

Sustainable Future Communities: Sociological and Anthropological insights

Kieran Keohane

Department of Sociology, University College Cork, Ireland

Sustainable communities are usually intentional; animated by utopian impulses, seeking a realization of 'the good life', its approximation, or at least 'a better life'. Often these communities are ex-urban, neo-rural, seeking modes of re-engagement with rural life; projects oriented to sustainability, ecologically and sociologically, in the context of future horizons of global climate change, peak oil, and the depletion or degradation of other natural resources, e.g. mining, fisheries, forests, fresh water. What interests me especially in the problematic of sustainable communities, beyond the challenges of ecological sustainability (e.g. eco-friendly energy technologies, horticulture and farming practices) is the problematic of sociological sustainability. In the history of utopian communities of one form or another, inter-generational sustainability, the likelihood of the community surviving –and thriving– into second, third or fourth generations have been low, exceptions being Hutterite, Amish and Kibbutz communities and similar modern examples such as Gould Farm (a therapeutic, quasi monastic spiritual community in Massachusetts established in 1913) indicating the importance of a moral/religious commitment of members to sacred & transcendent values and ideals, and the reproduction of these values and ideals in the ritual practices that structure everyday life. This question of sociological sustainability takes us to the core of the problem in two ways: first, to focus on the ways in which transcendent and sacred ideals and values are –or can be– present in an ostensibly modern secular society? These ideals may be, for instance, ideological, and centered around a charismatic leader or the legacy of such a person's institutionalized charisma. Usually, and especially recently, the ideals are cosmopolitan, rational consensual commitments to sustainable living and duty of care, but this rational society of good intention hasn't been sufficient for reproduction and inter-generational solidarity as it requires the conscious decision to elect for such a form of life, and it entails the freedom –especially for a subsequent generation– to opt out. From the other side, as it were, sustainable communities rely on the lived experience of 'belonging to a community' and its dense and supporting webs of mutual recognition, reciprocity, shared symbols and meanings; but this experience of binding & constraining is at odds with the sensibility of modern individualism. In between and mediating the transcendent realm of intentional commitment to guiding ideals and the profane world of everyday life in intentional sustainable communities are sociological & political anthropological processes, for example forms of association (Simmel) such as play (Huizinga), the general economy of gift relations (Mauss), and rituals and rites de passage (van Gennep, Turner). Specifically I am interested in those rituals that transform profane contents of everyday life into meaningful (& meaning-giving) sacred transcendent ideals that protect the community from anomie, and the rites de passage that demarcate limits, insulating members from liminality emanating from abstract processes of modernity and globalization, and that reproduce the normative order of a shared life world and that structure and make coherent the individual life course in terms of membership of a community.

The analysis will be based on research on a number of specific sites in communities seeking sustainable futures: In Atlantic Canada: Annapolis valley, Wolfville; the farmers market, and similar thriving alternative businesses catering to University and new ex-urban communities; Cape Breton, where after the decline of mining a new vitality and resources for sustainable rural futures is found in music, heritage and eco-tourism. In Ireland: Cloughjordan eco-village, a new intentional community committed to sustainable development and regeneration in conjunction with the declining rural town within which it is located, now coping with the impact of severe economic recession and with negotiating its interfaces with the wider community; Allihies, once a copper mine, later a fishing & subsistence farming community (the subject of a classic study on the decline of rural community by H.Brody) recently a center of tourism and a bohemian arts & culture community. In Scotland: Findhorn: fifty years established and growing, though its founding members are now elderly; a spiritual community, eco-village and an international center for holistic learning based on the principles of co-creation with nature, service to the global community, and a positive and sustainable future. In Denmark: Dyskilde, a carbon-neutral sustainable community where, enabled by new technologies, people live and work, while actively focusing on promoting social interaction, tolerance and respect, and the adjacent rural town of Torup, once declining, now revitalized as the new sustainable community grows.