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Humanities and sustainable development

John Canning

It is no coincidence that this module is called Sustainability in the Local and Global Environment. Sustainability, however we define it is a global issue, but it is also a local issue. Sustainability affects real people living in real places. There is no place called global.

This for a moment about a place you know well. Perhaps the city, town or village you were brought up. It could be a school, a house, a place of worship or a place where you went with friends or family. It might be a play park or a swimming pool.

What is special about that place? I don’t know what place you are thinking about but I know that that place is unique. It occupies a particular space on the surface of the earth and there is no other place like it. Whatever feelings you have for this place, positive and negative, it is part of who you are. If that place is threatened in some way you may feel that you are threatened personally. When a school is closed down or a building is scheduled for demolition or a new road is to be built there are often protests. To the outside observer these events might seem like rational decisions, but attacks on our buildings, our landscape, our places, are an attack on us.

I grew up in village with an animal feeds factory right in the centre. The factory bordered the infants’ school and my friends and I would often look through the chainlink fence and watch the comings and goings during playtime. The factory later closed down. A large supermarket is now on the site. It was supermarket we didn’t want, we didn’t need and we wouldn’t use. It would destroy our established local shops which had existed for as long as any could remember. Ten years later it is heaving with people and is now being expanded.

In the 1950s the residents of a village in North West Wales discovered that they were facing more than the loss of a cherished building or the arrival of a supermarket. Their village, Capel Celyn was fairly flat and surrounded by mountains. A reservoir was going to be built. The reservoir was not *near* Capel Celyn. The reservoir *was* Capel Celyn. The reservoir was needed to supply water to Liverpool. ‘All’ Liverpool City Council needed was an Act of Parliament. It didn’t matter what the people of Capel Celyn or their local councillors or their Member of Parliament thought. The protest galvanised support across Wales. When the bill was voted on in the UK Parliament 35 out of 36 Welsh MPs opposed the plans. The bill passed anyway.

Capel Celyn was about more than Capel Celyn. It was a predominantly Welsh-speaking community at a time when numbers speaking the language were decreasing. It also illustrated that the politicians of Wales as a whole were powerless against the water needs of a large English city, even if they were all united. It illustrated that the people of the village had no power to stop their homes from being submerged under water. One choice they did have was whether they wanted to dig up their relatives in the graveyard and bury them elsewhere – even the dead were not safe.

In the early 1970s work started on the James Bay hydro-electric project in the Canadian Province of Quebec. The dam lies over 1000km north of Montreal, the largest city in the Quebec. Although the territory Quebec of is around three times the size of France it is home to just 7 million people, around 90% of whom live along the St Lawrence river, most within about 150km of the US border. It is only part of North America where the majority of the population speak French as their first language. The Northern two-thirds of the Province are home to just 20,000 mostly Cree and Inuit native peoples.

The building of the dam needs to be placed into a socio-political and cultural context. During the 1960s Quebec went through a rapid period of modernisation and cultural change known as the “Quiet Revolution” or “La revoluation tranquille”. We don’t have time to go into the details of the Quiet revolution, but the chances bought about included an increased support for separatism from the Rest of Canada, a more assertive French language ‘Quebecois identity’ and a desire for economic sovereignty – most industry in Quebec, energy included, was dominated by English Canadian and US interests. The James Bay Project was an assertion of an increasingly confident Quebecois identity. It also enabled Quebec to have control of its own energy supply. This was well illustrated during the North American blackout of August 2003 where Quebec, unlike the rest of Eastern United States and Canada was unaffected by the loss of power.

The construction of the dam remains controversial. To the planners Northern Quebec looked like a sparsely populated, essentially blank space or ‘white space’. The native people of the regions, the Cree and Inuit were (and still are) predominantly nomadic hunters, trappers and fisherman. The native peoples depend about hunting, trapping and fishing for food—there is no agriculture at this latitude. The impact on the environment and the impact on the lifestyle of the native peoples were not even a consideration in the early 1970s.

A legal challenge to the Project meant that work was unable to go ahead until a legal agreement was put into place between the Hydro Quebec (owned by the Quebec government) and local residents. In *The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement*, signed in 1975, the Native peoples agreed to surrender parts of their traditional lands to the Quebec government in return for financial compensation, paid into the three native development corporations. There is still controversy about the extent of the environment impact but the building of the dams did impact upon traditional hunting routes and on access to James Bay itself.

In his introduction to The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, John Ciaccia, member of the National Assembly for Mount Royal and Special Representative of Premier Robert Bourassa outlined two principles which he considered to be equal:

1. The first is that Quebec needs to use the resources of its territory, all its territory, for the benefit of all its people.
2. The second principle is that we must recognize the needs of the native peoples, the Crees and the Inuit, who have a different culture and a different way of life from those of other peoples of Quebec.

These are both interesting principles which we can think through:

The first principle is about the need of a territory to use its resources for the benefit of everybody in that territory. The cases of James Bay and Capel Celyn bear an interesting parallel here – in both cases the displacement of small number of people might be justified on the grounds that a large number of people elsewhere would benefit. The notion a ‘greater good’ is implied here.

The second principle is about the needs of native people or minorities who have a different way of life to the majority of the population. The Cree and Inuit are nomadic hunters, trappers and fishermen speaking their own languages in contracts to the mainly urban Quebecers speaking mainly French, but also English. The people of Capel Celyn were predominantly Welsh-speaking rural dwellers, employed in agriculture in contrast to the English-speaking urban industrial residents of Liverpool. The people of Capel Celyn and the people of the James Bay region were small in number. Although both were in democratic countries both communities failed in their attempts to maintain their ways of life in face of a geographically distant powerful majority urban culture.

The social philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote of the “tyranny of the majority”. In democratic societies there is no individual despot or tyrant, but society itself can become the tyrant oppressing those who for one reason or another dissent from their society prevailing opinions. These dissenters may be ethnic, religious, cultural, political or linguistic minorities who face oppression from the ‘majority view’ of society. The water demands of Liverpool and the desire for a flagship engineering project in Quebec (as well as cheap electricity) might be seen as part of the ‘tyranny of the majority’ as their interests differed from those of the majority. The oppression is administered through the state itself, in the case of Capel Celyn through the Westminster parliament.

We might argue defend these case studies projects on the grounds of a ‘greater good’ which outweighs the rights of a minority. But is the greater good a price worth paying? And what is the greater good anyway in situations like the ones we have discussed here? Is the ‘greater good’ as euphemism for the tyranny of the majority?

David Crystal in his book *Language Death* says that the death of a language is the death of a language is ‘a serious loss of inherited knowledge’. Some of this knowledge may be about medicine, agriculture and sustainable living. Displacing minority linguistic communities is one of the causes of language death and the effects are not always understood at the time. But is the defence of a linguistic or cultural minority community more defensible than the loss of other communities?

We don’t even have to look too far from Southampton to find examples of ‘former communities’. The village of Imber on Salisbury plain was taken over in 1943 to be used to military training. The residents were given 47 days’ notice to leave and they have never been back. Or what about the village of Barton-on-Sea where coastal erosion has claimed several buildings in the past few decades? In the 1940s reservoirs were built in the Derwent Valley in Derbyshire. Not all the buildings in Derwent Village were knocked down. A particularly haunting image is a photograph of the church spire rising from the reservoir. The spire was demolished in 1947, but the picture remains an iconic image. It is interesting to compare the responses to the Derwent Valley to those of Capel Celyn. Protests occurred in both cases, but Capel Celyn symbolised something much bigger. Whilst protests accompanied the official opening of Capel Celyn and the , the Ladybower Reservoir in the Derwent Velley was opened in 1945 by King George VI amid much pomp and ceremony.

These discussions are also carried out through literature and poetry:

Welsh poet R S Thomas (1913-2000) reflected on this in his poem *Reservoirs*.

There are places in Wales I don't go:  
Reservoirs that are the subconscious

[Rest of poem removed for copyright reasons]  
“Others”-

Another idea we can work with is that of ‘the other’ or ‘otherness’. The idea of the ‘otherness’ was popularised by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism.* Said understood Orientialism as how Europeans or ‘the West’ understood the ‘Orient’ or the Middle East. “the Orient” a place of romance, exotic beings, haunted memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences”. The emotions are complex, yet the idea of Orientalism could be thought of as useful in describing the relationships between the UK government and the residents of Capel Celyn and the Quebec and Canadian governments with the people of James Bay. Capel Celyn lies just outside the Snowdonia National Park and within what geographer Denis Cosgrove (1996) called “Wild and Upland Britain”, a part of the Britain geographically and culturally distant from the City of London and the ‘home counties’. The romanticisation of the life of the native peoples of North America, living in harmony with their natural environment is nothing new. This can be well illustrated by the Ojibwa conservationist *Grey Owl* who turned not to be first nations person but a man called Archibald Belaney, a native of East Sussex. This otherness is complex: romantic, uncivilised, barbaric, exotic, in harmony with nature, cruel, traditional, backward.

In both Canada and the USA native identity is problematic— how much native blood does a person need to live on a reservation and be identified as an indigenous person? The Mohawks of Kahnawake, an Indian reservation south of Montreal has complex rules about who can be a member of the community. Among other qualifications a member needs to have at least Kanien’kehá:ka four great-grandparents. Membership also excludes children of non-indigenous descent who are adopted by Kanien’kehá:ka and non-indigenous spouses or partners. These laws are not without controversy and there have been accusations that revisions of the rules in 2007 amount to ethnic cleansing. The connections between protecting a ‘traditional culture’ and exclusion from a territory on the grounds of race or an insufficient amount of the right ancestry are highly problematic.

During the lead up to the submersion of Capel Celyn a journalist from *The Times* reported his meeting with a Mr Jones who lived in the village, a life very distant and ‘other’ to the average *Times* reader*.*

*Behind the Chapel lives Mr G P Jones, the county patrol shepherd, who walks 20 miles every day over the mountains on the lookout for sheep that are sick , stolen or strayed. Differently shaped cut in their ears help to tell him to whom they belong. He knows hundreds of these patterns. If he is really stumped he can tell the difference between sheep belonging to farms fifteen miles apart just by looking at the wool because, he says, the climate is different. His simple life provides a strange contrast with the scientific engineering only a short distance away.*

*The waters of the dam will help to light people’s homes as well as slake their thirst. It is an odd thought that when Mr Jones wants electricity he has to switch on his own generator.*

*The Times 26 September 1963.*

British culture

There is also sometimes a desire to ‘preserve’ what is seen a minority culture, almost museum like. It brings us to what historian Eric Hobsbawn calls *The invention of tradition’.* There is the apocryphal story of the schoolboy who wrote “Abraham Lincoln was born in a log cabin he built with his own hands”, but the invention of tradition is no less factious. These attempts to invent tradition affect who is seen as belonging and who is not. Urban migrants, non-locals, non-whites, gypsies and travellers are missing in idyllic representations of the English countryside. The idea of an unchanging countryside is an appealing, though erroneous notion. There is something somehow romantic and other worldly about the work of Mr Jones I quoted earlier. The countryside has always been in a state of change. The enclosure of agricultural land from the late medieval period prevented poor people from freely grazing their animals on common land. Rural landscapes, like urban landscapes are always in a state of change. The National Trust has recently acquired Croome Park in Worcestershire a project of the landscape gardener Lancelot “Capability” Brown (1716-1783). At Croome Brown even went as far as demolishing a medieval church and building an artificial lake, reputedly shaped as a model of the River Severn. Brown’s work is also celebrated at big houses such as Blenheim Palace and Warwick Castle.

In the late nineteenth early twentieth century Cecil Sharp, a graduate of Cambridge University began collecting folk songs from all other the British Isles—he also visited in North America. Rural, unsophisticated, less educated people in remote area were seen as the best sources of these songs. Again the countryside was a place where ‘old traditions’, lost through the processes of industrialisation urbanisation could still be found. Sharp’s contemporaries included Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan-Williams, composers of nationalistic English music in the pastoral traditional.

In 1980s the historian Robert Hewison wrote *The Heritage Industry*, a book which lamented that the only industry Britain has left is its past. has become centrered on preserving the past, moreover a specific idealised and a basically untrue view of the past.

The idea of the threatened community, the threatened culture is taken to another level by Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.* The first book opens with the protagonist Arthur Dent trying to stop bulldozers from demolishing his house to make way for a bypass. Dent’s house is, as it were his culture, it is where he feels safe and at his most contented. Now this safe space in threatened from outside. Dent’s home is about to be demolished. Unknown to Dent, the Vogons, a particularly unpleasant extra-terrestrial species are about to demolish the Earth to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Now it is the Earth which is in the way. The Earth itself is halting ‘progress’ for the rest of the universe.

You may be able to spot now where I am taking this analysis. Think of James Bay, Capel Celyn, Imber etc. etc. as metaphors for how the Vogons see the Earth. The earth is not important: it is in the way, it can make way for something better; its inhabitants are primitive. When they protest the Vogon captain informs the people of Earth that the plans have been on display on alpha centauri for the past 50 years. It is humankind’s own fault they don’t take an interest in local affairs. Earth is blank space in the universe. Earth culture is looked down upon. It is primitive, backward, insignificant. Earth is so insignificant that its entry in the hitchhiker’s guide simply reads “Harmless”.

Raymond Williams described culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”. The terms has a complex linguistic evolution from its early use in connection with cultivating the land. We make judgements about high culture—Mozart, Bach, the proms, opera, Shakespeare, Jane Austin. Or ‘low culture’: Big brother, Nuts magazine, TV soaps. Or folk culture : Morris dancing, Male voice choirs, brass bands— possibly associated with regional and local identities in Britain. I don’t have time go on

Sustaining culture for future generations is not a value-free process and the means by which we might sustain or not sustain our cultural heritage. Culture is not fixed. It is constantly invented and reinvented, interpreted and re-reinterpreted. Efforts are make to keep languages going, but not others. Rules are rewritten to signify who belongs and who does not belong to a particular group. The boundaries between cultural sustainability and racism can be unclear. Some buildings are knocked down whilst others are saved. Some authors are remembered centuries after their death. Others, famous in their own time are largely forgotten by future generations.

Culture is an important aspect of sustainability. It is also a highly complex aspect which goes to heart of key ideas of identity, morality, ethics, love and heritage. Sustainability is not just about enabling humans to stay alive, but also thinking about what we want to live for.

*Limits to Growth (1972)* is well known, but their rewrite twenty years later called *Beyond the Limits* in 1992 went well beyond the computer models of the 1970s.

*We think the human race is up to the challenge. We think that a better world is possible, and that the acceptance of physical limits is the first step toward getting there. We see "easing down" from unsustainability not as a sacrifice, but as an opportunity to stop battering against the earth’s limits and to start transcending self-imposed and unnecessary limits in human institutions, mindsets, beliefs, and ethics. That is why we finally decided not just to update and reissue* The Limits to Growth, *but to rewrite it completely and to call it* Beyond the Limits.

They also wrote:

*One is not allowed in the modern culture to speak about love, except in the most romantic and trivial sense of the world. Anyone who calls upon the capacity of people to practice brotherly and sisterly love is more likely to be ridiculed than to be taken seriously. The deepest difference between optimists and pessimists is their position in the debate about whether human beings are able to operate collectively from a basis of love. In a society that systematically develops in people their individualism, their competitiveness, and their cynicism, the pessimists are the vast majority.*

Questions to ponder

1. The Bruntland report (1987) defines sustainable development as:*" Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”* How might you apply this idea to culture?
2. What has love and other human emotions got to do with living sustainability?
3. What is lost (or gained) if a language or culture dies?
4. Think about how you might see the following through the lens of sustainability?
   1. A novel you have recently read
   2. A photograph or painting
   3. A piece of music

## All nature has a feeling

All nature has a feeling: woods, fields, brooks  
Are life eternal: and in silence they  
Speak happiness beyond the reach of books;  
There's nothing mortal in them; their decay  
Is the green life of change; to pass away  
And come again in blooms revivified.  
Its birth was heaven, eternal it its stay,  
And with the sun and moon shall still abide  
Beneath their day and night and heaven wide.

John Clare (1794-1864)

## Daffodils

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host, of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.  
  
Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.  
  
The waves beside them danced; but they  
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:  
A poet could not but be gay,  
In such a jocund company:  
I gazed--and gazed--but little thought  
What wealth the show to me had brought:  
  
For oft, when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;

To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,

And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;

To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

And still more, later flowers for the bees,

Until they think warm days will never cease,

For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

2.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find

Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,

Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook

Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep

Steady thy laden head across a brook;

Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,

Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

3.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river sallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;

Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft

The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

John Keats (1795-1821)

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