

Environmental Values in the USA Today

The perspective from the USA which is provided in this issue shows that environmental debate is still alive in that country although, from an outsider's perspective, the debate seems to be an increasingly restricted and uncertain one. As noted in this special issue, North America is regarded as having an environmental movement which is under duress and in need of reinvigoration (M. Smith 2006). Among the conflicted values of individual citizens, materialism and markets win in a political economy dominated by instrumentality. As Stewart (2006: 316) surmises, in reviewing the first three contributions, 'Instrumentality is revealed here as a mode of selfishness when we take into account the disastrous effects an instrumental approach to nature today will have on the future of nature itself.' What role then for aesthetics, spiritual values, and non-humans?

As academics we may wonder with dismay whether our debates and thinking have any impact on human behaviour and environmental policy. A socio-economic researcher I knew, who worked on the expression of plural environmental values, moved to the environs of Westminster, politicking in the New Labour camp. The aim of this person's group was to get the environment on the cabinet agenda. However, soon this individual was speaking in public against ideology, as a political danger to be eradicated from a progressive society. Within recent years they have moved to the Treasury and have replaced baggy jumper and earring for the three-piece suit and tie. Their favoured jibe to shake the ghosts of the past 'I used to be an academic but now I'm cured'.

Dominant values often force people to conform or be ostracised. In the environmental area sticking your head too far above the parapet makes the chance increasingly likely that you will get it blown off. In the USA academics who speak openly against dominant political myths have been subject to personal attack, and removal of tenure has been openly mooted. As Dunlap (2006: 328) notes 'American orthodoxy rains down the anathemas of Communism or anti-Americanism on any suggestion that the world lives by interdependence rather than voluntary cooperation'. Of course, as my anecdote illustrates, conformity is not a purely American problem.

This is particularly worrying if we are to answer Kimberly Smith's question: 'how do we as individuals and members of a society produce scientifically and politically valid forms of knowledge about the natural world?' (K. Smith 2006: 351). Despite supposedly heading into the information age, where education is meant to be essential to future economic success, those in higher education seem increasingly under-valued and forced to deliver narrowly numerated outputs. Free thinking is under pressure and not just in the USA. Showing any allegiance with animal rights in the UK these days runs the risk of landing you on a list of

terrorist suspects. Meanwhile the higher education research assessment exercise (RAE) provides a subtle British approach to restricting the careers of interdisciplinary environmental researchers. Yet pluralism, tolerance and openness to alternative perspectives seem central to a better future.

As the USA is currently 'the' super-power what goes on there does matter. The USA has mythologised the great melting pot which increasingly appears as a means of fusing all ideas and identities. Unrestrained markets and the freedom to do as you please are the essence of homeland and security, all of which can be wrapped in a flag and capped with biblical self-righteousness. Environmental problems don't fit well within this political philosophy because they emphasise interdependence, raise the spectre of constraints on human behaviour and show how unrestrained markets exploit those values which can be traded at the expense of those which cannot. There are clear tensions here and not just for Americans.

In this kind of atmosphere what hope is there for environmental concern? As will be seen within, some believe a religious revival of environmentalism is the hope (Dunlap 2006; Rolston 2006), some want restrained forms of public participation (Toman 2006), while others want the market to be extended to trading the atoms of the atmosphere (Singer 2006), or perhaps we must wait until things get so bad that the selfish are stirred to take interest (Gardiner 2006). What appears absent in America and lacking elsewhere is open debate between these perspectives.

There is a stark, if often ignored, contrast between discussions as to right and wrong, conducted on deontological grounds, and the free-market approach, where all things are up for grabs on the basis of their consequences. The former risks self-righteousness and authoritarianism. The latter leads to short term thinking and ignores anything which cannot be easily measured or pinned down. In the end the value expressed by economic calculus is often in conflict with what is seen as right, and this is starkly obvious in the case of climate change (Spash 2002). Opening that debate up will prove incompatible with the cost benefit analytical approaches and scientific technical 'solutions' which aim to close down all discussion. Hill (2006) recommends we move to consideration of virtue rather than being fixated on rights and/or welfare. Whatever the ways forward they are likely to prove far from easy, but business as usual is not an option and the time has come for a radical rethink.

The international dominance of the USA today means that if environmentalism is in trouble there, then we all must worry. Whether as a result of conspiracy or cock-up, the environmental stakes are getting higher every day. Unfortunately the political atmosphere seems to be moving backwards – to somewhere in the 1950s with its unpleasant cocktail, of McCarthyism, technocentric optimism and dominance by big business.

The main hope, in the current context, must be to increase communication, break down barriers and remove the inherent isolationism and insularity of

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North America. This means understanding different people's perspectives and seeing one's own in a new light. In its own small way this special issue may help toward that end, at least for those of us who still believe academic pursuits have some virtue.

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