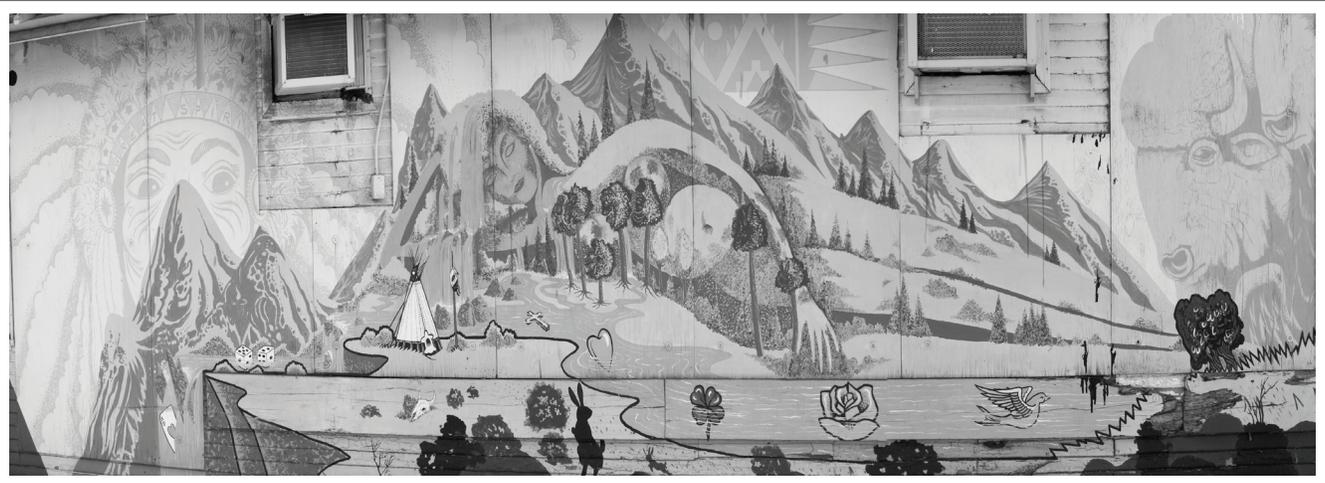


# Situating Systems Thinking between Past & Future

## Hannah Arendt's Discourse on the Multicultural "World"



**Chanthou Thoeun**

There is by now a devastating catalogue of evidence revealing the depth and breadth of corporate sponsored, government sanctioned acts of violence against the environment across the globe. British Petroleum's (BP) oil spill, for instance, is a testament to large-scale catastrophic ecological damages resulting from corporate overexpansion and systemic ecological ignorance (Martusewicz, Edmundsun, &

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Lupinacci, 2011). What can be no longer hidden from public consciousness is that the earth's natural resources cannot sustain the excessive consumption habits, persistent exploitation of human labor, and willful degradation and depletion of resources, particularly in underdeveloped nations: the world is collapsing. That the ecological crisis continues to be rendered inconsequential at the structural level depicts a disturbing image of our society; we are a society stuck in the midst of an ecological crisis that tests our values, ideology, politics, and education. Beyond exposing the corruption of a society that privileges capitalism and progress and fails to protect and conserve the earth's ecological networks, the continued exploitation of natural resources attests to the manner in which globalization fails to

promote a network of interrelationships among developed and underdeveloped nations, functioning instead as an extension of corporations' and governments' expansion through acts of neo-imperialism. The systemic nature of the assault on the environment and its testimony to the rise of mammoth-like corporations has been largely underestimated by mainstream media and politics. Given the urgency of the ecological crisis that all levels of society face, a paradigmatic shift toward restructuring politics, economics, and education must take place to ensure episodes such as the BP oil spill can be eradicated.

Placed within a historical context, we can observe that collective awareness of the commons, the network of natural resources and human practices that sus-

tain the earth in the face of unrelenting globalization (Bowers, 2002), have given way to large-scale hyper-consumerism and excessive individualism that feeds capitalism at the expense of shared mores about sustaining life for the future. However, to speak of suturing the ecological crisis by restructuring politics and economics is beyond the scope of this article; however I maintain that through education we can begin to address the local and global ecological crises systematically through multicultural educational pedagogies. In particular, the manner in which teachers are trained to become knowledgeable and informed scholars can initiate a series of actions that resist social injustices, particularly environmental exploitation (Nieto, 2000). Embracing multicultural education as a system of networks connecting professors, teachers, students, and parents with community and environment, I argue that inculcating teacher education programs with theoretical knowledge relative to ecological intelligence plays a critical role in addressing the culturally rooted environmental crisis.

In addition, we must broaden the field of multicultural education to include systems thinking and the current ecological crisis. Scholars of multicultural education assert that multicultural education arms students with skills and knowledge to engage in their local and global community, while remaining cognizant of social justice issues endemic to globalization (Banks, 2007; Banks & Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2000). To this end, I utilize a theoretical lens to juxtapose and ultimately link systems thinking and critical theory through Hannah Arendt's conception of "wordlessness" to prevent the world from further collapse. By juxtaposing Arendt's texts with texts on education for sustainability, the following inquiry based questions arise: In what ways does the work of Arendt inform issues of multicultural education and sustainability? Furthermore, how is Arendt's discourse on the "world" and "worldlessness" used to think about and conceptualize educating students for sustainability in a multicultural world?

### **Why Arendt, Why Now, Why Multicultural Education?**

Quite simply, Arendt's few contributions to environmental studies on sustainability have not been noticeably linked to current discourse around environmental sustainability, particularly within the field of multicultural education. However, mul-

ticultural education and environmental education share key ideas that undergird both approaches to education: (1) the importance of a local and global multicultural context; (2) the importance of seeking social justice in the act of educating; and (3) the call to reform education in response to hegemonic and often damaging ways of knowing (Banks, 2007; Banks & Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2000). Arendt's philosophy has only recently been unearthed by scholars and applied to environmental studies (Chapman, 2007; Ott, 2009; Whiteman, 1994) at the same time that educational researchers (Hinchliffe, 2010; Levinson, 2012; Mackler, 2010) now turn to her work

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to gain another layer of understanding about educating teachers and students.

Given the concurrent development of these particular strands in relation to the analysis of Arendt's oeuvre, it seems natural to bridge the discussion between Arendt's thoughts about nature and multicultural education. Nonetheless, the manner in which Arendt's conception of the world enlarges epistemological understandings for what Bowers (2002) terms the commons within the context of education has largely been left unexamined. In addition, Arendt's place in critical theory situates her work in the middle of an ongoing debate between scholars concerned with the ecological crisis and scholars of critical pedagogy.

My intention here is not to exacerbate the dissention between these two camps, namely Bowers (2003; 2006) and followers of John Dewey and Paulo Freire (McLaren, 2007). I utilize Arendt's work because she offers relevant insights about humans, the world, and multicultural education; reading Arendt against scholars of sustainability education (Bednar, 2003, 2004, 2006; Cassell & Nelson, 2010; Martusewicz, Edmundsun, & Lupinacci, 2011; Orr, 2004; Stone & Barlow, 2005;) demonstrates the manner in which sustainability education can co-exist with critical pedagogy within the framework of systems thinking.

### **Toward a Common Theory**

As society becomes fragmented along multiple lines of difference due to the proliferation of technology, capitalism, and migration—forced or volunteered—the feasibility of conceptualizing "world" and "environment" seems nearly effete. The notion of one's place is both mutable and transient, constantly changing due to the overwhelming forces of capitalism and globalization. Orr (2004) refers to people who experience this lack of place, home, and belonging as "de-placed," or "mental refugees" whose disconnection from nature is not unfamiliar to the homeless (p. 162).

This threat to what constitutes place magnifies challenges in moving society toward a systematic consciousness of place in economics, politics, and education. Approximately one in every eight adults is an immigrant while 25% of the nation's children are born to immigrant parents (Baum & Flores, 2011). Set against this context of hyper-immigration, the concepts of world and place are constantly being tested by adaptation and assimilation into America's consumer-based and materialistically driven culture. Educators are now being challenged to rethink the roles and responsibilities of schools and colleges of education in preparing teachers to educate students for living in an era of increasing environmental decay and perpetual displacement (Cassell & Nelson, 2010).

Given such immense frame factors that consistently work against building common language with which to discuss place and environment, it is absolutely necessary to provide a framework with which to address these issues of sustainability education systematically. Indicating this need for a common theoretical framework, sustainability education is fraught with buzzwords and hot terms ("environmentalism" and "greening") that become co-opted by a corporate marketed consumer culture in ways that reinforce superficial thinking at the macro level (McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011). Sustainability cannot become sys-

temic practice if a common discourse with which to talk about place, environment, and multicultural education does not exist at the theoretical and practical level.

While the sustainability education framework has provided clear and consistent goals and objectives since the 1960s, a foundational and commonly agreed-upon theoretical framework remains noticeably absent (Short, 2010). Short (2010) observes “the sustainability education framework has not deviated from its original form in the 1950s and echoes the much earlier educational philosophy of Dewey, who promoted the idea of democratic education as serving a vital social function essential to the continuity of societies and life itself” (p. 8). In other words, definitions and focus of environmental education have remained constant for nearly half a century despite the lack of a correlating theoretical framework.

Though dialogue about sustainability and sustainability education have ensued to some extent within the political and educational arena, following Giroux (1988) I maintain that a theoretical framework must come to fruition alongside development of practical applications. The reification of cohesive bodies of knowledge and theory, however, tends to progress in tandem with the re-inscription of hegemonic ideological ways of thinking that uphold social, economic and educational inequities. As such, while Bower’s (2002, 2003, 2006) and Bednar’s (2003) indictment of Freire and Dewey seems heavy-handed, attributing initial theoretical frameworks solely to such polemical and prevalent educational thinkers is problematic because doing so recalls “entrenched” thinking and does not approximate what Capra (1997) calls systems thinking, the process of considering many disparate and diverse parts to a whole.

Such warranted concern for supplanting one dominant system of thought with another is mirrored by Bednar who rightfully criticizes American education for passing down deeply flawed ethnocentric and anthropocentric views of the world (2003). Specifically calling attention to critical pedagogy, Orr (2005) contends that the banking model of education used in conjunction with nature only continues to worship humans while misguidedly positioning “progress as our most important product” (p.158). Bednar (2003) offers a similar critique, condemning Freire’s emancipator education for its lack of consideration for limits—in nature, economy and politics.

Accordingly, the development of a theoretical framework in relation to sustainability education must emerge from a systems theory approach, by forging connections among disparate and seemingly unconnected bodies of knowledge. As such, Arendt’s ideas on the world and worldlessness offer a useful point of departure upon which to initiate a theoretical framework of sustainability education. Arendt’s writings on the world and education, while provocative and useful for thinking about both topics, offer diverse and complex ideas that have not to date been adequately uncovered.

Discourse on Arendt’s conception of the world and education often stems from the discipline of political theory stance, particularly juxtaposing Arendt’s philosophy with that of Marx. While a Marxist reading of Arendt is certainly useful in explicating Arendtian thinking, doing so does not contribute to our conversation about how to educate students and teachers about sustainability in a multicultural world. Bowers suggests creating and speaking in a newly transformed lexicon. However, that does not take into consideration the ways that previous scholars such as Arendt have already begun to explain the actions of the world and its impact upon the fragility of earth systems.

### **The Nature of the World and the Limits of Nature**

Arendt famously writes in “The Crisis in Education,” that “[e]ducation is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of new and young, would be inevitable” (1977, p. 96). In order to discuss Arendt’s relevance to sustainability education it would be useful to clarify what she means by the “world” before moving on to a discussion about how to educate students how to live in this world. Arendt makes clear distinctions between the world and nature; one is a space visibly constructed by humans in the form of ideas, practices, and institutions while the other exists independently from the human world in the form of flora and fauna (Chapman, 2007). Within this conception, the world can be viewed as dynamic while nature can be viewed as static, not unchanging but incapable of rational thought the way that humans are. What this signals too is that nature is not without limits; what we see of nature is what we have and there is no way to make more of it like we can

with worldly ideas, practices and institutions (Whiteside, 1994). While it may seem reductive to create this binary construction between world/nature, Arendt’s delineation between the two makes it possible to view how human practices erode limited and finite natural resources. Arendt’s understanding of the world and nature underscores the fact that earth’s resources are not only unlimited, but in fact dramatically declining due to overzealous and unwarranted over-production and over-consumption driven for the benefit and profit of the corporate few.

Orr (2004) reiterates Arendt’s claim, asserting that although “the preservation of places is essential to the preservation of the world...we have not succeeded in making a global economy ecologically sustainable” (p. 162). In other words, public measures to conserve natural parks and other formations become offset by economic expansion and subsequent exploitation on a global scale. Societies, cultures, and languages continually become degraded and are increasingly becoming extinct as the result of corporate expansion into the developing world.

This tension between the human world and the natural earth results from the collapse of boundaries between world and nature; in effect, the world of humans has eclipsed nature, becoming synonymous with nature instead of maintaining lines of distinction to coexist with balance and equality. Even more problematic is the increasing sense of disconnection and diffusion that permeates society, rendering people, culture, and nature subject to forms of neo-liberal ideologies and accompanying corporate control. Because society has become so diffused, passing on the world and its ideas and practices, too, presents a Herculean task. The world, like nature, becomes lost.

### **Conservation for the Past and Future**

World and nature, then, are brittle terms, ready at any moment to become fragmented and of little use to a culture that is not only disconnected from human relationships, but also relations to ideas, objects, and practices that promote a sense of connection within a systems network. For Arendt, this sense of alienation at such a global scale conjures up a sense of loss almost insurmountable. Mackler (2010) observes: “loss of the world, for Arendt, is loss of a common sphere” (p. 511). The loss of a common sphere among humans presents a

pressing concern for Arendt because the loss signals the sense of “de-placement” that Orr (2004) speaks of. The loss of place results in the loss of a common sphere, and vice-versa as humans fail to connect with one another in terms of values, beliefs and practices.

In a sense, Arendt anticipates the discontent expressed by Orr (2005) who notes that the crisis is upon us but there is no systematic structure in place with which to address these impending catastrophes. He says, “On the contrary, the kind of education we need begins with the recognition that the crisis of global ecology is first and foremost a crisis in values, ideas, perspectives, and knowledge, which makes it a crisis of education, not one *in* education” (p. 126). It is the

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world of humans that has systematically broken down and collapsed other interconnected systems in the web of life.

Arendt’s observations about human’s relationship to the world and nature are similar to questions surrounding ecological intelligence, sustainability, and a pedagogy for survival (see Nelson & Cassell, 2012). Far from being an inexhaustible resource, the earth’s natural resources and the damage inflicted upon geographical spaces and human lives in the name of unlimited economic growth presents a crisis in witnessing and inheritance parallel with Arendt’s observations (Bednar, 2003). Bednar (2003) criticizes hegemonic discourse for upholding systemic inequalities relative to ecological intelligence and the current ecological crisis through systems of silencing created by political and economic infrastructures. Bednar contends that through silence such systems maintain and promote this notion of unlimited economic growth by depleting natural resources and human lives, particularly those situated in developing nations. For Bednar, the world as it has been constructed by human’s actions, policies, and ideologies perpetually violates nature’s boundaries.

In ways that both parallel and oppose current research relevant to education for sustainability and systems thinking, Arendt (1977) proposes a pedagogy of looking between past and future to educate children about the common world. That is, for Arendt the act of education cannot

be distilled down to basic memorization of disconnected pieces of information. To the contrary, for Arendt educating the future generation of scholars and thinkers entails maintaining connections to a historical past to ensure the future does not become severed from the past. Astute in her observations about disconnectedness, Arendt’s assertion can be confirmed through casual observations in contemporary society where fanatical addiction to consumption of material goods drives individual behavior and corporate practices and ultimately common cultural values. This zealous worship of material goods as god looks to neither past nor future; humanity becomes severed from a common

set of mores and ideals that lead to shared action. In a sense, we live in a culture of inaction, especially in the face of severe cultural and ecological crises.

As a survivor of the Holocaust, Arendt’s observation that Nazi war crimes signify man’s alienation from history and tradition functions as the crux of her continental style of philosophy (Parekh, 1981). Taken as a whole, Arendt’s oeuvre, ranging from *The Banality of Evil* (1963), *Between Past and Future* (1977), *The Life of the Mind* (1978), and *The Human Condition* (1998), examines human relationships within the time space continuum spanning the distant past and unforeseeable future. Though her discussions about metaphysics and political philosophy are at times both complex and convoluted one key idea best characterizes Arendt’s (1977) thought on human relationships with the past and the future: “This small non-time space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture unto which we are born, can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down from the past, each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between and infinite past and an infinite future must discover and ploddingly pave it anew” (p. 13).

For Arendt, human relationships with the past and the future is neither linear nor cyclical; conversely Arendt places people in a time-space conundrum, thus rendering human actions and thoughts about the past and future perpetually effete. Since

the world and its cultures hand down false legacies that offer little confirmation and truth, humans must actively engage in practices that reconceptualize the past in an attempt to forge a new future. This break in tradition is both daunting and liberating; on the one hand the thought of an unforeseeable future offers little confirmation and tradition within which to exist. On the other hand, the lack of tradition opens up a space within which humans can engage in and practice habits of the mind that are creative and consistently work against hegemonic structures.

Explicitly, Arendt links her conception of the world with education in “Crisis in Education” (1977), illustrating that the two co-exist and are not mutually exclusively. The crisis in education is a crisis rooted in our perspective of the world. Understanding Arendt’s basic assumption about education is critical to consider as she has often been accused of espousing traditionalist and conservationist viewpoints. She says, “the task of education is always to cherish and protect something—the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new” (1977, p. 188).

In *The Human Condition* (1998), Arendt makes interesting observations about man’s relationship with earth as well. She says, “For this inwardly alienation has nothing to do...with the alienation from the earth inherent in the discovery and taking possession of the earth” (p. 251). She further elaborates, “And even at the risk of endangering the natural life process we expose the earth to universal, cosmic forces alien to nature’s household” (p. 262). She views the human world as acting upon nature and earth, thereby shrinking it. The more humans know about the earth, the smaller the earth comes, thereby resulting in a collapse between world and nature. Within contemporary society, this mode of thought has become so pervasive that terms such as sustainability remain unfathomable to laypersons (McFarlane & Ogazon, 2011). Our view of the world has been eclipsed by the obsession with accumulating wealth. Anticipating even Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), Arendt proposes a stance of conserving the world, thereby conserving nature in the space of education.

### **Loving Children, World, and Nature**

While scholars focused on education for sustainability criticize neo-liberalism’s

tendency to privilege ideas of progress and individualism and conceptualize sustainability, environs, and education within a fragile web of interconnectedness (Bednar, 2003; Bowers, 2002), Arendt's conception of the "world" and its relevance of the earth and education remain unexamined. Both Bednar and Bowers have delved into the linguistical limitations that have shaped closed systems thinking, calling attention to Paulo Freire and John Dewey as culprits who have contributed epistemologically to the ecological and educational crisis contemporary society currently faces. While Bowers (2003) and Bedner's (2002; 2003; 2006) injunction against hegemonic models of knowing cannot be contended, both writers fail to consider the ways in which ecological intelligence can be used alongside critical pedagogical theorists such as Freire and Dewey. In particular, the contention surrounding Freire and Dewey's contributions to systems thinking offers a limited view and fails to make significant connections between educating for sustainability and critical and cultural discourses that have shaped knowledge and systems of knowing.

Amidst all of this discussion and dissection, Arendt still maintains that teachers hold a special place because they have a specific responsibility to introduce the world as it is to students (Levinson, 2010). Chapman (2007) usefully draws out the distinction between world and nature in Arendt's work, concluding that nature as it is ought to be embraced while the world is the world of human ideas, practices, and actions. What this entails for educators is the notion that teachers ought not to collapse the world and nature, but maintain clear distinctions between the two in teaching about a common history. Levinson (2010) states:

Because the world as Arendt understands it is composed of the cumulative activities of human beings who have taken it upon themselves to shape the world in one way or another—by acting upon it, interpreting it, and otherwise seeking to influence it—to teach "about" the world is also to cultivate a particular attitude toward the world and a certain sense of agency in relation to the world. (p. 467)

Arendtian thought rejects the notion of unlimited possibilities and progress, pushing for education while considering the past. Arendt argues that current educational practices prepare students for a world that does not exist, in the process embedding a sense of alienation in

students once they leave the educational infrastructure. Levinson adds:

But in trying to change the world through the young rather than through their own efforts, it seemed to Arendt that the adults had made a second mistake: by preparing young people for an integrated world that essentially did not yet exist, they were preparing children for the world as adults wished it might be rather than preparing them for the world *as it is*. (p. 468)

In contrast to teaching students for a future world, Arendt (1978) asserts "culture...indicates a loving attitude and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man" (p. 212). Loving children entails loving nature in a way that preserves the earth while humans inhabit their world on earth. For Arendt, the act of loving and educating children goes hand in hand with protecting nature and preserving ideas and practice that conserve the world, particularly a multicultural one.

### Conclusion

Teachers' attitudes about the world and nature play a profound role in how multicultural education prepares students to live in earth's fragile and ever diminishing network (Kandir, Yurt, & Kalburan, 2012). The lack of a common theoretical framework presents immense challenges in preparing teachings and students to co-exist with the earth's macro and micro ecosystems. In alleviating some of the ecological crisis society currently faces, theoretical considerations need to take place alongside practical applications at the educational, political, and economic level. Hannah Arendt's conception of the world offer unique contributions to sustainable and multicultural education because she advocates for the type of education that conserves the world's ideas, beliefs, and practices while espousing the nature and earth as it is.

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