

Grassroots Organizations, Public Spaces and Discourses of Sustainability

Christopher S. Rice, Ph.D.
Research Director
University of Kentucky Appalachian Center
Lexington, KY

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“The future belongs to the people who unleash ideaviruses.”
Seth Godin, *Unleashing the Ideavirus*

INTRODUCTION

The meme known to us as “sustainability” was effectively born in 1987, when the World Commission on Economic Development issued its report, *Our Common Future*, which defined sustainable development as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED 1987) However, in the transmission of this meme, mutation was, of course, bound to occur, given that the original meme was lacking in specific signifiers and memetic material. Indeed, it could almost be considered a memetic “blank slate,” onto which fields of power, both local and transnational, inscribe meaning.

The National Science Foundation’s 2000 Workshop on Urban Sustainability provides us with an important mutation point for the sustainability meme by recognizing two broad categories of the meme, which it refers to as the “sustainable development” model and the “sustainable livelihoods” model. Riffing off of the WCED’s meme of sustainable development, the NSF Workshop defined *sustainable development* as “a global-scale, big-players’ version” of sustainability which embraces “the agenda of the market, top-down planning, and scientific, technological, and/or design-based solutions.” (National Science Foundation Workshop on Urban Sustainability 2000: 6) This discourse of sustainability can be seen at play in the Natural Capitalism meme, advanced most notably by Paul Hawken of Natural Step, Inc. and Hunter and Amory Lovins of the Rocky Mountain Institute (Hawken 1993; Hawken, et al 1999). This version of sustainability can also be seen at play in the efforts of ecological economists such as Robert Costanza (1991) and Herman Daly (1996),

who seek to ground sustainability in an economic pricing of natural capital in an effort to establish the exorbitant costs of its destruction.

Other mutations of the sustainability meme have developed a more holistic approach to understanding sustainability. The NSF workshop contrasts *sustainable development* with the meme of sustainability as *sustainable livelihoods*. This is a “local-scale version” of sustainability “in which local context can lead to different and locally contingent perspectives on the meaning of and conditions for sustainability and the means to achieve it.” (National Science Foundation Workshop on Urban Sustainability 2000: 6) The sustainable livelihoods model of sustainability “1) entails necessarily flexible and ongoing processes rather than a fixed and certain outcome; 2) transcends the conventional dualisms of urban versus rural, local versus global, and economy versus environment; and 3) supports the possibility of diversity, difference, and local contingency rather than the imposition of global homogeneity.” (National Science Foundation Workshop on Urban Sustainability 2000: 7) In the United States and Canada, the sustainable livelihoods model of sustainability is also more popularly known as the *sustainable communities* paradigm, and is the central concept behind the works of activists and scholars such as Mark Roseland (1998), Michael Shuman (1998), and Richard Douthwaite (1996).

In this particular instance, the sustainability meme is mutated by the introduction and interpenetration of a discourse of *community*. According to Mark Roseland in *Toward Sustainable Communities*, “The primary social unit of an ecological society is the sustainable community, a human-scale settlement based on ecological balance, community self-reliance, and participatory democracy.” (Roseland 1998: 9) Echoing the NSF Workshop’s call for respecting the differences in sustainability across differing local contexts, the sustainable communities model of sustainability is meant to be tailored to the uniqueness of each place.

According to Roseland, “There is no (and perhaps should not be any) single accepted definition of sustainable communities. Communities must be involved in defining sustainability from a local perspective.” (Roseland 1998: 22) As the NSF Workshop report notes, “the role of local knowledge and practices is vital; there is much to learn from alternative ways of addressing sustainability in different contexts.” (National Science Foundation Workshop on Urban Sustainability 2000: 8)

Appalachia as a Site of Struggle and Resistance

Appalachia has long been a site of cultural, economic and political contestation. As Fisher (1993: 4) has noted, recent Appalachian scholarship has recognized the importance of this history of resistance and struggle in the region, with the realization that it “has most frequently occurred in struggles to preserve traditional values and ways of life against the forces of modernization,” which, I would argue, in its late-capitalist form can be seen as the phenomenon of globalization. Fisher also notes that, concurrent with the colonialist analysis of Appalachia in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an “explosion” of community organizing centered around “hundreds of citizens groups” emerged, though largely constructed around the struggle against a single issue, such as strip-mining, or more recently, acid mine drainage and mountaintop removal. However, the attrition rate for these grassroots organizations in Appalachia has been particularly high. Fisher observes that

Most [single-issue, grassroots organizations] have proved unable to establish continuity or to see beyond the immediate crisis. These single-issue groups have worked together from time-to-time, have helped create local leadership, and have won important victories; but most have been short-lived, disappearing quickly once their issue was resolved.” (Fisher 1993: 8)

As Mary Beth Bingman suggests, while single-issue organizations and their efforts may win important, individual victories, this mode of political resistance cannot of itself bring about fundamental change. (Fisher 1993: 6)

More recently, successful change in the region has been brought about by the “establishment...of thriving and influential multi-issue, membership-driven organizations” (Fisher 1993: 8). These dynamic organizations are essential for the creation of what Evans and Boyte (1992) have referred to as “free social spaces,” grounded in everyday life, in which “people can learn democratic values and leadership skills, obtain alternative sources of information about the world, form a coherent pattern of group identity and a vision of the common good, and act on their values and beliefs.” (Fisher 1993: 319) In short, these free spaces allow for the construction of civil society and the development of social capital necessary for participatory governance. Moreover, they channel those social forces for political development and resistance by providing **discursive space** “where ‘people’s history’ may be connected to a systematic critique of the political economy; where participants can begin to see the connection between their concerns and those of other exploited people;...and where people can start to envision new alternatives to the world in which they live.” (Fisher 1993: 329)

The history and struggles of grassroots organizations in Central Appalachia as “free spaces,” or as Couto has suggested, as “mediating structures” (Couto 1999), are parallel to, and intertwined with, the history of resistance and the struggle for sustainability in Appalachia. The challenge, then, for 21st century regional politics is whether, as Reid (1996) states, “a political movement seeking a new social ecology for the region’s communities as part of a project for global justice” will retrieve from Appalachia’s history of resistance the “memory of an alternative to continued obeisance to the Corporate State.” In the following

case studies, I will attempt to illustrate how grassroots organizations in Central Appalachia are working to continue this history of local resistance through struggles for sustainability. Moreover, I will attempt to illustrate how the functions of these grassroots organizations as public “free spaces” serve to mutate the sustainability meme into locally-contingent forms.

Case Study #1: Rural Action’s Sustainable Forestry Program

Rural Action’s Sustainable Forestry Committee developed the Sustainable Forestry Program to offer “workshops and technical assistance on sustainable timber management and cultivation of high-value special forest products such as mushrooms and herbs.” (Rural Action 2001a) Rural Action also saw the potential to empower local citizens to positively impact forest management policy through participatory decision-making by networking farmers, stakeholders and citizens possessing an alternative framework for economically beneficial, yet ecologically sustainable, forest management with government forestry agencies and university agriculture extension agents.

The primary focus of the Sustainable Forestry Program has been the protection and cultivation of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), which Rural Action refers to as “special forest products.” NTFPs were selected by the Sustainable Forestry Committee as the primary focus of the Sustainable Forest Economies Project because medicinal herbs such as ginseng, black cohosh and goldenseal are significant local assets, but the current over-harvesting of these herbs was seen as a serious threat to forest sustainability, as well as the sustainability of local culture and economy. (Rural Action 2001a) Because of Rural Action’s asset-based philosophy, this crisis was seen as an opportunity to show the need and means for restorative forestry in Appalachian Ohio.

However, the realities of landownership in Southeast Ohio also necessitated this focus. Colin says that “forest ownership is fragmented throughout [Ohio] with parcels of 22 acres or less quite common. It’s hard to make a profit growing timber on a small woodlot. We are trying to find ways to serve landowners who might need that kind of income [from NTFPs] to pay property taxes, for example.” (Balkits 1999) This might not be a full-time business, but rather a small-income generating sideline, “so you can have land pay its way, so to speak.” (Donahue 2000a) Moreover, this method may allow for protection of the forestlands of the region. As Al Fritsch, Director of Appalachia – Science In The Public Interest, indicates, the need for ginseng (and we can add herbs such as cohosh and goldenseal to this) “for a forested canopy may help save our threatened forestland. The lucrative demand would tempt many Appalachian woodland owners to stop cutting their trees in favor of securing a good income from the plant.” (Fritsch 1998) Thus, the Sustainable Forest Program’s emphasis on NTFPs generates a positive, “green” income for local community members while preserving ecologically sensitive woodlands.

This economic opportunity in the growing of medicinal herbs is, importantly, constructed discursively as “cultivation” rather than as plantation-style industrial farming of the herbs. As Carrere and Lohmann indicate,

A forest is a complex, self-regenerating system, encompassing soil, water, microclimate, energy, and a wide variety of plants and animals in mutual relation. A commercial plantation, on the other hand, is a cultivated area whose species and structure have been simplified dramatically to produce only a few goods, whether lumber, resin, oil, or fruit. (Carrere and Lohmann 1996: 3)

However, as they indicate, “the distinction...is not always hard and fast. A ‘native forest’ where economically unimportant species have been eliminated may wind up as simplified, as in need of constant human maintenance to stay that way, as any plantation.” (Carrere and

Lohmann 1996: 4) To this problem of elimination of “economically unimportant species” one should add the equally important category of “economically important species” which can be eliminated through over-harvesting or “poaching.” The Sustainable Forestry Program frames the cultivation of herbs as a mode of resistance to the problem of over-harvesting, which Tim Blakley of the National Center for the Preservation of Medicinal Herbs (and Rural Action associate) presents as

occurring due to the rise in demand for medicinal herbs which has caused the subsequent decline in supply. The demand will continue to rise and the end result will be that we can no longer meet the needs of the herb industry from wildcrafted supply. Many herbs will be harvested until they become endangered, as ginseng already has, or even become extinct. (Blakley 1999)

What then is the answer to this ecological and socio-cultural crisis? “Cultivation of the herbs is the only answer,” according to Blakley. The sustainable cultivation of medicinal herbs, however, should be contrasted with the ecologically damaging monoculturing of these roots which lead to a poorer quality crop, increased use of pesticides, and pathogenic soil contamination. (Fritsch 1998)

The Sustainable Forestry Program has taken steps to help local farmers and citizens to enter into this practice of medicinal herb cultivation. Through its early partnership with, and later control of, the National Center for the Preservation of Medicinal Herbs in nearby Meigs County, Rural Action provides professional assistance to prospective growers, such as locating starting material, information on cultivation and planting of herbs, marketing tips, and so on. (Blakley 1999) Owing to its culture of partnership and networking with other local GROs and CBOs, Rural Action partnered with the Appalachian Peoples Action Coalition (APAC) to start an Individual Development Account (IDA) program to help low-income growers enter this field. These IDAs help growers (or potential growers) save money at an accelerated rate by matching grower contributions to their IDAs at a 3:1 ratio,

helping local growers to save for tools, planting stock and other necessary inputs.

Participants are required to save for a two-year period, during which time they must also participate in training in budgeting, cultivation and other topics with APAC. (Donohue 2000b) Rural Action has also worked extensively with a local “business entity,” Understory, Inc., which Colin says was set up to look into what kinds of “enterprises,” such as herb, mushroom, and Paw Paw cultivation, and value-added processing of them, could be developed on the individual grower level, as well as the potential “marketing, co-op, or brokering arrangements [that] could be set up between these individual growers. (Donohue 2000a)

Rural Action has also had a major effect on sustainable economic development through NTFP cultivation through networking individual growers among each other, and with others outside their social and economic networks. Colin told me a story which related his particular pride in one local goldenseal grower who, through some of the networking that had developed as a result of the Sustainable Forestry Project’s work, had arranged to sell his crop for \$30/green pound, vs. \$30/dry pound, which is about three times what he would have gotten from a root buyer. This, Colin said, will enable him to reinvest his capital into new tillers and other implements, which will in turn increase his ability to produce. This type of success may not happen all the time, Colin says, but at least it has helped this one individual. He attributed this success to Rural Action being a “boundary spanner, in going between different social networks.” The Sustainable Forestry Program linked this grower up to someone in the “herb scene.” In isolation, Colin says, the grower wouldn’t have made this connection, or would have had to have spent a lot of money going to the “right” conferences. And even then, conferences and their attendant networking can be difficult for rural Appalachian growers. “Culturally it is difficult for folks from an isolated rural area to

go into a conference, where there are all of these folks from an urban, or at least very cosmopolitan environments – how do you identify who you need to talk to?” Subsequently, the Sustainable Forestry Program has been working on how to connect people from different social networks. (Donahue 2000a)

More than just networking growers with other segments of the herb economy, the Sustainable Forest Economies Project work has involved the organization and networking of herb growers and educating them as to the possibilities for NTFP-based economies in the region. This emphasis on organizing stems from Rural Action’s commitment to this process of citizen involvement and mobilization, and the important recruiting of staff members like Colin who embrace and expand this philosophy. Since 1998, Sustainable Forestry VISTAs have gone into several communities to hold meetings and workshops with local growers. According to Chip Carroll, an Economic Opportunities VISTA with the Sustainable Forestry Program, the herb growers meetings “have provided an opportunity for medicinal herb growers/producers to share their experiences with other growers and learn from each other’s successes and failures.” (Carroll 2001)

This conception of the meetings as a construction of public space is important for Rural Action’s work as a Grassroots Organization (GRO) working for sustainability in the region, as it is the quality of grassroots organizations *qua* free spaces which allow them to construct lines of flight from dominant discourses, such as development, agriculture, or citizen. Growers meetings have often been organized around the tool of the potluck dinner. Chip Carroll describes this process:

When we first began holding these growers’ meetings, just a few folks came out for the pot-luck dinners to get acquainted, discuss various herb growing issues...or hear from experts about different herb cultivation methods. Over time, more and more serious growers came out of the woods to meet other

growers, share their experiences, and learn more about what was happening in a *comfortable, secure and friendly environment.*” [My Emphasis] (Carroll 2001)

I emphasize these last aspects of the space created to show that, in many ways, what this program is creating is what Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) would call “intimate space,” with the purpose of simultaneously creating a political space in which action may form and take place. The two are interconnected. As Yi-Fu Tuan indicates, “Freedom implies space; it means having the power and enough room in which to act.” (Tuan 1977: 52) The intimate space which allows for this action on the part of growers is institutionalized through a spin-off organization (discussed below), but is created through the discursive construction of a socio-cultural imaginary and commons centered around herb lore and culture.

Folklorist Mary Hufford remarks on this in her essay “American Ginseng and the Idea of the Commons.” Although Hufford’s example refers specifically to ginseng and its cultural role in the communities she examines, one can apply her comments toward the hunting and cultivation of various other herbs, such as the goldenseal and black cohosh of Southeast Ohio. Hufford states that ginseng

Plays a vital role in imagining and sustaining a culture of the commons. Among the means of keeping the commons alive is talk about ginseng: where to hunt it, its mysterious habits, the biggest specimens ever found, and the difficulties of wresting the treasure from an impossibly steep terrain...the ability and authority to engage in this discourse is indeed hard won. (Hufford 1997: 14)

This talk that Hufford mentions takes the form of narrative, or storytelling. Although the growers’ meetings also involved planning, economics, presentations by “experts,” the gatherings also involve a good deal of storytelling. Colin told me that he had recently gone to a growers’ meeting and potluck that had been scheduled to last about two hours.

However, once the storytelling kicked in, Colin ended up staying with the growers for about four hours! “It felt good,” Colin said. (Donahue 2000a)

This sharing of stories is essential for the creation of a public space in which action can be formulated. As Hufford indicates,

Such stories conjure the commons as a rich social imaginary. Through narrative the commons becomes a public space, its history played out before audiences who know intimately its spaces whether they have been there together or not. Inhabiting the commons through practice and narrative confers social identity and makes a community of its occupants. [...] Collective reflection on what it means to be a ginsenger gives rise to reflection on what in fact it means to be human. It is through such a process that the geographic commons nurtures a civic commons as a forum for consensus and dissent. (Hufford 1997: 15)

What Hufford is indicating here is the creation of “placed space.” This is not as contradictory a term as it might sound. As Yi-Fu Tuan states,

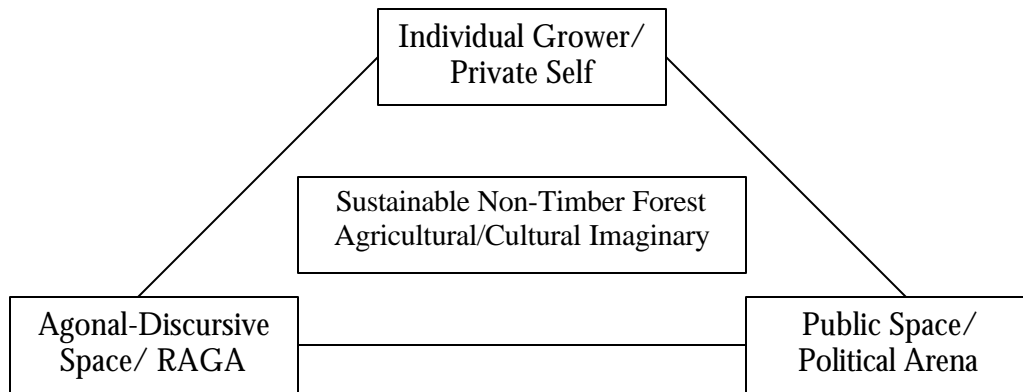
Space is a common symbol for freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. On the negative side, space and freedom are a threat. A root meaning of the word ‘bad’ is ‘open.’ To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable. [...] Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values. [...] A healthy being welcomes constraint and freedom, the boundedness of place and the exposure of space. (Tuan 1977: 54)

Considering Rural Action’s discourse of *health* as a local metaphor for sustainability, it should come as no surprise that healthy individuals are rooted in place, while simultaneously being open to the freedom of action that membership in an organization provides.

These herb growers meetings resulted in the formation of the Roots of Appalachia Growers Association (RAGA), an Action Team-style organization for NTFP work, in 2000. The double nature of the organization’s name is apparent: while focusing on the cultivation of medicinal “roots” in Appalachia, there is simultaneously a discourse of cultural roots, an “imaginary” as the basis of a political and cultural commons as Hufford indicates, at the basis of the group’s identity. Colin believes that RAGA is a good example of Rural Action’s

work in local and regional networking. RAGA, he says, “is not big, by any means, but there are folks coming from different backgrounds who have different information, and they are able to share it.” For example, it can link a person who has been digging yellowroot for decades with an individual who has used it for years. The one can share what they look for in finding good sites, the other can share what they are looking for in a good herb. Another participant has worked as a USDA inspector and can help with the regulation issues. “Like tends to gravitate towards like,” Colin said, “and unless you make a real effort at inclusion” it doesn’t tend to happen automatically. He believes that this has been one of Rural Action and the Sustainable Forestry Program’s successes – “not so much the numbers of the group but the quality.” (Donahue 2000a)

It is curious, then, to note the discursive difficulties these growers had in forming their organization. As Chip Carroll indicates, the growers saw “the many benefits of a group” which would still allow “each [grower] to work independently toward personal goals.” These growers then set as one of their first goals “providing a secure and completely private place for herb growers to work together.” (Carroll 2001) These growers early on saw the need for a “place” (or, rather, placed space) in which they could be secure enough to act as individuals in an agonistic political space. The safety of this “private” public space allows a basis from which to proceed with public political action, such as the organization’s stand against the environmentally and economically damaging activity of poaching of roots and herbs. This results in a trialectical (Soja 1996) construction of discursive space around the collective imaginary of sustainable non-timber forest agriculture/culture.



Case Study #2: Community Project for Revitalization (CPR)

In the fall of 1999, Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD), an offshoot organization of the Coalition for Jobs and the Environment (CJE), decided to try a second attempt at their Economic Renewal process in Pennington Gap, VA. Nancy Bell, a founding Board member of CJE, was brought on board to act as a consultant and facilitator for the process. Nancy approached Regina Warren and others who had been involved in the first ER attempt in Pennington Gap and asked them to provide a list of names of other people who might be interested in participating. It seems that, perhaps inadvertently, Bell was making the same error as the leadership of the first ER iteration, which was the narrowing of participants by ideology at the beginning of a process which is designed to be inclusive across a broad spectrum of community interests and power bases. Regina's invitations, however, unintentionally served the original process of the ER design by accidentally including what she referred to as "non-sustainable people." Regina had given Bell the name of one of her best friends, who happened to be "very interested in recycling." The friend's then-boyfriend (later her husband) was Charlie Bunch, the ROTC instructor at

Lee County High School. Regina was initially pleased by the addition of someone like Charlie to the new ER group, because

He was a big military. They're highly disciplined and highly organized. So we saw that as a plus for the organization. You know, that's another issue for environmentalists. Left brain, right brain mentality. You got environmentalists whose hearts are pure, whose actions are pure, but my God, you try to organize them and they haven't a clue! You're almost asking too much for someone to be both right-brained and left-brained at the same time, which is what you do when you ask someone to be the chair or director or whatever for an environmental group. (Warren 2000)

Regina said that Charlie was a "go-getter, a doer," who "saw it as more of a revitalization, he could just care less how it got revitalized, just revitalize it." Charlie then brought in a local businessman, Dexter Gilbert, and the two became president and vice-president, respectively, of the fledgling grassroots organization.

However, as Regina indicates, this new blending of personalities and ideologies didn't exactly work out the way everyone had hoped.

We kind of had a problem. What happened when we came together, we made it clear *why* we were coming together and talked about our goals as being environmentally sensitive. I think I kind of like that...and we used the term 'sustainable'. Then we had people who came in later to the group, that didn't understand that we *were* revitalization, and they applied their interpretation to the word revitalization and it caused some complications. (Warren 2000)

Or, as Regina puts it, the men (and she specifically referred to the *men* who had joined here) who had joined the ER group "started showing their true selves as being not really focused on the same things we were focusing on. Then Carol started challenging them. Their male egos just did not handle the challenge. Carol was just really...at one point it got really bad." (Warren 2000) One early event in the group's history illustrated this difference in attitudes concerning mainstream economic development vs. sustainable community development and how it split the organization.

We wanted to have a raffle to make some money so we could apply for our nonprofit [status]. So, one person suggested we raffle a quilt. And then he

went on to say, well, we had to sell the tickets for a dollar a piece, so we didn't need to spend over fifty or seventy-five dollars for the quilt. 'So I'll run over to [a store in another town] and get one. They've got them on sale.' Carol Murphy said, 'well, that defeats the purpose of who we are. First of all, we need to buy our quilt locally. If we can we need to get it handmade, and we need to get it with actual material, not polyester.' Which is what you get if you go to [the store] and get one. The *guys* that had come in later didn't understand that. They were really indignant about it, and said, 'well, there's no sense in even doing this because we won't make any money if we have to pay \$300 for a quilt. I don't give a damn *where* it comes from, a quilt's a quilt!' (Warren 2000)

She said another man wanted to raffle off a deer rifle, which really frustrated the women in the group, especially Regina.

This is not the message! This is not the message we want to send. So on the one hand we've got sustainability being a trite, over-used expression, and on the other hand, we've got people who have not a clue about sustainability, so you need to educate them. So that's where I came in. the group was going, 'Get rid of them! Get them out! We don't want them!' I said, 'No, we've got to educate these people. This is an opportunity to try to educate people about what being environmentally sensitive is. If we can raise their level of consciousness, that would be great'. (Warren 2000)

However, this attempt at bridging the gap would not last long, and would ultimately prove to be unsuccessful. In the spring of 2000, less than six months after the ER Program had been reopened in Pennington Gap, Bunch, Gilbert, and the other men of the group all resigned at the same time, leaving Regina, Carol, and the other women of the group to find the future of the Economic Renewal process in Pennington Gap.

So, Regina says, she called Nancy Bell to set up an April meeting to try and salvage the process. But, importantly, out of this struggle came a realization that would determine the future of the group and its unique niche in Lee County's struggles for sustainable community development.

It was...I don't know. There was no *men*. This sounds terrible, but Carol articulated it better than I do. It sounded terrible, but we did better as a *women's* group. Carol said 'I don't like life without them, and I don't like to say it, but we seem to share a common vision as women.' She said, 'This county, this area, has enough male influence.' In other words, it's almost lacking in a feminine...a beauty that women bring to an area. I think

sometimes it takes a woman's vision to want to put in window boxes and see better trees. I think even men can have a feminine side, and certainly women can have a male side. We need to recognize both of that in all of us. The men seemed to only want to recognize the maleness of the whole thing. So Carol [Murphy] said that maybe that was what we could offer. Maybe we can offer a feminine point of view to revitalization. And of course that feminine point of view will include an environmental point of view, and a sustainable point of view. (Warren 2000)

Regina believes that this "male-planning mode" is all the local city government has seen, and that when she was there, she now sees that she was trying to bring this female/nature dynamic into things, and this is what caused so much trouble. She believes that it will be a real challenge to overcome this male-female divide in county development in the future. However, she still hopes to "find common ground" with people like Charlie to move the process forward.

Soon after this "reorganization," the group decided on a permanent name for itself: the Community Project for Revitalization (CPR). The name was chosen for several reasons, and the acronym of CPR providing a metaphor for breathing life into a dying community was not the least among them. However, discursively, it becomes interesting to look at two components of the group's name: "revitalization" and "community." Revitalization enters into the group's discourse as a substitution for "sustainability," which Regina earlier indicated had become "trite" and "overused." Moreover, it is linked to the conceptual formation of "downtown revitalization," which has been promoted by several state governments (including Virginia) and supported by Community Development Block Grants. It also possesses a better "fit" with Regina's vision of the group's niche, which involves the beautification of the downtown Pennington Gap area, and the refurbishing of buildings which are currently unoccupied and rapidly deteriorating. As Regina told me,

It just saddens me when you go to downtown Pennington, and it saddens me to live in such a beautiful area that we're letting towns like Pennington go to ruin. So that's where my struggle is, Pennington needs some revitalization.

And that's what we do with our Economic Renewal committee, that's what it's all about – revitalization in environmentally sensitive ways. (Warren 2000)

This focus on the urban architecture as space of flows illustrates the paradigm of sustainability as sustainable urban design, which appears to blend well with Regina's attraction to a natural capitalism model of sustainability, understood as the CJE model of "environmentally sensitive" development.

This preference for urban design as a method of sustainability also blends well with Regina's understanding of "community," and how this will be affected by the globalizing New Economy. Things are "really going to change," she said.

That's probably something else that we've got to remember when we're thinking about revitalization in our community. I don't care how prosperous a community is even now, or a city or whatever, I think the access to the internet and e-commerce is probably going to change the way we see our community and the way we want our community to even function. That's what is used to be was a hub of businesses. That's because urban communities revolved around a hub of businesses, and now we don't need that. We will progressively no need it over the next few years. Maybe that's what we'll need, is the true meaning of community. And that is the interaction that we have and the ability to care for each other and support each other and be kind and good to each other, instead of so...you know. (Warren 2000)

Thus, it becomes understandable when she says that the name Community Project for Revitalization was chosen "because we didn't know if we should limit it to Pennington or the surrounding area." That, she says, is why

we called it [CPR] instead of the Pennington Project for Revitalization or whatever. We did want to include 'community' because...another thing that insulted me I guess at one point is that one of the Council members said at a Town Council meeting that I had no business being clerk-treasurer since I didn't live in town. He thought if you hold a job with the town, you should live in town. My response to that is that Pennington *is* my town. It's where my family traded. It's where my grandparents traded. Regardless of where we lived, that was our town. That's where we came in to buy our goods and services. We supported this town as much as *anyone* who lived inside the town, and we always have. You cannot restrict that town to the corporate limit, because it can't sustain itself. It is a community, and the community supports that town. We wanted to call ourselves the Community Project for Revitalization, although the core focus, I guess you could say, initially would

be hopefully revitalizing Pennington, and if we get some progress made, then...we'll go anywhere. (Warren 2000)

Thus, the organization attempts to establish itself as a grassroots organization which is *place-based*, but not *place-bound*.

However, Regina seemed to indicate that this notion of community, indeed, of the politics of community and place-based sustainable community development, were individualistic by nature, at least from her viewpoint. When asked what she thought the level of influence of organizations like CJE, ASD, and CPR were in Lee County, Regina replied

As a group, not much. But as individual members, I think what happens is, individually we come together as a group to develop strength. Then we go back to our community, and you've got to have the strength to influence or make connections, or do battle, or whatever it is you need to do. So you come together as a group and I can go to ASD, we can all go to our monthly CJE meeting, and then we all go back to our community and hopefully, through our actions and being who we are, and by working, we make a difference and maybe get some education. I don't think – a lot of the environmentalists are heavy into legislation, and I don't know. I'm just kind of torn between that. My influence on me has come through individual work and action. That's how I want to influence others, is by my own actions and my own morals, and not try to make other people moral, or other people act. (Warren 2000)

As a result of their “birthing” trauma, CPR is not yet very inclusive of alternate viewpoints or social bases, but they seem eager to get there as soon as possible. However, this drive to expand is approached cautiously, gingerly, given what happened with the last expansion of membership. Regina addressed the importance not of quantity of members, but of quality. Much as she had explained her viewpoint on this to me earlier, Regina talked to the group about its importance as a support mechanism for its members. Eventually, the discussion turned around the issue of increasing the group's membership. Several women asked, “Do we need more members?” Nancy Bell, the ASD facilitator for CPR, questioned the need for a membership drive. “We're still evolving,” she said. “We don't need numbers, we need people who care.” (July 13, 2000) Nancy Pope agreed with this saying, “Were not

ready for an all-out drive, because we're still changing.” There was general agreement among the membership that next year’s (2001) Spring Fest would perhaps be a good start for membership drive. It seemed very clear that mutual support and social capital-building would have to be the group’s primary focus for now.

Talking with Nancy Bell at this meeting, she indicated to me that she believed that this iteration of the ER process in Pennington Gap would be more successful than the first try. I asked her if it was fair to say that things would be different this time because they're focusing more on social capital-building now, and were less project-oriented. Nancy didn't agree with this, and seemed uncomfortable with the idea that CPR might not be project-oriented. Although CPR currently doesn't have any major projects under way, they do spend some time talking about several initiatives and ideas. According to the minutes from the June 2000 meeting, they had held a brainstorming session on “What would a revitalized Pennington Gap look like?” This brainstorming session resulted in several ideas, such as the renovation of Lee Theater into a community arts center, closing off North Main Street to become a pedestrian mall, adding brick paving, flower boxes, trees, and benches to downtown, forming a Downtown Association, having full occupation of all downtown buildings, and getting involved with “events” such as Market Day, Farmers Market, and Spring Fest. Regina discussed with the group the possibilities for a farmers market downtown on Saturday, saying that this would bring early morning business to downtown Pennington Gap. She discussed with them the changes that such a combination of a Farmers Market and a Market Day were able to effect in her in-laws’ hometown. However, the group seemed to lack the drive to begin such a program at that time. It seems clear, though, that a discourse of sustainability or sustainable development has not re-entered the ER process in Lee County. Rather, CPR appears, under the guidance of Regina and the

others, to be following the discursive strategy of promoting “downtown revitalization” without incorporating, at least to any large extent, an environmental ethic or strategy.

However, CPR has also been involved in a powerful method of community building through the organization of an annual Spring Fest in Pennington Gap. CPR held its initial Spring Fest in May 2000 as an effort to draw attention to downtown Pennington Gap and also to build much-needed social capital for future efforts. The importance of “the carnival” for green politics is emphasized by Douglas Torgerson in The Promise of Green Politics. As Torgerson indicates, “green politics possesses a tendency to challenge its own tragic aspect with comic gestures. Taken together, these various gestures are not simply stunts or jokes or mere tactical maneuvers, but express a kind of language. This is the idiom of the carnivalesque, and it is key to the creation of a green public sphere...”. (Torgerson 1999:94)

The usage of “the carnival” as a discursive strategy serves as a practical critique of what Torgerson refers to as some of the more troubling aspects of Habermas’ conception of communicative rationality which, in its institutionalization, privileges the modality of “argument.” Torgerson argues that, since argument by nature seeks coherence, it “chalks itself in a circle. Strictly speaking, it has to be a dialogue, but it constitutes itself as a unitary idiom, aspiring to a single voice that ultimately proclaims *the* conclusion. In this manner, argument takes on the character of a monologue, thereby undermining its dialogical aspect.” (Torgerson 1999:95)

However, the performative discourse of “the carnival” serves as a powerful counterbalance to this totalization of discourse, according to Torgerson.

Unless the green public sphere is implicitly to stamp itself with the monological image of the administrative mind, it must remain sensitive to a diversity of voices, including those of nature. In challenging the bias of industrialist discourse, it must not excommunicate its carnival elements in the name of rationality. *And it must not forget to laugh.* " [My Emphasis] (Torgerson 1999:95)

Indeed, CPR used laughter to good effect during Spring Fest. One member, Nancy Hobbs, dressed as a clown and wandered up and down Morgan Avenue (where Spring Fest was centered) “dusting” businesses, or more specifically their storefronts, during the festival. The local paper reports that she also “generally entertained the crowd and passers-by.” (Powell Valley News May 31, 2000) Further extending the carnival idiom, a local music group provided music and square dancing, arts and crafts were displayed, CPR member Regina Warren painted faces, a local member of the African-American community performed gospel selections on a street corner, and local children were brought together to play Pokemon in a local furniture store! (Powell Valley News May 31, 2000) Thus, not only was a carnival atmosphere created and maintained, which through events like Nancy Hobbs’ dusting and sprucing up of local business storefronts allowed the citizens of Pennington Gap to laugh, and also to consider the possibilities for sustainability in a non-confrontational manner, but also the diversity of voices which Torgerson calls for was strengthened and institutionalized in a dialogical rather than a monological fashion. This non-argumentative strategy of promoting a diversity of voices to resist the “monological image of the administrative mind” becomes of special import considering the history of the Community Project for Revitalization, which mirrors the divisiveness of Lee County as a whole. Perhaps CPR, through events such as Spring Fest and other efforts, will continue to be able to work toward community sustainability by healing their own wounds, and thus, being able to then reach out and heal the fractured nature of their communities.

Conclusion

As numerous scholars and activists concerned with issues of environmental and social justice have indicated, sustainability cannot be understood as a single discourse or as a

totalizing concept. Rather, local context will in most cases determine how a discourse of sustainability is to be effectively articulated. By conceiving of sustainability as a meme, it provides us with an analytical tool for understanding how local meanings of sustainability are constructed. Local grassroots organizations, properly understood in their democratic context as “free spaces” provide discursive space where memes of sustainability are rarely kept intact as received. Rather, in the discursive space created by grassroots organizations, citizens have the opportunity to conceptualize what sustainability means in their local context, further mutating the meme of sustainability and its attendant discourses.

As we can see from the cases of the Sustainable Forestry program of Ohio’s Rural Action and the Community Project for Revitalization (CPR) of Pennington Gap, Virginia, sustainability can run the gamut from a memetic metaphor of (forest and community) health to a less ecologically sound discourse of “revitalization” and “environmentally-sensitive development. However, both mutations of the sustainability meme enable local grassroots organizations to engage in resistance against mainstream discourses of development and the fields of power, both transnationally and in their local extensions, which enable these discourses. Sustainability, in its various forms, provides a powerful organizing discourse that enables local grassroots organizations to develop a new global-regional political and environmental movement. As Seth Godin indicates in the quote with which this paper began, the future indeed belongs to those who are able to unleash ideaviruses. That is, the future of our communities and ecosystems belongs to those grassroots organizations that are able to receive and mutate sustainability memes, and them infect the dominant discourses of development and ecology with these discourses of sustainability.

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