve special privileges. The evidence is clear that when people or groups have privileges for a time they will interpret them as rights. Reassessment of what we mean by rights then becomes vital.

3. Individualism and Ethnocentrism

The current world is dominated by western industrial nations operating in conjunction with corporate capitalism. The ideology of such countries, especially the United States, is based on personal rights that give more importance to individualism and the right to choose, rather than to community. The dominant world powers find it quite “natural” to impose their ideology. This is called ethnocentrism, based on “our way is the right way.” So we have a world of unequal power, dominated by traditional property rights beliefs, supported by self-righteous economic ideology. This power, supported by multinational corporations, has created a 21st century world that has priorities which are virtually upside down with respect to sustainability. Corporate capitalism and western national dominance supersedes ecological sustainability and human community.

Furthermore, the belief structure is held with such dogmatic tenacity that it takes the form of what Harvey Cox, professor of religion at Harvard University, calls “capitalism as religion.” The strategy for turning this situation around is no small challenge.

4. Rights of Future Generations

Democratic governments are organized to be responsive to constituencies that vote at election time. Public policies are usually reflective of the will of the voters and of those who provide the money used to support candidates. People not involved—often the poor—get little or nothing when the economic pie is divided by budgets and tax systems. The other groups that get little or nothing are future generations. They have not been born in time, so they have no political power. The natural resources that serve wealthy constituencies in connection with forests, mining, and land use decisions become the capital that serves the economic interests of the most powerful constituencies, largely corporations. Much of the wealth being created involves virtual stealing from future generations, because they are not yet around to make a claim.

This structural immorality has, however, a technical legal solution. Rights can be created for future generations and “standing” can be provided for others to represent future generations. Such a proposal has been underway in the state of Oregon in the U.S.—to include “a right to a clean and healthful environment” and “a right to sustained natural ecosystems” in the state constitution. Twenty-two other states in the U.S. also have ballot initiatives that could be used to produce such changes in state constitutions. This quantum leap in human rights at the state level is not as easily created at the national level, since there is no initiative process available nationally in the United States. Furthermore, creating such rights on the national level through the electoral process is very unlikely since campaign funds largely control national politics. The principal donor corporations to these funds tend to view environmental rights as restricting their current “freedom” to exploit natural resources.

New countries that create constitutions and those that revise them need to include this important consideration of “rights of future generations.” If countries are able to make these piece-meal changes, a world of the future would eventually require a world constitution that provided rights of future generations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is currently the primary world directive for creating political and economic rights, but it does not include environmental rights of future generations. Inclusion would dramatically expand the conception of human rights. A first step to such inclusion is simply to talk about the idea so that it gains public visibility. Certainly schools can provide some social momentum for such talk.

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Biographical Sketch

William Boyer is professor emeritus in philosophy of education from the University of Hawaii. He has helped develop new educational programs in world order education, environmental education, and futures studies. He has taught at the University of Oregon, Oregon State University, University of Montana, World Campus Afloat, Chico State University, and Milwaukee Downer College. He has been involved in environmental planning in California, Hawaii, and Oregon. Many of his presentations at national and international meetings and in journals are included in the book *Education for the 21st Century*.