

CIVIC ENVIRONMENTAL PRAGMATISM

A Dialogical Framework for Strategic Environmental Assessment

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

Questions of uncertainty and value conflict are increasingly pervasive challenges confronting policy makers seeking to address the range of environmental problems generated by contemporary technological systems. Yet these questions are ultimately political and moral in nature, and require a framework of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) that is marked by informed and democratic civic governance. Reflecting this, the original, civic purposes of environmental assessment (EA) embraced science and public participation as interdependent elements in the creation of more sustaining forms of human-nature interaction. However, formal models of EA have forsaken meaningful democratic engagement to technique. Based on the instrumentalist assumption that better science automatically leads to better policy, EA has externalised the civic source of political energy that underpins its environmental expertise. Moreover, debates become polarised when science is uncritically imported into the adversarial forums of interest-based politics, so that environmental science is increasingly unable to support political action. I shall argue that the revolutionary potential of SEA to transform the policy process rests upon a recovery of its original, civic purposes. My thesis is that a deeper understanding of the relationship between scientific knowledge and political action is required if SEA is to be rigorous, and also relevant to public concerns. Philosophical pragmatism contributes epistemological resources vital to this task. By situating knowledge in the context of practice, and by recognising the dialogical, judgmental nature of rationality, the practical philosophy of pragmatism reclaims the contextually embedded nature of inquiry. When science is embedded in a wider ethical context, the meaning and purposes of environmental knowledge become central questions of policy. The procedural ethics of both liberal and Habermasian politics cannot address these questions, however, because they relegate questions of the public good to the realm of individual choice. Instead, I argue that public dialogue, guided by a *praxis*-oriented virtue ethics, is required to recover objective environmental goods in the policy process. I also argue that Aristotelian rhetoric, with its focus on the credibility of expertise, is the mode of persuasive argument most appropriate for dialogical public forums. The public philosophy of civic environmental pragmatism is therefore presented as a richer theoretical framework for understanding the contribution of both experts and citizens in the development of environmental knowledge for policy. As a dialogical framework for SEA, civic environmental pragmatism constructively combines the critical/normative and instrumental/descriptive aspects of policy inquiry, both of which are required in the development of socially robust knowledge and politically feasible policy decisions.

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