A provocative question for a public media education program to put before its audiences, would be, in this instance, “Are US bureaucracies (e.g., Congress; state and local governments; courts and justice) adhering to the Weberian model, or are they beginning to approach the Asian model?” Other social-structural options of possible relevance for a public education program could be the following (clearly, not all of these options would be selected, but perhaps two or three could be):


2) Balanced and unbalanced Patron/clientage: post-peasant societies--such immigrants as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong.

3) Personal leader/chief rule: city mafias--Russia and Mexico; dictatorial leadership and abject followers.

4) Familial hegemonics: Chinese, E. Indian and Pakistani, Latino US immigrants; Iraqi immigrants, with social and motivational focus strongly on entire family, and how this operates to control and or mediate encounters with law, civil society, government, etc.

My main point in writing about this suggestion for a public education media project lies in my belief that greater understanding of the socio-cultural models and operations of power and powerlessness in our own society, as well as among those whom some of us (or our government) deem to be “enemies,” could be improved by learning from the analysis and operations of the (comparative) models suggested here.

Anthropology, Sustainability, and Higher Education: An Interview with Peggy Barlett

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Applied anthropologists are increasingly studying sustainable human/environmental systems around the world, but very few of us have given much attention to our own home turf. Peggy Barlett, the Goodrich C. White Professor of Anthropology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, stands out from this crowd. Originally focusing her research on the relationship between Green Revolution technologies and smallholders in Central America, Barlett has turned her attention to the university campus over the past decade. The campus, Barlett argues, is a tangible arena in which to engage in cultural change efforts around sustainability.

Edited with Geoffrey Chase, Sustainability on Campus: Stories and Strategies for Change (MIT Press, 2004), documents the strategies and setbacks of this movement at sixteen schools. She discovered through her Emory work that “place-based engagement” is an important way to rebuild relationships with the natural world, shift identity, and offer inspiration to act. Urban Place: Reconnections with the Natural World (MIT Press, 2005) documents grassroots efforts around the country, and explores the mental and physical health impacts of nature contact. Thanks to Barlett’s attention to social, economic, and environmental sustainability at Emory, an Office of Sustainability was established, and has led the university to become a national leader in greening its campus and curriculum.

Given the recent meteoric ascendancy of sustainability in higher education, it is intriguing that anthropologists like Barlett are at the forefront of the movement. The only two universities, for example, to have created formal schools of sustainability—Arizona State University (ASU, http://schoolofsustainability.asu.edu) and the University of South Florida (USF, http://www.sgs.usf.edu)—did so with the drive of anthropologists: Charles Redman (an archaeologist) at ASU and Linda Whiteford (an applied medical anthropologist and past SfAA President) at USF. I had the opportunity to speak with Barlett on July 1, 2010, and asked her why this is the case. Why is anthropology uniquely positioned to advance sustainability in higher education? Is it our holistic perspective, our focus on culture change, our interest in global interconnections? Below is a condensed transcript of our conversation, where Barlett reveals that the answer lies in our distinctive ability as anthropologists to
WELLS: I guess we should start at the beginning, if you could tell me a little bit about how you became interested in sustainability, specifically in higher education?

BARLETT: When I finished the second long-term research project of my career, the first one being in Costa Rica and the second one being in Georgia, I was really drawn to the issue of what we call sustainability today. And the reason I was so drawn to it is that we had headline after headline in the Atlanta paper about crises in some dimensions of our relationship with the earth. We were running out of clean water, we were having major crises with sewer overflows, and we were facing terrible smog. And when we reached a point where Atlanta was worse than Los Angeles in traffic congestion, I began to wonder: who is minding the store here?! City leaders were talking always about growth as the solution to any challenge, and yet we were outstripping our resources. I had been looking at the possibility of going back to Latin America for a third phase of research, and I had seen how a number of countries in Latin America were incorporating environmental issues into development projects, building on the Rio Earth Summit. But I had not seen this at all in the Southeast, so I began to look at grassroots groups around the U.S. who were formulating different languages of engagement with these issues.

WELLS: So what pulled you to focus on Emory?

BARLETT: I began to be intrigued by this whole issue of cultural transformation towards awareness about environmental limits to our U.S. lifestyle. From our experiences in less affluent societies, I think all anthropologists appreciate the extent of America’s affluence and consumer-oriented lifestyle, and we also appreciate that ultimately the earth can’t support continuing, let alone, extending this lifestyle. I had been at Emory for twenty years at that point, and just because I had been around so long I knew a lot of people who were now deans or other kinds of administrators. A university is like a small city—Emory has 17,000 employees plus 12,000 students—and we really have a lot of impact. If I’m trying to figure out how a massive cultural change starts, it would make sense to try to do that in a place I already know well. The first year, we created an ad hoc committee and there was really a lot of support. I found out first of all that there were more people already doing things around sustainability than I had realized and other people were ready to move ahead. And it helped them with their supervisors to have a senior faculty member articulate that these issues are important. My role was really as convener and legitimizer of the issues. My research interests in higher education really came from watching what motivated people and what got them involved. I could see in people’s eyes those “ah ha” moments—such as when faculty realized how to change their courses or staff to innovate in meaningful ways, and I found that very satisfying.

WELLS: It sounds like there was a real personal connection that started a lot of this.

BARLETT: Yes, it was. I had always thought that I would do applied work in my career—and had studied that at Columbia—but I expected it to be in agriculture and in Latin America. But the Reagan revolution that shifted the openness of aid agencies to the work of anthropologists closed many doors, so I had been focusing more on understanding agrarian change through research. But as I listened for what was the right next step for me at this stage, I wasn’t very excited about another conventional anthropological research project. It felt very good to listen to that internal voice and follow it toward this on-campus work, though at first I thought it would probably not be very successful. It has turned out to be a real shift in my career, but it feels like it provides many new challenges in a very satisfying way.

WELLS: So you’re a long time Atlanta resident?

BARLETT: Well, thirty-three or so years.

WELLS: You must have seen a lot of change over that time.

BARLETT: Enormous change, just enormous change.

WELLS: Have you branched outside of the university and gone into the community, or has most of your work been on campus?

BARLETT: Well in two main ways I’ve branched out beyond the university. In those early days when I was trying to figure out what gets people moving, I found contact with nature was powerful, and so I helped to start a local watershed alliance. Our group was part of a whole network of dynamic watershed alliances in Atlanta and it brought me in contact with environmental groups that I had not been a part of before. I found testing creek water or exploring urban streams very rejuvenating—I felt more energized on Monday mornings—and so we began to do more of that kind of outdoors effort at Emory. The other way I got connected to the community...
was through a national effort to expand food policy councils. In collaboration with the University of Georgia, we received a small grant and built a coalition of diverse groups in Atlanta interested in food systems and sustainable agriculture and that led to the Atlanta Local Food Initiative. That group fostered awareness around sustainable food for the last five years, and we’re very pleased that it has led to the Georgia Food Policy Council that started this summer (2010). ALFI also now has a paid staff person. I’ve really enjoyed knowing the diverse folks in government and health agencies, farmers, chefs, storeowners—that sounds pretty anthropological, I think.

WELLS: Tell me about the Piedmont Project.
BARLETT: When we first began activities at Emory, there were a few faculty who remained involved, but most said they supported our efforts but wanted to stay focused on their own research and teaching. So, a wise friend of mine said, “Let’s go where the energy is,” and we began a faculty Green Lunch Group. It showcased research on campus related to sustainability and also allowed us to discuss teaching dilemmas about sustainability. Then, I heard about a program at Northern Arizona University to infuse sustainability and environmental issues across the curriculum, and I went out and participated in it, and liked it, and we decided to bring that model of faculty development to Emory. The Piedmont Project has continued now—this is year ten—and it has supported new courses and new modules in existing courses in a wide range of departments and professional schools. We’ve worked with over 170 participants and almost 100 graduate students.

WELLS: How did sustainability move into a university commitment?
BARLETT: Well, first the Piedmont Project raised awareness in many parts of the university, and then when we got a new president and began strategic planning, sustainability was adopted as a fundamental principle of the university. And that led the President to appoint a committee to figure out what that meant—what would a sustainable university look like? I was asked to co-chair that visioning committee with the Executive Vice President. Our task was to set benchmarks for the next ten year period as well as to highlight the long-term goals. It was a great group of ten people and we had a really good time together. Our administrators have taken these benchmarks seriously, and now we are working to meet serious goals in terms of reducing electricity and water use, planning for our watershed, reducing waste, preserving and restoring our forests, and of course shifting our food toward more sustainable and local sources.

WELLS: How does your role as an anthropologist play into this? Has it advantaged you or disadvantaged you in certain ways?
BARLETT: I think that, being an anthropologist, one of the main advantages is that I was completely comfortable with the idea of running around all over the university and all parts of the bureaucracy and talking to people. In the early years, I just did a lot of listening and talking and asking and probing, and you know that’s just second nature for anthropologists. I find the different cultures of different parts of the university intriguing. And, also, there’s a lot of factual knowledge that anthropologists bring to the issues—about international issues, commodity systems, political economy, policy. We expect systems to be complex wholes. But I have to say that I was pretty disappointed in my efforts to use the literature in anthropology on cultural change. When I first started on sustainability work, I went back to the applied anthropology and change theory I had studied, and I tried to read all the many anthropologists who have written about sustainability and social movements and higher education in recent years, but it didn’t help me much. The old literature focuses so much on components of a culture—how to integrate some new piece into an existing system—but not how to support a fundamental restructuring of values, practices, institutions. I found that I really needed to just try things and watch what worked.

WELLS: Did you use “traditional” anthropological methods when you listened and watched?
BARLETT: Anthropological methods played an important role for me. I learned a lot from the 60 interviews I carried out with faculty colleagues. I was so intrigued with the impact of the Piedmont Project that I had to talk to the first 40 participants to find out what the experience was like for them and how long the impact had lasted. And then I talked with another 20 random faculty across the university as a control group. It was through those interviews that I began to piece together an understanding of re-enchantment—of powerful emotional and sensory ways of connecting with the
earth’s living systems, the non-rational approaches that contrast with the rational. Then I began to explore re-enchchantment in the academic literature and found that the importance of combining the rational and the non-rational to address cultural transformation cropped up in fields as diverse as art, geography, urban planning, and theology. As faculty shared with me the importance of wonder, delight, and awe in nature—and how it motivated them—I began to understand we need to use more kinds of approaches than I had been trained to use. And then I traveled around the country and interviewed sustainability leaders in many other schools, and heard how a re-enchanted relationship with the earth was formative for many of them, though others came to sustainability through more rational, problem-solving interests, and others came through social justice commitments. Anyway, in this period of watching and listening and trying to figure it out, I’ve come to realize that stories are very important. I still collect data, but I know the stories probably will have more power.

WELLS: Do you see your work going more in an advocacy direction or is it really about analysis?
BARLETT: It’s really been about fostering change. And I feel such a sense of urgency that it’s not happening on a national scale at the pace that we need, and so we’ve got to build a base that will support major policy change. Each of us has to find what niche feels comfortable. The changes we seek are so huge and overwhelming, I was lucky to have come to a place early on where I’m content to try to do my part but not be too attached to outcome. I am fascinated by temperament differences among people and how to find “languages” that different kinds of people can hear—and levers that allow people to shift behavior in ways that stick. So that’s analysis, but in the service of supporting change. And even though Emory has really come along in a very exciting way in these ten years, we have so far to go. For example, we’re nowhere near meeting energy reduction goals that will reduce our contributions to climate change. We’re just barely starting that awareness process. The same thing with food; we’ve made some good progress in buying more sustainably grown and locally grown food, but we are a long way from really eating in a way that’s socially just and doesn’t degrade ecosystems.

WELLS: You’ve written about “place-based engagement.” What is the role of place-based engagement for sustainability in higher education?
BARLETT: I have seen place as a very important way to shift both identity and willingness to act. And I recognize that the situation may be different for some other schools, but very few Emory faculty come from Atlanta. And so for almost everybody here, this is a new ecosystem and a new place. In academia in general, Vitek says it’s OK to be autistic as to place. For us as anthropologists, part of that is a loyalty to the place where we did our fieldwork—we’re experts on Papua New Guinea or sophisticated about Paris. There’s no prestige in being knowledgeable about the particular town or bioregion where our university may be located. This attitude transmits to our students a notion that, well you don’t have to know anything about where you are to be a successful person and a knowledgeable citizen. In this particular era, that’s a dangerous habit. We do want to have sophistication about the rest of the world, of course, but we need to stand on two legs—local and global groundedness. I have found that when you take faculty outside in the woods or do a field trip in a part of town they’ve never been to or walk along a creek that they didn’t even know was there five minutes from their office, and talk about the species that are right around us or the challenges of invasives in our forest, people are really very interested. And over and over again faculty have said to me, “I see everything differently now.” And so I think when we have that kind of awakening to place, it inevitably translates into some of the excitement we transmit to our students.

WELLS: Where did the idea about place come from?
BARLETT: I first got exposed to it through an anthropologist named Jon Andelson at Grinnell College, which was our alma mater. John started the Center for Prairie Studies, and is very committed to place-based pedagogy. I had a wonderful talk with him at an alumni reunion and he shared a great reading list with me and it brought to mind a lot of things that faculty had been saying to me. So I came back to Emory and started talking about place, and folks just asked for more. It’s really a concept that now is widely embraced throughout higher education—it’s important for our students and it is sometimes linked to sustainability, though sometimes it’s just valued in its own right.

WELLS: Why did you write Urban Place?
BARLETT: I particularly wanted other social scientists to pay more attention to the natural world in their field site. We’re so busy looking at our specific topics that we often don’t really take account of the physical and ecological systems of which the people are a part—or their sense of relationship to it. At this moment in history, grassroots groups

Society for Applied Anthropology
all across the US are creating community gardens and prairie restorations and it has an important impact on our mental and physical health, too. We have so much to learn from other cultures that are not divorced from natural systems, but we need ethnographers to pay attention.

WELLS: What do you think are the biggest challenges for Emory, and for universities in general, to become more sustainable?
BARLETT: I think the biggest challenge for the faculty is finding the time and the space to integrate these new ideas into their work. But I think that more and more faculty are aware of wanting to participate, and are just looking for an avenue and some encouragement. I think the biggest challenge with students is that they inherit a value system which says success means certain things, a certain kind of job, a certain standard of living, a certain level of consumption. How do we attend to a very different quality of life, one that values the material things less? It would help students embrace another path if they see more role models in the university. And I think for university administrators and for political leaders, the challenge is that we need to shift fundamental parts of our culture, such as “growth is good, expansion is essential.” I’m not seeing that dialogue even starting yet in Atlanta. We still have a lot of people saying, “we’re at four million and we have to start planning for eight million.” What about the fact that during the last drought, we came within two weeks of running out of drinking water?! Atlanta has the largest population on the smallest watershed of any city in the country. I don’t see how we can grow to eight million even with serious conservation. And yet growth is still a measure of success. So, how do we begin to transform our mindsets and our assessments of what’s a good corporation, what’s a good university? How do we build benchmarks and what Princen calls “mechanisms of restraint”?

WELLS: Is there a role for anthropologists in that? If anthropologists were to read this discussion and become excited about it, what can they do?
BARLETT: Well, I think that each person has to find a place that feels right for them within either their political economy or their university system. There’s a huge amount that anthropologists can do. Because of our perspective on the whole concept of culture, we know it can change. And we can document how other cultures have seen amazing transformations. We also can have a certain amount of courage in calling for what needs to be done. Just as we have courage to go be strangers in another land and not conform to all the rules, either at home or in our field sites, I think we have a certain amount of courage we can bring to our job sites. Whether it’s to a political group or a faith community or even in our departments, we can ask how might we stop a particular practice or re-think how we want to contribute to sustainability challenges, as a department or as a university or college or as individuals.

WELLS: What’s stopping anthropologists from getting involved?
BARLETT: I feel like there is a tendency in some cultural anthropology to take pride in cynicism and the critical eye. I think some anthropologists would like to be a part of this change, but they’re deeply uncomfortable with the messy trade-offs of building coalitions and compromises. They recognize a tremendous urgency and yet they haven’t found their way yet. I really like Gibson-Graham’s urging us to celebrate the experiments and foster creativity around solutions. That’s what we try to do in the Piedmont Project and it’s fun. I think that we could be on the verge of an era of cultural anthropology where we try to meld some of our critical eye with embracing the satisfactions of creativity and welcoming opportunities to contribute. Can we imagine a future in which every anthropologist expects to have a phase of applied work?

Down the Dusty, Dirt Road: Migrant Education Outreach in Appalachia

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Farm work as a Latino labor niche has a long history in the U.S. and we have heavily relied on it for over 150 years. Many times farm workers bring their families along with them and they have to readjust every time they arrive in a new place. The Migrant Education Program was created to help migrating families and youth. The evolving systematic changes in global agricultural regimes, food and migration are reshaping places and realities every day; these changes are especially apparent in rural classrooms in the Deep South or as it is being called today the Nuevo South where I work.