

**Review of *Occupy education: living and learning sustainability* by  
Tina Lynn Evans.**

**Mark Seis, Fort Lewis College**

**Key words:** occupy education, sustainability, Tina Evans, critical social theory, global capitalism, higher education

*Mark Seis is an associate professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies at Fort Lewis College. His research interests include environmental policy issues and the development of sustainable communities, focusing around the issues of food, energy, and local democratic governance. He is an avid gardener, and he loves to revel in wild places with wild people.*

Tina Evans' *Occupy Education* is a theoretically sophisticated work focusing on the topic of sustainable education. This treatise is rich in exploration, not so much with respect to theoretical originality, but in eloquent synthesis of theoretical perspectives. This book should be on the shelf of any educator professing an interest in the teaching of sustainability.

Evans' project is to construct a critical social theory (CST) of sustainability, which emphasizes human agency in the production of social change. While drawing upon Marxist insights, Polyanyi's concept of reciprocity, Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, critical theory in general, and Marcuse in particular, Evans does not wish to see her work "pigeonholed as a Marxist or neo-Marxist analysis" (9). "My CST of sustainability recognizes that growth-oriented industrial economies, whether socialist or capitalist, are incompatible with sustainability" (9). Evans' book is a rigorous effort to steer the reader away from over simplistic calls for personal life changes in an effort to curtail radical planetary destruction rooted in industrial capitalist practices. There are few things more distracting and frustrating than reading a book on how our planet is dying, which then concludes with 10 simple ways that you can end this destruction by changing a few personal behaviors. Yes, personal changes collectively are not insignificant, but they do nothing to change the externalized material conditions that are perpetuating the destruction of our planet. Identifying the forms of domination and understanding the interlocking systems of power that define global industrial capitalism are the central tenants of Evans' CST of sustainability. It is the in-depth understanding of the materialist structural forces of our ecological crisis that leads Evans to believe that our ecological crisis can be subdued through human agency and praxis.

To this end, the book is divided into three parts. Part one, the first four chapters, is focused on developing Evans' CST of sustainability. These four chapters provide the reader with a set of analytical tools to understand our ecological crisis historically, economically, politically, sociologically and even psychologically. This section of the book is my favorite and is without doubt a clear demonstration of Evans' ability to synthesize complex critical social theory and apply it to ecological sustainability literature. This trans-disciplinary approach is rare in most environmental sustainability literature aimed at diagnosing said crisis.

The first chapter in Part One is essentially a review and sorting of a wide breadth of critical social theory and ecological literature, where key theoretical concepts are identified for the purpose of denoting forms of structural and cultural domination discussed throughout Evans' CST of sustainability. In Chapter Two, Evans constructs a theory of sustainability praxis. Because Evans grounds her work in CST, she presupposes the historical nature of social structure, therefore contending that "social formations are...open to change through human agency—that nothing in human history is absolute or immutable because all history is

contingent upon past and future action” (47). It is this awareness that allows for critical consciousness and human agency to act to change material structural conditions which frame being. To paraphrase Marx, circumstances make humans as much as humans make circumstances. This CST grounding differentiates Evans’ approach from many deep ecology and eco-psychology sustainability approaches, which advocate that sustainability is just a matter of changing the way we think about our relationship with our land base. For Evans, the problem of sustainability is deeply rooted in structural material conditions and concomitant ideological factors.

Chapters three and four are provocative and provide the most interesting analysis of the book for me. These two chapters are built on the far reaching systemic power of global corporate capitalism and its unsustainable nature as demonstrated by “fossil fuel depletion, ecological breakdown and the structural crisis of capitalism” (75). Evans explores in these two chapters “how and why the economic and political possibilities of societies narrow as a result of late capitalist, neoliberal globalization so that, even should a nation or community wish to reverse or change course, the late capitalist system enforces continued political and economic dependency on the globalized economy” (75). The deterministic nature of these two chapters is what Evans must overcome in order to make her theory of a CST of sustainability stick. In short, she must reconcile the contradictory and deterministic nature of “enforced dependency” with the development of a sustainability oriented education and praxis. The last two parts of this book address the application of human agency and praxis to dismantling “enforced dependency,” which, for Evans, remains the main cause of our ecological crisis.

Chapters five through seven, in Part Two of the book, develop a CST of sustainability focused on praxis and the implementation of human agency in changing destructive ecological practices to more sustainable behaviors. This part of the book focuses on applied strategies for implementing a CST of sustainability, ranging from (re)inhabitation and (re)localization efforts, to decentralized political organizing, to creating sustainable food systems, to focusing on confronting imminent ecological crises like climate change and the end of oil. These three chapters again exemplify Evans’ ability to synthesize a wide variety of literature focused on alternative practices aimed at the specific goal of dismantling the hegemonic functions of “forced dependency.” Those who doubt that there is no will out there to resist the status quo need to pay close attention to these chapters. Evans makes it very clear that there is no shortage of viable solutions to deal with our ecological crisis nor is there any shortage of prescriptions for confronting sustainability.

Part three, chapters eight and nine, focus exclusively on the application of critical pedagogy in creating sustainable practices. Chapter eight is focused on using higher education as a vehicle for dialoguing on sustainability. The chapter is slightly contradictory, and, as an educator, I can identify with the problem Evans is grappling with here. On the one hand, educators want to view their institutions of higher learning as places of creative problem solving with the aim of improving our

social world. On the other, institutions of higher learning are entrenched bureaucratic apparatuses run by technocrats, whose primary concerns are student body count and standardizing pedagogy. Challenging destructive worldviews and practices is not the primary aim of higher education, contrary to the idealist hopes that many of us, however naïve, may have had at some time in our academic careers. When surveying the diverse disciplines comprising most colleges and universities, it seems doubtful that most academics perceive that we are even in a full-blown ecological crisis, let alone the same ecological problem so eloquently constructed by Evans. Needless to say, Evans is not so naïve as to “hold any illusions about the difficulties inherent in reorienting the pedagogies of U.S. colleges and universities toward sustainability” (223). This chapter is an effort to grapple with the significance of utilizing higher education as an agent of constructive social change despite its entrenched hegemonic function in maintaining the status quo—witness the title of Evans’ book *Occupy Education*.

Chapter nine is an actual example of how Evans implements her CST of sustainability in a classroom setting. The chapter highlights the significance of grounding a course in an ecological and social problem and then seeking productive ways to engage students in active social change; the course is titled *The End of Oil*. This chapter may be extremely helpful to many educators, attempting to make their classrooms actual communities of active engagement. This is an excellent hands-on chapter on how to do as one professes.

I am personally always ambivalent after reading books of this ilk, which means it was an excellent book because it made for frustrating self-reflection. My frustration stems from thinking of academia and higher education as a vehicle of critical social change. After more than 20 years in academia, I have read many brilliant critiques of our economic, political, social and ecological woes and *Occupy Education* is no exception. I have seen many of my students get excited about such critical works as well, only to have their enthusiasm silenced in other classes, where social and ecological problems are treated as simple matters, requiring a tweak here or there. I have also seen many enthused graduates get quickly discouraged at their new places of employment by the same political and social bureaucratic structures that keep tight reins on any type of constructive change on college campuses, even something as simple as creating a policy to eliminate throw away plastic bottles. There are many prescriptions for how to change the world, but in these very dire times our world is not changing fast enough to curtail the catastrophic ecological and social changes that are occurring. Are education and normative social engagement enough to make our world livable and just? If so, then why has a half-century of CST failed to make our universities bastions of social justice? Paraphrasing the famous anarchist Emma Goldman, if voting changed anything it would be outlawed. After more than 20 years in higher education, I have come to believe that if higher education could change anything, it too, would be outlawed. This is not meant as an attack on this book, but rather a serious criticism of we academics who seek solace in the virtues of our “normative” critical pedagogy. For years, many intellectuals wrote, read, and discussed the immoralities of slavery, but

it was non-normative critical social engagement and action that severed the yoke of slavery. The magnitude of our ecological crisis also requires non-normative critical social engagement and action, much of which lies outside the ivory towers and prison-like classrooms of academia.

