The Sustainability Agenda podcast: 'Episode 169: Interview with environmental anthropologist Peter Sutoris on new models for schooling and environmental activism.' January 30, 2023.

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Note: This is a partial transcript, edited for brevity. I've selectively added bold emphasis. – Michelle

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Fergal Byrne (podcast host): I'm very pleased today to welcome Peter Sutoris to The Sustainability Agenda.

Peter is an environmental anthropologist, a Lecturer in Education at the University of York and Honorary Senior Research Associate at University College London. His work bridges anthropology with education, development studies, and environmental studies, as he explores the cultural and political aspects of the environmental crisis, the limitation to technological solutions to environmental decay, and degrowth. He is the author of two books, most recently 'Educating for the Anthropocene: Schooling and activism is the face of slow violence'.

Peter Sutoris: My background is in environmental anthropology, **thinking about how different societies, different cultures imagine the future differently**… I work on the intersection of sustainability and education - thinking about how education might respond to this moment, what education might offer, how it might help us navigate this predicament we're in.

What in particular worries you most at the moment?

It's a multiplicity of crises. In the book I used the word 'multi-crisis', and what worries is me is that we lose track of that, and that we've become so exclusively focused on climate that we've forgotten that **the climate emergency is just one manifestation of a deeper problem which is the way our civilisation relates to the natural environment, the way we think about nature as simply just a space of extraction for carrying our our instrumental goals**. And ultimately to my mind what that suggests is that **we need more of a cultural and political shift** rather than simply just swapping one technology for another. And yet the direction in which we're moving at the moment, I think, is just a very technocratic, engineering approach where we think of the environmental crisis as an engineering problem rather than a cultural or political problem. So I worry that this conversation we are currently having about whether we can make this transition fast enough in some ways is not the right conversation to be having. We never properly had the conversation about what the transition actually is; what it is we should be moving towards. For me that is a real worry because it feels that we are wasting valuable time, and that we do need to go deeper in these conversations.

Where do you see seeds of optimism?

A big part of the book [*Educating for the Anthropocene*] looks at activist movements, looks at **grassroots environmental activism**, specifically in India and South Africa but I've also been engaged in various movements in different parts of the world. And **that's really a space where I see a lot of hope: a lot of people who are thinking about these issues very deeply, who are taking action, who are creating spaces for conversation and democratic engagement around these issues.** It's not something that we see a lot of in the media or that seems very present in many people's lives, especially in the global North, but I have become quite aware that it does exist. And that is where I look for hope and for inspiration.

What motivated you to write this book?

Educating for the Anthropocene looks at the [questions]: Who are the people designing the blueprints for the future? Who are the people that are expected to implement them? **What is the role of the education system in spreading those blueprints, either in opening up or closing down opportunities for democratic dialogue about what the future should look like?** We do have a polarisation between the so-called 'leaders' and the so-called 'masses'. And it is a fairly small group of people who are designing these blueprints and expecting the rest of society to follow. And perhaps that is one of the reasons why our progress hasn't been quite so swift.

When you think about education as a process that responds to the contemporary moment, we tend to think of education for the 21st century – that's a buzzword that gets thrown around a lot in education. What I'm suggesting is that maybe we should replace that by thinking about educating for the Anthropocene, because the 21st century is a very arbitrary marker that doesn't really mean much, whereas the Anthropocene gives us pause, once we think about what it really means.

Slow violence… is basically that **some of this environmental destruction unfolds rather slowly which makes it difficult to perceive**, to witness, in real time – in contrast to some of the fast violence of war, the kind of destruction we see in everyday news. **And that makes it particularly difficult for education. How do you educate somebody about something which they may not be able to perceive with their senses, something that is very very gradual,** difficult to grasp…. Places facing extreme levels of environmental degradation – I think of them as spaces of the future in the sense that much of the rest of the world may not be facing that level of degradation just yet, but will be eventually. And in that sense it's a little bit like stepping into a time machine, looking at how are the communities of people who are already experiencing this kind of burden – how are they coping? What are they doing? What kinds of strategies are they coming up with? And that's where the activism comes in. These are places of **accelerating slow violence**. So the violence is not quite so slow in these places. It affects everyday people in very very tangible ways. And once you are in spaces like that, **activism – both as a form of resistance and as a form of proposing alternative ideas about the future** – becomes very noticeable in the communities. And what I have picked up on while doing this research was that a lot of the young people in these spaces of accelerating slow violence are really drawing on the activists in their communities to understand, to make sense of their predicament and of the future. So in some ways **the activism is providing the kind of education for the Anthropocene that the school fails to provide, or is very limited in providing.**

[There have been many thinkers in the long] tradition of humanistic education and reconnecting with our humanity, of which imagining the future, and having a dialogue about it, are very key components. It gets at the very goal of education. What is actually the point of education? Is it to reproduce society as it is? Or is it to allow people to look at society from the outside a little bit, and critique it, and think about how society could be different in the future. And I think the environmental crisis makes that task of reimagining the future very urgent…

This book shows that a lot of these activist approaches to dialogue, to the future, resonate with a lot of these ideas [from progressive education theorists].

We tend to think of activism as resistance, you know, people marching in the street, holding up banners, shouting things. But I think what I found in these communities where I did this research was that as much as there is that kind of activism, **there's also something about activism in these spaces which is much more about simply creating spaces for people to feel heard**. As a young person who goes to school… to have, suddenly, **this space where you are treated like a citizen, not just a future citizen** – not somebody who one day might have something to say, but in the here-and-now has something to say – it is important to listen to that. **Creating these forums where people come together and have an opportunity to express their views of the future**

and the kinds of narratives that they think are important for society to pay attention to. A kind of validation that as an individual you are not just a cog in a machine. You are not just something that is meant to contribute to the economic growth or expanding the human capital of your country. You are a political being and your view matters, even if you're not yet 18, even if you come from a very poor socio-economic background – still, it is important for others to listen to what you have to say… This kind of deliberation and dialogue really is key to dealing with this environmental crisis that we are in.

When [Hannah Arendt] talks about action, she means multiple people coming together. She says **action is impossible in isolation**; you have to have multiple people because action is inherently political. **It comes out of people negotiating their differences.** It comes out of people agonising over their differences. And it is something unexpected, something you wouldn't be able to easily predict. There's something fresh, something new about action… **Creating your own blueprint and acting on it – that is the sort of thing that our education for the most part not only fails to do, but it actively creates barriers to that kind of thinking.**

Arendt talks about this idea of **agonistic pluralism**… The idea of agonistic pluralism is that rather than negotiating our differences through these very formalised institutions that have these very rigid rules about how we engage and how we express our political differences, we have more of a direct confrontation around them, which… makes sure that the conversation doesn't get sanitised…

If you look at the political spectrum right now, you will hardly find anybody within the mainstream of it that questions the idea of infinite economic growth, for example, because those ideas … get excluded. They're not part of the conversation. The institutions that we have set up can't cope with that level of difference in politics. So the idea of agonistic pluralism is that you do actually confront these differences in a much more direct way. But … this is not some kind of anarchy, this is not some kind of free-for-all where anybody can say and do whatever they want; this is still within the framework of a democratic society. You have to make sure that **anybody who is taking part in this process views the person that says something different … not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an intellectual opponent**, which is quite an important distinction to make.

… **Opening up these conversations is not *politicising* in the sense of** the 'capital P' of 'Politicise' where are **encouraging people to join a particular political party or adopt a particular political view. It's simply sensitising them to these conversations. And I also found that young people, children, actually can engage with these issues at a younger age than we conventionally assume…**

The 1950s; nuclear bomb testing during the Cold War; the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the beginning of agricultural societies – those are some of **the beginning points [of the Anthropocene]** that have been put forward – a lot of them **have to do with colonial forms of extraction, subjugating either the natural environment and other people; seeing the environment or other people as somehow instrumental to the goals of whoever is doing the extracting and the subjugating.** So I wouldn't say that these are separate issues. **The way we found ourselves in this predicament is through the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, the ways in which that impacts on our current levels of inequality, racism, bigotry – these are all, to my mind, connected issues.** So we can't really talk about the Anthropocene without acknowledging that this is part of the issue. Again, it's not just a simple engineering problem, but something much much deeper with cultural and political roots.

Facing up to these issues can be really quite traumatic, as a young person with your life ahead of you, thinking about what that life might look like as a result of the mess that you've inherited from previous generations. But one thing that I've noticed [is that] … when you are talking about these issues in a didactic way, where you're passing down a narrative or a blueprint or a vision for the world, that can be very depressing and it can feel like you're

paralysed, as a young person. 'There's no space for me to act, for me to do anything within this narrative.' But I think if you are opening up these conversations in a way that encourages young people to truly be political beings, to realise their potential as political beings, to enter the conversation about what the future ought to be, and deploying their imagination in the process – I think that in itself helps deal with some of the apathy, or some of the hopelessness that otherwise they might experience. Because suddenly they're in a position when they're being listened to, they're being taken seriously, and even if they don't necessarily know how to achieve the kinds of futures that they're articulating, at the very least they're creating through imagination the possibility of something different. And then you can think about 'how do you get to that?' and 'what is your role as an individual in trying to make that possible?' But just the very existence of that possibility I think has a really profound effect.

What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the educator? What is the role of the school? **Does the school simply exist to fill people's brains with information, or helping them practise certain skills, or is it also a supportive space, a safe space to explore some of these questions, to think about strategies about what you can do as a young person, as an individual, as a collective, as a group?** And to have these conversations in ways that are safe. Of course you are inherently taking some risks by having those conversations, but being prepared for situations where young people might need support is important… We've got a generation going through the school system now that is facing a pretty rough landscape, and I think we would do well to recognise that and to provide adequate support – which I think few countries have been paying attention to in the way that it deserves.

Short excerpts from Sutoris' book *Educating for the Anthropocene: Schooling and activism is the face of slow violence:*

"Against the backdrop of widespread bureaucratisation as an enabling force for slow violence, the role of education must go far beyond social reproduction, beyond helping humanity develop new technologies, even beyond cultivating critical thinking among young people. What is needed is nothing short of a wholesale reimagining of the future, and the requires education that helps us envisage alternative futures and gives us tools to communicate our visions and agonize with others over their visions, helping us realise our agency as *political* beings. **Critical thinking envisioned by proponent of twenty-first-century competencies may be a helpful skill, but if it is limited to thinking about a limited set of possible futures, it may not save us from becoming cogs in the Anthropocene's destructive processes**, just as the educational accomplishments of Weimar Germany did not save millions of Germans from becoming complicit in a the Holocaust. In other words, by de-instrumentalizing education and putting it out of service to the larger economic/ political system, we may have a greater chance to succeed in confronting slow violence.

… I found… that environmental educators and environmental activists were often two distinct camps that were suspicious of each other: Educators often saw activists as radical anti-system agitators, while activists considered educators complicit in the status quo….

The activists offered a notion of an engaged citizenry that collectively imagines a shared future and rectifies what they see as a lack of civic engagement…

Clearly, activism and schooling on the frontier of the high Anthropocene are worlds apart. But **is it possible to imagine a world in which education is no longer synonymous with depoliticisation and bureaucratisation and aligns itself with the 'right side of the barricade'?**