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PRAGMATIC JUSTIFICATIONS FOR THE SUSTAINABLE CITY

ACTING IN THE COMMON PLACE

MEG HOLDEN



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Pragmatic Justifications for the Sustainable City

What can justice and sustainability mean, pragmatically speaking, in today's cities? Can justice be the basis on which the practices of city building rely? Can this recognition constitute sustainability in city building, from a pragmatic perspective? Today, we are faced with a mountain of reasons to lose hope in any prospect of moving closer to justice and sustainability from our present position in civilization.

Pragmatic Justifications for the Sustainable City: Acting in the Common Place offers a critical and philosophical approach to reevaluating the way in which we think and talk about the "sustainable city" to ensure that we neither lose the thread of our urban history, nor the means to live well amidst diversity of all kinds. By building and rebuilding better habits of urban thinking, this book promotes the reconstruction of moral thinking, paving the way for a new urban sustainability model of justice.

Utilizing multidisciplinary case studies and building upon anti-foundationalist principles, this book offers a pragmatic interpretation of sustainable development concepts within our emerging global urban context and will be a valuable resource for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as academics and professionals in the areas of urban and planning policy, sociology, and urban and environmental geography.

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

earthscan
from Routledge

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Names: Holden, Meg, author.

Title: Pragmatic justifications for the sustainable city : action in the common place / Meg Holden.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, [2017] |

Series: Routledge equity, justice and the sustainable city |

Includes bibliographical references

Identifiers: LCCN 2016042581 | ISBN 9781138121102 (hbk) | ISBN 9781315651255 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Sustainable urban development. | City planning--Environmental aspects. | Urban ecology (Sociology)

Classification: LCC HT241 .H65 2017 | DDC 307.1/16--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016042581>

ISBN: 978-1-138-12110-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-65125-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

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“Drawing on the American pragmatic tradition and the recent pragmatic French sociological theory, Meg Holden develops a fresh and illuminating approach to issues of urban sustainability and justice. She perceptively discusses recent debates and persuasively shows how a pragmatic orientation provides a more flexible and realistic way of moving forward with urban planning. Throughout she shows a subtle way of integrating theory and practice.”

Richard J. Bernstein, New School for Social Research, USA

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Preface

In April 1991, I filed in line to board a yellow school bus to a rival high school's gymnasium for a county-wide Earth Day event. The event had been planned to engage me and my fellow teenagers on the 20-year anniversary of Earth Day and included lots of milling about, awkward giggling and oogling, information booths and stickers, some political speeches (Ontario premier-to-be Bob Rae was there), and Dr. David Suzuki. I remember that attendance was optional, and at that time in my so-far suburban life playing hookey with friends was a much more popular thing to do than attending planned rallies. To be truthful, doing that which my friends were doing was the default decision. This time, though, I got on the bus although I don't recall any of my friends opting to go. Tony was there, my school's star basketball player and my first crush. He was unique in my mind not for his fame but because he told me in one of our rare conversations that his favourite subject was geography. Conditioned by peer pressure, I didn't understand at the time how the subject of geography could in any way achieve such status in the mind of a status-concerned kid. Anyway, we may have said hi, but we didn't talk at the Earth Day rally.

The event was packed with students who I guess had also overcome their self-consciousness about feeling uncool for caring about Earth Day when they could be enjoying time away from school, or maybe they were more socially advanced than I was. (I was 25 before I figured out that the coolness rules on which I had based my understanding of my own self-worth were complete bullshit. Coincidentally, I was 25 when I moved to New York City.) I don't remember talking to any of my fellow students. It's possible I simply couldn't, because I do remember being struck speechless by the crisis, the challenge, and the marching orders handed down to me that day, particularly by Suzuki. He unceremoniously and straightforwardly pulled the cord on the blinders in front of my blue eyes about the condition of the world, the position of my country in it, the work that lay before the willing, and the implications of not getting personally involved, deeply, utterly, and with gusto.

Up until this time, I didn't think anything could be more moving than a Pink Floyd song. I was already a self-proclaimed environmentalist, contributing money earned from babysitting to both Greenpeace and the World Wildlife

Fund, but all things considered, this was mostly about the bumper stickers these organizations sent me back, which I used to decorate my school binders. Hearing Suzuki's presentation on the perils of the planet sent me over the deep end. Whales and baby seals were being killed, rainforest destroyed, toxic chemicals released from my paper and most of the products I used, and the atmosphere was being seriously messed with; all this I already knew. But he convinced me that I was implicated, my family was implicated, and in my ignorance of this I had already been shirking my responsibility while the dire situation deteriorated.

I went home and did what Suzuki said to do: I wrote signs to my parents and posted them on my bedroom door, on the refrigerator, and even on their bathroom mirror. Following his careful instructions, the signs said: EVERY 6 SECONDS, 133,000 SPECIES ARE GOING EXTINCT, and WE HAVE 10 YEARS TO CHANGE THE WORLD and WOULD YOU IGNORE YOUR DAUGHTER IF SHE TOLD YOU SHE HAD CANCER?

For the record, this initiation to home-based direct action on my part had exactly zero impact. Not one conversation, or changed idea, or diverted or reallocated shopping dollar, or altered habit resulted in my household, present writer excluded. David Suzuki would not be proud of me, I thought, and decided not to take activist ideas any further. I obviously wasn't very good at it and if Suzuki ever found out, I would be humiliated. I was pretty shy, besides. I did have a knack for formal learning, however, and so this was an obvious place to invest my energy for what became, the following year at Rio, the quest for sustainable development. Equipped with the confidence of 20 more years of thinking about sustainable development, the credibility of a PhD, and experience as an urban researcher engaged with policy, activism, and organizations in a host of cities, this book demonstrates how I am coming to terms with the sorry results of my early attempts at activism and making some ginger steps back out "to the street" with my ideas. My mother's home, of course, remains the final frontier.

This is a book about hope for and in the city to become a place for what I don't believe we have ever before seen on Earth: sustainability. The approach taken is philosophical investigation of how a pragmatic interpretation of sustainable development concepts, plans and policies articulates a path toward sustainable cities. Amidst the intellectual and policy furore over defining "the sustainable city," there may be infinite variations on the theme of constructing and maintaining the urban realm in a manner fit to promote better human development and livelihood opportunities, long into the future, without depleting their natural resource base or decreasing life opportunities for those elsewhere around the world. Building upon pragmatic, anti-foundationalist principles, we will attempt here to build a definition from the ground up. We have over 200 years of history in democratic society from which, if we can face the challenge of dissecting the hope and promise from the hardship and failure, we can begin to build a sustainable city that is within the realm of possibility. At any rate, from a pragmatic perspective, this history, along with the

interpretations that all of us can bring to bear upon it, is the best chance we have got to move in a more sustainable direction.

The final important note before we begin is to offer a few words about what I mean by a pragmatic approach to urban sustainable development. When I use the term ‘pragmatic,’ I am referring not to the common use of the term but to the philosophy of pragmatism which was developed by American philosophers in late nineteenth-century New England (members of the elite “Metaphysical Club” that Louis Menand has documented well in his book by the same name, and, in particular, Charles S. Peirce and William James). It was developed a little bit later by other philosophers and social activists in New York and Chicago (in particular, I include John Dewey and Jane Addams). Working completely independently, pragmatism received new life from the work of social theorists in France (led by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot) on pragmatic sociology. Put together, pragmatism is a pluralistic set of ideas intended to guide better action, many of which can be brought to bear on questions of sustainable development and justice. I will not be aiming to produce a comprehensive pragmatic philosophical position on sustainability, as this would go counter to the spirit of pragmatism itself. Instead, in this book, we will delve into and offer perspectives on a number of core pragmatic ideas: the importance of scrutiny of material as well as social conditions of engagement; the public interest and the democratic community; the key role of justification in forming perspectives and actions; social learning and knowledge generation.

Acknowledgements

This book was written in the supportive environment provided by my colleagues in the Urban Studies Program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, where we work suspended in our steel skybridge over Richards Street. Principally, I mean: Terri Evans, Karen Ferguson, Peter Hall, Anthony Perl, and Patrick Smith. Of the many student colleagues to whom I owe debts of gratitude, I need to mention Cameron Owens, Peter Marriott, Natalie Ord, Meghan Cross, Wesley Regan, Devon Farmer, David Sadler, Daniel Sturgeon, Amanda Winter and Azadeh Hadizadeh Isfahani, who all provided key writing and conceptualizing help. Thanks to my research assistants who have helped to uncover the roots of some of these ideas and hit the ground with them: Ana Molina, Charling Li, Luc Bagnères, Michael Wakely, Sébastien Froment and Majken Taftager Larsen. And thanks to the very capable editorial team at Routledge for their knowledge of the craft of publishing.

Further thanks I offer to the many teachers and colleagues who have prompted, disrupted, antagonized, and otherwise pushed my writing forward, and in particular: Rose Longini who introduced me to reading philosophy as a way of life, Richard J. Bernstein who introduced me to American Pragmatism, Andrew Scerri who introduced me to the pragmatic sociology of critique, as well as Robert W. Lake, Anna Maria Bounds, and Monique Montgomery. Thanks to Bob, Anna, and Andy for extremely constructive comments on drafts of this work. Robert A. Beauregard has my additional gratitude, for the joint and several decisions, questions, contributions, heart-stopping critiques, matter-of-fact demands and fat-lip, bruising silences he has offered me in the past 18 years, all of which made this book happen. Bob told me in 1998 that someone interested in studying urban sustainability should probably study Central Park. He let me have the PhD a decade before I figured out why he was right.

Thank you to my right-hand muse and my left-hand muse, Penelope and Brookelyn, who have stuck up for, stood by, and sometimes coloured in this work along the way. Thank you from us three to all our relations, who have given us so much.

Financial support came from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight grant 435-2014-0465 as well as from a National Research Foundation of Korea Grant funded by the Korean Government (NRF-2013S1A3A2054622).

Thank you for reading.

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Part I

Our starting point for urban sustainability and justice

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1 Our starting point

Sustainability and justice made urban

What can justice and sustainability mean, pragmatically speaking, in today's cities? Can justice be the basis on which the practices of city building rely? Can this recognition constitute sustainability in city building, from a pragmatic perspective? Today, we are faced with a mountain of reasons to lose hope in any prospect of moving closer to justice and sustainability from our present position in civilization. But from the philosophically pragmatic approach that we adopt in this book, despair is not an option. Instead, what we attempt here is to take stock of the demand for sustainability and justice within a growing awareness of the globally dominant trends of urbanization. We will consider the critical urban scholarship that warns us about the ways in which finding hope in contemporary urban trends is dangerous. Specifically, critical urban scholarship warns us about three traps in the contemporary celebration of prospects for justice and sustainability in cities: (1) the local trap; (2) the empowerment trap; and (3) the community trap.

The warnings are well advised, but we will consider how bringing the resources of pragmatic thinking to bear on the trappings of urbanism today can change the equation. With a mix of reasoning from philosophical, sociological, and urban studies bases, cases and anecdotes, we will propose that some key reasons for hope sit with urbanism today. We build a case, in short, that some uniquely urban values can take root today, offering promise to move us toward sustainability justice.

First, urbanites today give value to an individualist authenticity that, for all its vanity and obsessive qualities, also opens up a willingness to engage with diverse others. Because contemporary urbanity values an individualist sense of self-determination and life planning, radically uprooted from any sense of given foundations, urbanites also have the potential to develop better habits of tolerance of diverse lifestyles and perspectives.

Second, today's successful cities may mock the prospect of any quintessential utopia devised from above, in advance, but urbanites have not given up on crafting their own versions of utopia. In generating a willingness among urbanites to engage with one another in piecemeal ways to create partial, experimental, fleeting utopian projects and alternatives, the city includes a pragmatic utopian vision that also serves to empower those who engage in crafting and carrying out these experiments.