

SOCIAL CHANGE AND POST UTILITARIAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: ADAPTATION OR TRANSFORMATION?

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Abstract

The resource management profession has made concerted efforts in recent years to respond to the contingencies of social change at the turn of the 21st Century. Two prominent theoretical traditions characterize the variety of resource management responses: participatory democracy and communicative action, both of which feature the decline of the technical expert and the rise of the public sphere in policy making. But in confronting change, has the profession simply adapted the principles of its utilitarian past, or have its efforts been more transforming? This paper argues that resource management has been only adaptive, clinging to the utilitarian systems-based assumptions of Parsons' structural functionalism. The paper then uses Habermas' notion of the lifeworld and Giddens' Third Way politics to suggest a theoretical and practical outline for the transforming potential of a post-utilitarian resource management.

1.0 Contemporary Social Change and Resource Management's Utilitarian Legacy

There is a frequently told story about a Great Lakes freighter that had passed through the Sault St. Marie locks one night and was steaming along the south shore of Lake Superior towards its eventual destination in Duluth. As it passed Munising on the upper peninsula of Michigan, the captain, who was a seasoned veteran of 35 years on the Great Lakes shipping lanes, looked up and spied a light straight ahead. He quickly made radio contact with the object in front and ordered it to move 10 degrees to the south. The radio crackled and the voice on the other end came back and said "you move 10 degrees to the north." The captain was disturbed by the impertinence of the voice at the other end, and forcefully stated, "I am a captain of 35 years on the waters. I demand that you turn 10 degrees to the south!" The radio crackled again and the same voice came back to the captain saying, "I am a seaman second class, but I must insist that you turn 10 degrees to the north." This of course enraged the captain who shouted back, "You

turn 10 degrees to the south. Turning this fully loaded Great Lakes freighter on such short notice is far too difficult." The voice on the other end once again came back and said, "You turn 10 degrees to the north. I am a lighthouse!"

This story is typically told as a metaphor of contemporary change. Applied to a resource management context, it illustrates a management system that has been cruising along with its course set on the first half of the 20th century. Resource managers, operating under utilitarian principles founded on the promises of the progressive era conservation movement, strive to use science and technical expertise to maximize public goods in an efficient and inclusive way. The metaphor, however, suggests that if management continues along that same path, it is headed for trouble. And it is easy to recognize signs of trouble in the growing contentiousness of current resource management controversies. So over the last 2 or 3 decades we have seen management agencies scampering around on deck making new efforts to steer a sometimes sluggish bureaucracy into the 21st century.

But, what is the nature of contemporary change in the resource management profession? Has the resource management profession simply tweaked its practices, adapting the assumptions of its utilitarian past to contemporary problems? Or has management implemented more far-reaching transformations that embrace a post-utilitarian style of resource management? In my view, resource management has, for the most part, been adaptive. But is adaptive change enough? Or is society demanding more comprehensive change in the provision of environmental goods? This paper examines some theories of social change to help make sense of the contemporary pressures facing resource management. The paper then draws on Giddens (1998) to make some rough suggestions for what a post utilitarian resource management might look like.

2.0 How Has Resource Management Responded to Social Change?

What specifically are the contemporary management responses to social change? They go by a variety of names including discursive democracy, collaborative conservation, public/private partnerships, ecological

modernization, alternative dispute resolution, adaptive management, ecosystem management, ecological economics, integrated resource management, and sustainable development. One could add many other labels and concepts to characterize the variety of ways resource management agencies have attempted to “reinvent” themselves in response to the social pressures and demands of recent years. But there are two prominent theoretical traditions that can characterize this variety of resource management responses: participatory democracy and communicative action.

2.1 Participatory Democracy

Daniel Kemmis in his book *Community and the Politics of Place* (1990) describes the contemporary management scene as a transition from an “interest group politics” suggested by James Madison’s version of democracy to a “face-to-face” consensus style of democracy suggested by Thomas Jefferson. In Madison’s vision, interest groups are in constant tension and conflict over political favor and advantage. State agencies serve as the mediators between these competing interests, making allocation decisions that weigh costs and benefits to society as a whole and its resource conservation goals. In this context, no interest group ever quite wins, because in conflict, the scales of favoritism and advantage naturally tip back and forth in an uneasy balance.

In Jefferson’s vision, democracy works best when people engage in reasoned discussion and debate with the goal of compromise and consensus. The engine of good government is collaboration rather than competition, where people who disagree about resource allocation and service provision work together in good faith to settle their differences in productive ways. Mediation occurs within the public collaboration process, and state agencies simply administer the public will. Many believe that this face-to-face style of democracy produces better policy outcomes than the clientelism and cooptation inherent in Madison’s interest group politics.

Why has this change occurred? According to Kemmis, it was a response to the gridlock of the 1970s and 1980s. Legislation, such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act, has facilitated public litigation. Environmental interest groups typically have lawyers on staff to challenge agency decision-making processes, and to stall or halt programs and policies that run counter to the group’s

mission. With these heightened levels of public scrutiny, resource management agencies feel they are “caught in the crossfire” (Salwasser 1990), and must spend less time on “pure” science, and more time on strategy and accountability in their policy-making process. For Kemmis, this social climate represents interest group politics run amok, and it calls for management agencies to adopt new inclusive and collaborative ways to make allocation decisions.

2.2 Communicative Rationality

A second theory widely applied to emerging approaches to contemporary resource management is Habermas’ theory of communicative action (1984). His theory also features enhanced levels of public communication and collaboration. The difference however, is that Habermas built his theory around a pervasive and profound framework of social change in late modernity.

Specifically, his theory was an elaboration of Max Weber’s analysis of rationality at the close of the 19th century (Weber 1978). Weber argued that human rationality had evolved historically through four stages. The first form of rationality was what he called “traditional rationality,” where human action was determined exclusively by ritual, obligation, or habit. Much of this type of behavior was directed at appeasing the unseen forces of the universe. Second was what Weber calls “affective rationality,” where action was driven by emotion, passion, or feeling states. Hedonism provided the standard of appropriate behavior under this form of rationality. Third was “values-based rationality,” where duty, morality, normative standards, or religious sentiment determined action. Historically, the role of the Catholic Church in Europe played a major role in articulating this type of rationality. Finally, Weber argued that values-based rationality had given way to “instrumental rationality,” where action is goal-directed towards planned and calculated outcomes. It was this type of rationality that was born in the Enlightenment and galvanized the industrial revolution.

Habermas argued that the instrumental rationality that characterized industrial society - and which has characterized much of 20th century resource management - is giving way to a fifth type of rationality, “communicative rationality.” In this new form, an increased capacity for individual reflexivity, and a society that engages more frequently in open and inclusive public discourse determine action. Communicative rationality is

embodied in a society that has become reflexively critical of bureaucratic decision making. It is a society that is reasserting its interest in the provision of public goods, and demanding a comprehensive, less insular way of making decisions that more adequately reflect the public will.

Applied in a management context, the transition to communicative rationality has brought about at least five major changes over the last quarter century. First communicative rationality means that agencies are breaking down their culture of expertise, where managers turn to scientists for the final say in contested decisions. An increasingly reflexive public understands that scientific findings are full of contingency, and often the public has reason to distrust the science that informs the decisions. Second, resource management agencies must operate under a new transparency, in which fewer of their decisions are made in a vacuum. Increased public scrutiny and a fading sense of agency legitimacy are all products of an increasingly reflexive society. Third, public engagement and involvement in the decision making process are escalating, and agencies have worked to institutionalize mechanisms of public participation in their standard operating procedures. Fourth, there is a new awareness among management agencies of the human dimension of resource management. Biological science is no longer enough to guide resource allocation decisions. A better understanding of the psychology and sociology of people is necessary to make better management decisions. Finally, there is a new emphasis on collaborative problem solving, where new communicative methods of policy making are forged in a face-to-face setting of partners rather than opponents.

Most would agree these are positive steps. But, I argue in this paper that these steps make selective use of Habermas' theory. Consequently, they are merely adaptive and incremental, and may not be a sufficient response to the demands of contemporary social change.

3.0 Adaptive or Transforming?

3.1 Stakeholder Analysis

Why are these steps merely adaptive? The stakeholder concept offers a good illustration. Stakeholder analysis draws on the assumptions of Talcott Parsons' theory of structural functionalism (Parsons 1937). Parsons' was perhaps the first social theorist to explicitly use a systems metaphor to describe social life. This metaphor had been

widely used in the natural sciences, which assume the world conforms to physical and biological systems, laws of nature, and cause and effect relationships. Parsons' applied the same metaphor to the social world to describe the structural qualities of society that enable and predict coordinated individual action.

Parsons' theory specified the integration of human action as it was influenced by three systems: the personality system, the social system, and the cultural system (Kluckhohn 1951; Parsons 1951). Consistent with cognitive psychology of the mid 20th century, Parsons' *personality system* maintained that individuals are oriented toward specific actions through mechanisms of motivation that included physiological drives and socially learned need-dispositions. Action within the context of the personality system was constrained by forces within the social system and the cultural system. Mechanisms of constraint within the *social system* are normative in character. They consist of institutions comprised of status-based roles, ritual activities, and structures designed to sanction actions that do not maintain the social system. These mechanisms are aimed at reproducing the social system by reducing conflict, strain, and deviance in everyday action. Finally, the *cultural system* contains the values, beliefs, language and other symbols of a broader cultural milieu. These elements of the cultural system are internalized into the personality system through socialization and thereby circumscribe the need structure of the individual. They also frame the role structure of the social system, and direct the acquisition of interpersonal skills necessary for playing these roles. Consequently, values are the glue that holds the interface of these three systems together. Values are functional for social order because they coordinate individual action in the context of role appropriate behaviors and culturally relevant symbols that facilitate a sense of belonging to a broader societal whole.

So, dividing the world into stakeholders and analyzing the divergent values expressed by these groups is one way of characterizing structure in society. It is a sort of in-the-field factor analysis or a data reduction tool that helps managers segment the public into manageable units, and explain the behavior of individuals as they act in concert with identifiable value positions or ideologies. With this information, managers can predict behaviors, anticipate information needs, manage conflict, and search for common ground in disputes. In this way, stakeholder

analysis is a pragmatic tool that helps managers link specific tasks or actions with concrete and measurable outcomes.

As managers attempt to embrace the human dimension of resource management, the stakeholder concept has become a prominent tool, particularly as a foundation for public participation initiatives. The currency of the stakeholder concept, however, comes not because it is innovative, but because its roots in structural functionalism make it quite consistent with management's standard utilitarian practices. Wondolleck and Yaffee in their book *Making Collaboration Work* (2000) characterize this management approach as an innovative way to "break the gridlock" of recent decades, and to get on with the business of making good decisions. But, here's the key question: Is "getting on with it" enough, or is society demanding a more wholesale transformation in the way resource managers do business?

In my estimation, there appears to be some urgency for transformation. If there is any common theme that runs across theories of modernity and post modernity, it is the belief that contemporary social change is profound and momentous. Giddens (1998) argues that "there are good, objective reasons to believe we are living through a major period of historical transition." So if social change is particularly momentous, what might this transformation look like?

3.2 Decolonizing the Lifeworld

Habermas and his concept of the lifeworld offer one vision of change that can be applied to resource management (Habermas 1970). But, ironically the lifeworld concept has been selectively ignored by many who use his theory as the basis for public participation. Nevertheless, change has been at the heart of Habermas' theory of communicative action. Habermas was a product of the Frankfurt School of social research, which offered one of the first systematic critiques of modernity. In the shadow of Nazi Germany, they argued that the promises of the Enlightenment - i.e., human progress through rationality - had failed. Rationality and its tools of science, technology, industry, and markets promised a more stable and ordered world. Yet, the contradictions of the modern age, they argued, had brought about wide spread alienation, and had positioned society on the brink of disaster and impending chaos.

Habermas, however, had a different take on the modern condition. He recognized the contradictions of industrial mass society and the alienation of modern life. However, he rejected the notion that modernism was dying. Instead, he argued that the promise of Enlightenment progress was still a viable orienting principle for "late modern" society, and that the transition from instrumental rationality to communicative rationality provided hope that the principles of reason could direct the course of history in a progressive direction.

In analyzing modern alienation, Habermas used the concept of the lifeworld to energize his theory; a term cast broadly to characterize human action and interaction (Habermas 1970). Habermas built on Weber and his iron cage metaphor. Weber argued that corporations and state bureaucracies would confine public decision making and policy formation into more progressively rigid forms of instrumental rationality. And he argued that most forms of human interaction would be reduced to functionally determined means-ends relationships. Habermas characterizes these outcomes of instrumental rationality as the "colonization of the lifeworld." Individual action in the modern age has become increasingly dominated by bureaucratic control, and decisions are increasingly in the hands of the technical expert.

But Habermas draws a sharp distinction between the instrumental rationality of administrative and market systems and the communicative rationality of the public sphere. Under communicative rationality the public sphere reasserts itself. It is through dialogue in a fair and open setting where people can speak without the fear of intimidation, retribution, and embarrassment. In this context, the lifeworld becomes decolonized from overbearing bureaucratic constraint. Decolonizing the lifeworld describes the process whereby the public becomes free to imagine and invent public policy and action through collaborative and inventive ways that are not constrained by rigid bureaucratic procedure, institutional standing, or status obligations.

4.0 Transforming Resource Management?

The problem, of course, is that Habermas does not offer a very clear vision for how this decolonization process is to proceed. Exactly how does society go about reconfiguring the relationship between bureaucracies and the public sphere under communicative rationality?

There may be no definitive answers to this question, but let me offer a two observations.

First, public participation, *by itself*, is not the solution. Legislative mandates to incorporate public involvement in decision-making have become quite common lately. But can bureaucracies really reinvigorate the public sphere by creating more top-down processes and institutional protocol? Of course agencies should not throw out their public involvement initiatives. They have clearly provided positive adaptations to contemporary management challenges. But agency-led processes of public participation don't usually generate the sort of social transformations that contemporary conditions may require.

Second, what else might be needed to transform this relationship between public agencies and the public sphere? I believe Anthony Giddens' widely debated Third Way politics (1998) are suggestive. And I believe the widely cited experience of the Quincy Library Group in Northern California is illustrative (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000). The Quincy Library Group is a grass-roots coalition of environmentalists, county planners, and members of the timber industry centered in the town of Quincy, California. The three groups formed in response to the spotted owl gridlock in the early 1990s, created a management plan of their own, and then shepherded a law through Congress that required the U.S. Forest Service to implement their plan.

This example exhibits several of the principles that Giddens outlines in his Third Way politics. The first is devolution, or the movement of power from centralized to localized sources. Giddens argues that the pressures of globalization have created a backlash of communitarian groups seeking power and control through assertive localized organizations. Renewing the public sphere means investing one's identity in local initiatives and programs. In Quincy, local groups usurped decision-making power. And it was usurped because of the ineffectiveness of a centralized authority. In the process, the U.S. Forest Service was a minor player. When they did attend meetings, they occupied the chairs against the wall rather than chairs at the table.

A second principle Giddens describes is mechanisms of direct democracy. As bureaucracies grow more

complex, they become less responsive to local need and representative politics loses its legitimacy. In response, a "sub-politics" has emerged (Beck 1992) which includes citizen initiative groups and other activist organizations. These single-issue organizations have effectively responded to the crisis of representative politics by mobilizing political action around "lightening rod" types of issues. The Quincy group's experience shows how decisions were removed from the normal bureaucratic systems of command and control, and sequestered by the people most affected by the decisions. And while they did work within the procedures of existing national government, passing legislation to mandate their management plan, they clearly changed the rules of public engagement with government authority.

A third principle is the process of building social capital. Renewing the public sphere means engaging in deliberation that builds the sort of social networks, volunteerism, and sense of place that turn localities into desirable and livable communities. As the public takes a greater interest in resource management policy, the typical way to force management action is through litigation. Opposing groups in California, however, chose a process of community building where opponents worked in good faith to sort through their differences over timber policy and resource allocations. As a result, one environmentalist in the Quincy Library Group perhaps described it best. He said that when people in Quincy greeted him with a wave, they now use all five fingers.

Fourth, Giddens argues that contemporary technologies of the late modern age require managers to become as much risk managers as they are service providers or benefit managers. As bureaucratic devolution proceeds, the role of management agencies shifts from a decision making center of command and control. Agencies become more important as brokers of scientific and technical information. Management agencies use their scientific expertise to help monitor the consequences of locally mandated plans and to prescribe correctives if necessary. The key challenge becomes the effectiveness in which agencies partner policy and decision making in the public sphere. This may be the most challenging and troubling of Giddens' notions about change, because it implies a fairly sweeping transformation of agency functions in late modern society.

In the end, few would deny that resource managers are facing intense public scrutiny. In response, managers today have to be light on their feet and in constant motion to respond effectively to public demand and the speed of social change. And to deal with this reinvigorated public sphere, managers must also be creative, flexible, responsive, collaborative, intuitive, and entrepreneurial. Can these contemporary demands on managers be addressed by adaptations to the profession's utilitarian past? To a point, but these adjectives sound more like a call for transformation - transformation to a post-utilitarian style of resource management.

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6.0 Citations

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