



Julian Agyeman PhD, FRSA. (1959-Present)

Professor

**Tufts University, Department of Urban and
Environmental Policy and Planning**

“Feeling that I’m making a contribution and leaving a legacy is the biggest reward.” Julian Agyeman, 2007.

Overview

Julian Agyeman is a Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, Medford, MA. He is the originator of the concept of 'just sustainabilities,' the full integration of social justice and sustainability, defined as 'the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems.'

He is an environmental social scientist who thrives at the borders and intersections of a wide range of types of knowledge and methodologies and utilizes these in creative and original ways. His current research interests are in five broad areas, each of which critically explores some aspect(s) of the complex and embedded relations between humans and the environment, whether mediated by institutions or social movement organizations, and the effects of this on public policy and planning processes and outcomes, particularly in relation to notions of justice and equity.

The areas are:

- The nexus between the concepts of environmental justice and sustainability and, specifically, the possibility of a 'just sustainability'
- The potential of the concept of 'spatial justice' to contribute to 'just sustainability'
- The potential in emerging discourses around 'food justice/sovereignty' to contribute to discourses around 'just sustainability'
- The concepts of interculturalism, cultural competency, culturally inclusive practice and culturally inclusive spaces in urban planning
- The potential in sharing in cities to decrease inequality, increase social capital and to cut resource use.

He is also the co-founder, and Editor-in-Chief of the international journal 'Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability.' With over 160 publications, his books include 'Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World' (MIT Press 2003); 'Sustainable Communities and the Challenge of Environmental Justice' (NYU Press 2005, 'Environmental Inequalities Beyond Borders: Local Perspectives on Global Injustices' (MIT Press 2011) 'Cultivating Food Justice : Race, Class and Sustainability' (MIT Press 2011), 'Introducing Just Sustainabilities: Policy, Planning and Practice' (Zed Books 2013) and Incomplete Streets: Processes, Practices, and Possibilities (Routledge 2014). In fall 2015, MIT Press will publish his book Sharing Cities: An Agenda for Truly Smart and Sustainable Cities.

Early Life and Career

Julian Agyeman acknowledges that he occasionally has trouble figuring out exactly how he and his work fits into the "environmental field," largely because he is working to transform how the field itself is defined. "We need to think about 'sustainable development' in the sense of, 'How do we improve the quality of all people's lives now and into the future in a more just and equitable manner, while respecting the boundaries of ecosystems?'" he says. "We need to see sustainability as something beyond science—it needs to be a new political paradigm." Much of Agyeman's work has been critical of the current discourse surrounding "the environment" and its lack of emphasis on human beings' interaction with their environment. Agyeman works hard to integrate perspectives on equity, justice and diversity into that discourse, and in the process transform how people view concepts like "ecosystems" and "sustainability."

For someone who has devoted his career to re-shaping the paradigm of environmentalism, Agyeman's interest in the environmental field actually began in a rather traditional way. Growing up in a large village in Britain, Agyeman remembers being "fascinated by nature. I was a birdwatcher and an amateur botanist...my mother took us outside a lot, and I spent a lot of time just walking and collecting plants," he recalls. That enjoyment was transferred into a more academic interest, and once he was introduced to science in school, "I was just hooked," Agyeman says. "That was me." He went on to get degrees in geography and botany from the University of Durham, and taught geography at the high school level before moving to London to teach in an Urban Study Center, where he began working more directly on urban environmental issues. "I was attracted by the idea of working with kids in an urban environment," Agyeman recalls. "80 percent of kids in Britain grow up in cities—why not look at the city as their environment?" He went on to work with two inner city London boroughs as an environmental educator, a job that allowed him to work with community groups in poor areas of the city. During that same period, in the wake of the Rio De Janeiro Earth Summit, Agyeman saw an opportunity to bring environmental justice issues into the growing national and international conversation about environmental sustainability; he helped found the Black Environment Network (BEN), the first environmental justice organization in Britain, which he also chaired until 1994.

Education

Agyeman's interests, and his resulting work, broadened with time. Working in the inner city, he grew fascinated with the processes that shaped human-environment interactions, especially in an urban setting. As a result, by the time he returned to school to get his master's degree in conservation policy, "I was looking at the social science of conservation," Agyeman says. "Because I was working in the urban environment, I was getting interested in issues of gender and race. I started looking at questions like, why

and how do people make change in the world? What is the policy window? What makes people say, 'I'm not going to watch TV tonight, I'm going to make a change in my community?'" He went on to get his Ph.D. in Environmental Education from the University of London, while continuing to work with communities. His dissertation examined how young people in urban centers were taught about their environment, particularly whether ecologists were giving teachers information that idealized a "ruralized" view of nature. In reality, Agyeman found that cities had their own diverse and "peculiar" flora, one that did not match up with the "ideological" view presented by some ecologists. "Many ecologists want to bring the country into cities," he says. "But in reality, cities have their own multi-cultural ecosystem, one that reflects their human diversity, and vice versa." Agyeman coined the term "multi-cultural ecology" to describe this phenomenon, and push for a more diversified and inclusive approach to the environmental movement.

After earning his Ph.D. in 1996, Agyeman carried on much of the community-focused work he had done previously, establishing his own consulting firm which offered community environmental solutions to local governments and businesses. He also co-founded *Local Environment: The International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*, which he continues to edit today. Despite his success, Agyeman was feeling the need for a change; he decided to take a non-tenured teaching position at a U.S. university, and set off with his wife, Lynn, for what they assumed would be a temporary re-location in 1998. The re-location became permanent when Agyeman accepted a position in the Urban and Environmental Planning department at Tufts University. Since then, "I've never looked back," Agyeman says. "It's been a wonderful seven years here at Tufts." Agyeman is set to be named Chair of his Department, an opportunity that he doesn't take lightly. "It's my chance to make some really big changes," he says. "Not many departments like ours are chaired by people of color."

Mentoring to Others

Agyeman has taken his mentoring role seriously throughout his career, and even more so now that he is a full-fledged academic. "I take the nurturing of the next generation very seriously," he says. "Many students and many students of color especially, have come to Tufts specifically to work with me. It's a great feeling when someone tells you that, or when someone tells you that something they read in your book inspired them." Agyeman notes that he owes much to his own mentors, among them Bob Evans, a longtime friend and colleague from London South Bank University in Britain with whom he has collaborated on the *International Journal of Justice and Sustainability*; and Bob Bullard, who Agyeman credits with being a "mentor from afar." "He came out with, and was saying and doing things that I was thinking about in the late 1980s, before anyone else was," Agyeman says. "That was so refreshing for me, being in Britain and feeling very alone in what I was trying to do. In Britain at that time, I was the black environmentalist."

Contributions

Agyeman believes his biggest contributions to the field has been developing the paradigm of 'just sustainability' and seeing that idea spread through the literature and influence his own students. He is also proud of his numerous publications, several of which have become best-sellers within the field, and the fact that he publishes extensively with his students. "I publish a lot with my students...I have very high

expectations for them, and they meet them. It's wonderful when they go off and do work that uses these concepts...feeling that I'm making a contribution and leaving a legacy is the biggest reward of my work."

More than anything, Agyeman hopes his work and his vision move the concept of "green" beyond its current, narrow meaning. His advice for young people of color interested in that vision: "Get involved. It's the way of the future whether we like it or not. Change will be forced upon us by global geo-politics. Young people need to be effective in the new emerging policy and strategic area of sustainable development."

For More Information

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Journal: www.tandfonline.com/toc/cloe20/current

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