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**Approaches to Sustainability Conference, 28th
June 2013: Part of the IAS Environmental Studies
Research Network**

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Abstract

'Approaches to Sustainability' was part of a project of the same name, and was organised as part of the programme of events for the Environmental Studies Research Network. The network intends to bridge gaps between disciplines in the field and to explore the synergies of the work taking place in different areas of the University of Warwick and beyond by creating a central hub for all the issues that surround sustainability. The intention is to allow researchers to communicate and collaborate across disciplines, to gain a broader knowledge of work related to their own. We feel that the rich diversity of research carried out at the University of Warwick can and should act as a catalyst for exciting ideas that address the complex problems of sustainability. This account shares some of the main ideas and discussion points arising from the network's conference in June 2013.



Figure 1: Guatemala (Source: Archer10, flickr)

'Buen vivir' and philosophical approaches

Johanna Bergström's discussion focussed on the meaning and scope of the concept 'buen vivir', defined as 'good living'. In contrast to western philosophy of good living, which dwells primarily on the wellbeing of the individual, 'buen vivir', within the context of indigenous 'cosmovisions' of Latin American society, perceives the individual in the social

context of their community and in a unique environmental situation. Put differently, the concept could be seen as an excellent example of philosophical and theoretical engagement with environmental issues. The paper, which centred on the Guatemalan and Mayan feminists' concept of 'buen vivir' where it has been institutionalised, was a critique of the very idea of linear development and growth. 'Buen vivir' is a major reaction against the way economic values dominate all aspects of life, with the attendant commodification of nearly everything that this has led to. Under 'buen vivir' philosophy, nature is seen as a constitutive of social life, with the economy forming part of larger social and natural systems.

Cultural and historical perspectives

Dr. Nick Lawrence used the work of theoreticians such as Timothy Morton and Jason Moore to examine ecological poetry by Lisa Robertson and Kenneth Goldsmith. He linked poetic and theoretical interpretations of environmental crisis to the perception of ecology and economy by the Frankfurt School of philosophy, using these perspectives to interpret apocalyptic and utopian visions of our ecological future. Dr. Christian Smith similarly drew on the arts but with an historical perspective, cleverly revealing the capitalist sustainability and necrophilia within Bertolt Brecht's play *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. As the drama's events unfold, Mother Courage both benefits from and relies on war to sustain her family, but her children die at war, leading to the famous 'silent scream' scene. Dr. Smith's paper was a pioneering study of the play's presentation of environmental destruction during the Thirty Years' War.



Figure 2: Mother Courage and Her Children: Alexandria Wailes, Meryl Streep, Geoffrey Arend, and Frederick Weller. Photograph by Michal Daniel, www.playbill.com

In Michela Coletta's paper on 'Hegel in America: nature and identity in the twentieth-century Argentina', an attempt was made to examine the challenge by the early 1960s Argentine anthropologist Rodolfo Kusch against Hegel's historicism. Hegel situated Europe within the realm of history, whilst the 'primitiveness' of America was placed in the realm of 'nature'. The discussion brought into focus the contribution of Latin America to the debate on the whole question of the divide between nature and culture in the western world, which tends to be neglected. Chris Maughan added to this global contrast, explaining how in the southern hemisphere (such as South America and Africa) agro-ecological resistive themes are relatively common, especially in comparison to Northern literature. Maughan demonstrated that eco-agrarian thinking suffers from an avoidance of the root causes of food crises due to the use of mainstream actors and institutions. More recently, dedicated agro-ecological groups have been more focused on the initial causes and the hope is that this will continue.

Ecopoetry

Lancashire-based poet Elizabeth Burns gave a reading of her tranquilly beautiful poetry of landscapes both local to her and far away. She explored the lovely but treacherous seascape of Morecambe Bay, Viking graves by the seashore, limestone landscapes, the river Lune and its role in global migration, and the more disturbing days when the river was used for the transportation of slaves. In a more provocative approach, Mandy Bloomfield's discussion, entitled 'Unsettling Sustainability: A post-equilibrium poetics?', centred on the exploration of literary modes which privilege flux, instability and incompleteness in their engagement with ecological questions. Within this context, the ecological poetics of two contemporary British innovative poets, Maggie O'Sullivan and Allen Fisher, were fully analysed. Whilst O'Sullivan adopted what was regarded as shamanistic approaches to the natural world, Fisher's poetics drew on scientific ideas and language. Nonetheless, both poets enunciated principles of dynamism and uncertainty that tended to shift the focus usefully away from unsustainable ideals of ecological stability.

Our exploration of interdisciplinary approaches continued with insights from Professor Jonathan Skinner's work on ecopoetry and his collaboration with scientists at Cornell University that explored how the sounds of nature can inform and inspire the sounds of poetry. Professor Skinner provided an unfamiliar view of the calls of familiar garden birds by slowing them down, allowing the listener to appreciate swift nuances of the song that would

normally be inaudible to human ears. He also showed sound traces of the birds' song. These recordings and images were used as the basis for poetry that echoes the sounds of nature.

Renewable energy

Remaining with the field of engineering, Dr Stuart Coles reported on the successful project that was recently completed and named 'WorldFirst Formula 3 Racing Car'. This is the first car built in the world that shows how synergies among virtuous industries in terms of environmentally oriented activities and operations can contribute to develop more sustainable racing cars, and as a consequence also conventional ones.



Figure 3: Formula 3 car. Further information, images, and video available at http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/racing_car/

The ideas behind this car are revolutionary as its development required a full rethinking of how a car is made and how it was possible to obtain the same performance as the conventional ones by using materials defined as renewable and sustainable. As a result, except the electronic equipment and the safety structure, the other components have been obtained by using a variety of natural and recycled products. Pulped carrot by-products were used to produce the steering wheel, while wing mirrors were based on materials derived from potato waste. Furthermore, resins made from recycled bottles have been used in the manufacture of the side pods, and recycled carbon fibres constitute most of the high performance body of the car. Lastly, the fuel was obtained from fermented wine waste, which would have been thrown away otherwise, and a specific lubrication system compatible with

the renewable oil was developed, showing that powerful engines can be developed and work with renewable-based fuels.

Education and the Future

Dr. Sam Adelman made a rousing call to arms in the war against climate change and urged the people in power to do something to establish sustainability for our planet before it is too late. Adelman described the need for both discussion and meaningful action in every way possible, and to set high targets for emission reductions rather than sidestepping the issues at hand.

Dr. Ria Dunkley, Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning, outlined how education for sustainable development was an inadequate method for inspiring a profound change in the way students treat both the environment, and each other. She reaffirmed the need for an increased presence of education for sustainable development and evaluated ecopedagogy as an alternative method for bringing ecological awareness into higher education.

As a Network we will continue to explore the crucial questions that have been raised through our work, including: What are the possibilities for future education to have a greater emphasis on the environment in our curricula? Is 'sustainability' really the right term to use when talking about processes as changeable as weather systems, global climate, evolution and biodiversity? Is there hope for a new focus on interdisciplinarity in the higher education system, and what would it involve?

Further information about the IAS Environmental Studies Research Network at the University of Warwick is available at:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ias/current/networks/envirnonnetwork/