Diaspora, (‘just’) sustainability and development: Meeting at the nexus

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Introducing Just Sustainabilities
Policy, Planning and Practice

Tufts University

Urban + Environmental Policy + Planning

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Brighton, England this summer....

On a T shirt:

“Great minds don’t think alike, they think differently....”

Let’s think differently about sustainability?

Using my book’s themes of Food, Space, Place and Culture, I want to offer some opportunities to think differently about sustainability and diasporic communities...
In 2003 we broke new ground by embarking on a sustainability and sustainable development-based discourse, but one that focused explicitly on equity and justice – on the links between environmental quality and human equality.

We argued that:

“Sustainability cannot be simply a ‘green’, or ‘environmental’ concern, important though ‘environmental’ aspects of sustainability are. A truly sustainable society is one where wider questions of social needs and welfare, and economic opportunity are integrally related to environmental limits imposed by supporting ecosystems.”

(Agyeman et al. 2002, 78)
Environmental quality and human equality are related.

The most compelling evidence to date............

“Inequality....heightens competitive consumption”

(Wilkinson and Pickett 2009)

If we REALLY want to understand (just) sustainability our focus should be on both human equality and environmental quality TOGETHER.
Just sustainabilities defined

“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.”

1) improving our quality of life and wellbeing;

2) meeting the needs of both present and future generations (intragenerational and intergenerational equity);

3) justice and equity in terms of recognition, process, procedure, and outcome;

4) living within ecosystem limits (‘one planet living’).
Food
The food movement as consistent/dominant narrative.

“The purchase of local and organic food is cast as a “vote with your fork,” to quote a common movement refrain. It is a vote for environmental sustainability, as local, organic producers cultivate biologically diverse polycultures and avoid the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. It is also a vote for small, family owned farms, as opposed to their large, corporate counterparts, and for creating local communities filled with rich interpersonal interactions.”

Are you or your culture in these pictures?

“such a consistent narrative, along with the movement’s predominantly white and middle-class character, suggests that it may itself be something of a monoculture. It consists of a group of “like-minded” people, with similar backgrounds, values, and proclivities, who have come to similar conclusions about how our food system should change.”

(Alkon and Agyeman 2011)
“When Pollan begins his first rule by telling us not to “eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food,” he ignores the fact that “our” great-grandmothers come from a wide variety of social and economic contexts that may have informed their perceptions of food quite differently. Some were enslaved, transported across the ocean, and forced to subsist on the overflow from the master’s table.”

“because of his privileged positionality, Pollan fails to consider the effects of race on food access and the alternative meanings his words may hold for people of color in the United States. In this same way, whites in the food movement often simply do not see the subtle exclusivities that are woven into its narrative.”
The food movement as incomplete

“If activists in the food movement are to go beyond providing alternatives and truly challenge agribusiness’s destructive power, they will need a broad coalition of supporters. We argue that such support can best be found in the low-income communities and communities of color that have been, and are currently, most deeply harmed by the food system. But this alliance will require that the food movement reach beyond its own dominant narrative to understand the experiences and perspectives of its potential allies.” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011)
“communities of color are beginning to engage in food justice activism in order to provide food for themselves while imagining new ecological and social relationships. According to veteran organization Just Food (2010), food justice is:

‘communities exercising their right to grow, sell, and eat [food that is] fresh, nutritious, affordable, culturally appropriate, and grown locally with care for the well-being of the land, workers, and animals.”
Food as performance I: Foodways

“Winson (1993) refers to food as an “intimate commodity” that is literally taken inside the body and imbued with heightened significance. Not only is it a physiological necessity, but food practices—what scholars often call foodways—are manifestations and symbols of cultural histories and proclivities. As individuals participate in culturally defined proper ways of eating, they perform their own identities and memberships in particular groups (Douglass 1996). Food informs individuals’ identities, including their racial identities.” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011)
“One gardener at the South Central Farms [LA], a thirty year old Zapotec woman, described her involvement at the farm in the following way: ‘I planted this garden because it is a little space like home. I grow the same plants that I had back in my garden in Oaxaca. We can eat like we ate at home and this makes us feel like ourselves. It allows us to keep a part of who we are after coming to the United States.’” (Mares and Peña 2011 p209)
“New Roots [San Diego], with 85 growers from 12 countries, is one of more than 50 community farms dedicated to refugee agriculture, an entrepreneurial movement spreading across the country. American agriculture has historically been forged by newcomers, like the Scandinavians who helped settle the Great Plains; today’s growers are more likely to be rural subsistence farmers from Africa and Asia, resettled in and around cities from New York, Burlington, Vt., and Lowell, Mass., to Minneapolis, Phoenix and San Diego”. (Agyeman 2013)
Food as re-imagination 1: problematizing ‘the local’

What are ‘local foods’? Are they what should be grown locally according to the predominantly ecologically-focused local food movement, or are they what our increasingly diverse populations want to buy locally as culturally appropriate foods?

George and Julia Bowling: Maryland
“Filipino immigrants in San Diego demonstrate trans-localism, they carry with them the idea that Filipino food is local food, which they cook at home or eat in restaurants. They also exercise this trans-localism when they tend their fruit and vegetable gardens. The discourse within agrifood literature and the food localization movement needs more reflexivity.” (Valiente-Neighbours 2012)
Due to a ‘history of anti-Chinese racism in Canada, together with Chinese-Canadian farmers’ creative resistance and entrepreneurialism in responding to social and economic changes’ Gibb and Whitman (2012) argue that there are ‘parallel’ networks in which ‘both sets of networks are “local” in that they shorten relationships between producers, consumers, and place; however, these networks have few points of intentional connection and collaboration.’
Space and Place
“Just as social justice requires that life chances are not distributed along class lines, spatial justice requires that they are not distributed geographically.”
(David Lammy, British Member of Parliament 2004)
“In this new century, we are facing a different kind of threat to public space—not one of disuse, but of patterns of design and management that exclude some people and reduce social and cultural diversity”.

(Low, Taplin and Scheld 2005)

“contact theory posits that….interracial interactions that occur in leisure settings have the potential to be more genuine and sincere compared with the more obligatory interactions that take place in formal settings”

(Shinew, Glover and Parry 2004)

In the 1980s, environmentalists in Bristol, UK, persuaded the local Parks Department to create wildflower meadows. These are environmentally sound, but are they socially just?

Fire pits
Delivering spatial justice:
Immigrant use of public open space

“The lack of engagement of more recent immigrants in “friends of the park” organizations and other environmental groups of today has led to concerns that while Olmsted’s vision continues to resonate with a great many Bostonians it may not resonate with the majority of those who will decide Boston’s future.” (Lanfer and Taylor 2004)
The street is our most commonly used public space. It has been democratized on Södra Vägen but not on Massachusetts Avenue. What does this say to adults, children who use these streets daily and become acculturated to spatial justice on Södra Vägen or spatial injustice on Massachusetts Avenue?
Massey’s (1995) and Blokland’s (2009) point, that places are “constantly shifting articulations of social relations through time” implies struggles over residents’ different historical narratives, thereby defining ‘the community.

“What is causing the anger and resentment is that it’s only an issue of safety now that whites are the ones who are riding bicycles and walking on the streets. Because we have been in this community for years and it has not been an issue and now it’s an issue. So that’s the resentment you’re hearing…years of people being told, you don’t count, you don’t matter…but now that there’s a group of people who’s coming in that look like the people who are the power brokers — now it’s important. That’s the anger. That’s the hurt.” (Donna Maxey, Resident)
“This book problematizes the Complete Streets concept by suggesting that streets should not be thought of as merely physical spaces, but as symbolic and social spaces. When important social and symbolic narratives are missing from the discourse and practice of Complete Streets, what actually results are incomplete streets. It questions whether the ways in which complete streets narratives, policies, plans and efforts are envisioned and implemented might be systematically reproducing many of the urban spatial and social inequalities and injustices that have characterized cities for the last century or more.”
Culture
Culture: Difference and diversity. Fincher and Jacobs (1998) productively talk of ‘cities of difference,’ places where we are “in the presence of otherness” (Sennett 1990, 123)—namely, our increasingly different, diverse, and culturally heterogeneous urban areas.

Just sustainabilities thinking can help us recognize, understand, and engage difference, diversity, and cultural heterogeneity in inclusive, creative, and productive ways on two conditions: We embrace interculturalism and we take seriously the need for cultural competency.
“The interculturalism approach goes beyond opportunities and respect for existing cultural differences, to the pluralist transformation of public space, civic culture and institutions. So it does not recognise cultural boundaries as fixed but as in a state of flux and remaking. An interculturalist approach aims to facilitate dialogue, exchange and reciprocal understanding between people of different cultural backgrounds. Cities need to develop policies which prioritise funding for projects where different cultures intersect, “contaminate” each other and hybridize… In other words, city governments should promote cross-fertilisation across all cultural boundaries, between “majority” and “minorities”, “dominant” and “sub” cultures, localities, classes, faiths, disciplines and genres, as the source of cultural, social, political and economic innovation.”

Bloomfield and Bianchini (2002 p6)
Can we design **culturally inclusive spaces**?

Many planners and urban designers conception of ‘inclusion’ focuses on *Universal Design* (making spaces that are accessible to people of varying physical ability, learning and emotional disabilities, sensory impairments and communication limitations).

**Designing in Interculturalism 1? Culturally inclusive space?**

Few publications addressing park or open space design specifically mention *difference, interculturalism or cultural inclusion*. Notable here is the work of Sofoulis et al. (2008) in Metro Sydney, Australia: *Out and About in Penrith: Universal Design and Cultural Context: Accessibility, diversity and recreational space in Penrith*”
The number one need is for a more diverse set of place-making professionals: *We need to look like the communities we work in*. Planning and design professionals need to do more than simply *respond* to increasingly different or ‘multiple publics’ with albeit innovative ideas and designs. They need to more fundamentally include these multiple publics in ‘their’ work such that they are seen to be demonstrating *culturally inclusive practice*. In this way we as communities have a hope of creating *culturally inclusive spaces/places*.
Cultural competency is essential for planning, policymaking and practice in our “cities of difference” and for developing *culturally inclusive practice*. Policy makers, planners and other practitioners require cultural competency to recognize, understand, and engage difference, diversity, and heterogeneity in creative and productive ways. Cultural competency should be an essential part of the professional’s praxis.
If we want just, sustainable and intercultural cities, we cannot leave it to chance. We must plan for them.