

APPLYING HABERMAS'S CRITICAL THEORY TO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND POLICY: A CASE STUDY OF THE FLORIDA EVERGLADES RESTORATION PROGRAM

Claire Connolly Knox

Overview of Habermas's Critical Theory

The foundation of Habermas's argument, a leading critical theorist, lies in the unequal distribution of wealth across society. He states that in an advanced capitalist society, the possibility of a crisis has shifted from the economic and political spheres to the legitimation system. Legitimation crises increase the more government intervenes into the economy (market) and the "simultaneous political enfranchisement of almost the entire adult population" (Holub, 1991, p. 88). The reason for this increase is because policymakers in advanced capitalist democracies are caught between conflicting imperatives: they are expected to serve the interests of their nation as a whole, but they must prop up an economic system that benefits the wealthy at the expense of most workers and the environment.

Habermas argues that the driving force in history is an expectation, built into the nature of language, that norms, laws, and institutions will serve the interests of the entire population and not just those of a special group. In his view, policy makers in capitalist societies are having to fend off this expectation by simultaneously correcting some of the inequities of the market, denying that they have control over people's economic circumstances, and defending the market as an equitable allocator of income. (deHaven-Smith, 1988, p. 14). Critical theory suggests that this contradiction will be reflected in Everglades policy by communicative narratives that suppress and conceal tensions between environmental and economic priorities.

Habermas' Legitimation Crisis states that political actors use various symbols, ideologies, narratives, and language to engage the public and avoid a legitimation crisis. These influences not only manipulate the general population into desiring what has been manufactured for them, but also leave them feeling unfulfilled and alienated. Also known as false reconciliation, the public's view of society as rational, and "conducive to human freedom and happiness" is altered to become deeply irrational and an obstacle to the desired freedom and happiness (Finlayson, 2005, p. 5). These obstacles and irrationalities give rise to potential crises in the society.

Government's increasing involvement in Everglades under advanced capitalism leads to Habermas's four crises: economic/environmental, rationality, legitimation, and motivation. These crises are occurring simultaneously, work in conjunction with each other, and arise when a principle of organization is challenged by increased production needs (deHaven-Smith, 1988). Habermas states that governments use narratives in an attempt to rationalize, legitimize, obscure, and conceal its actions under advanced capitalism. Although there have been many narratives told throughout the history of the Everglades (such as the Everglades was a wilderness that was valued as a wasteland in its natural state), the most recent narrative, "Everglades Restoration", is the focus of this paper.

Initial Results: Policy Narrative "Everglades Restoration"

Critical Theory views the recent passing of Everglades policies as a battle between different capitalist interests trying to keep the narrative of "Everglades Restoration" (a discursive reduction that is easy for the general public to understand, buy into, and believe) alive as they battle over resources (land, minerals, and water). These interests are keeping this narrative alive for a number of reasons. First, they need cheap resources (limestone, concrete, and water) for real estate developments to allow for greater profits. The increasing population, especially in south Florida, has kept the pressure on these interests to keep the narrative alive (Hollander, 2005).

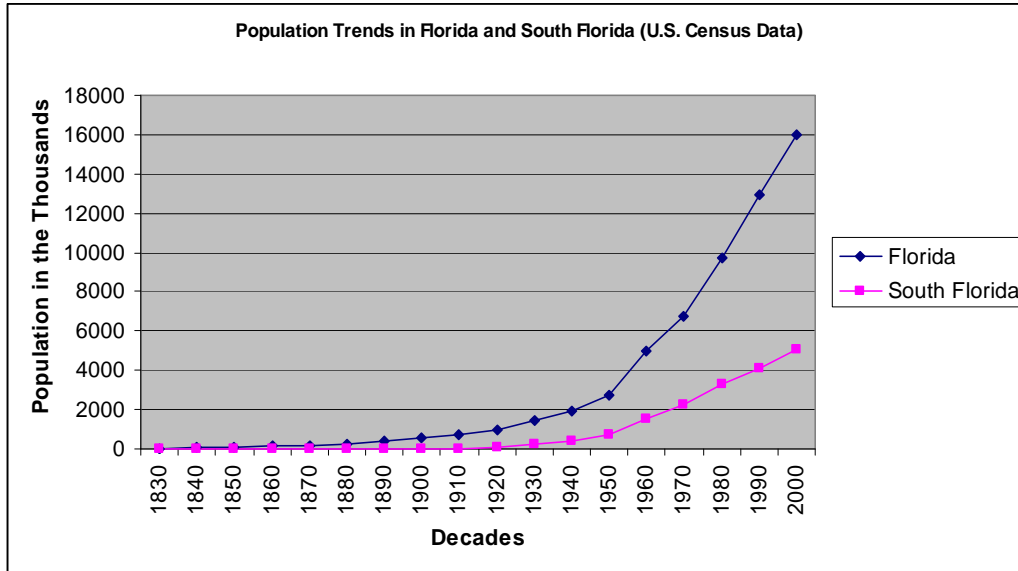


Chart 1: Population Trends in Florida and South Florida (data: Historical Census, 2004)

Without these cheap resources, which Habermas argues the economic subsystem needs as inputs, an economic crisis could arise. For example, in the CERP limestone pits are to be mined in the middle of the Everglades affecting 20,000 acres of wetlands. The reason the government is providing the public for allowing these pits to be mined falls under the "Everglades restoration" narrative: to prepare the land for future water retention areas for south Florida's drinking water supply (Gonzalez, 2005). In addition, in April 2008 the majority of Miami-Dade County Commissioners voted to extent the Urban Development Boundary (UDB) to allow Lowe's, a big box home improvement store, to build on 20 acres of wetlands and thereby further encroaching into the Everglades. Although Mayor Alvarez vetoed the new development, the commission overruled him twice and the item passed the agenda. In May 2009, Judge Bram D. E. Canter, an administrative law judge, ruled that the county commission's vote and expansion of the UDB was wrong. In August 2009, the Florida Cabinet voted 3 to 1 in support of the judge's ruling stating that the state's Growth Management Act was violated (Klas, 2009). The trend to move the UDB outward into the Everglades is increasing. In the 1990s, the boundary moved only twice. However between 2002 and 2009, the boundary line has moved more than five times and all voted upon by the Miami-Dade County Commissioners. Currently being debated by the commission is a 961 acre suburb named Parkland that would again expand the UDB to accommodate 19,000 new residents with homes, offices, and shops (Haggman, 2009).

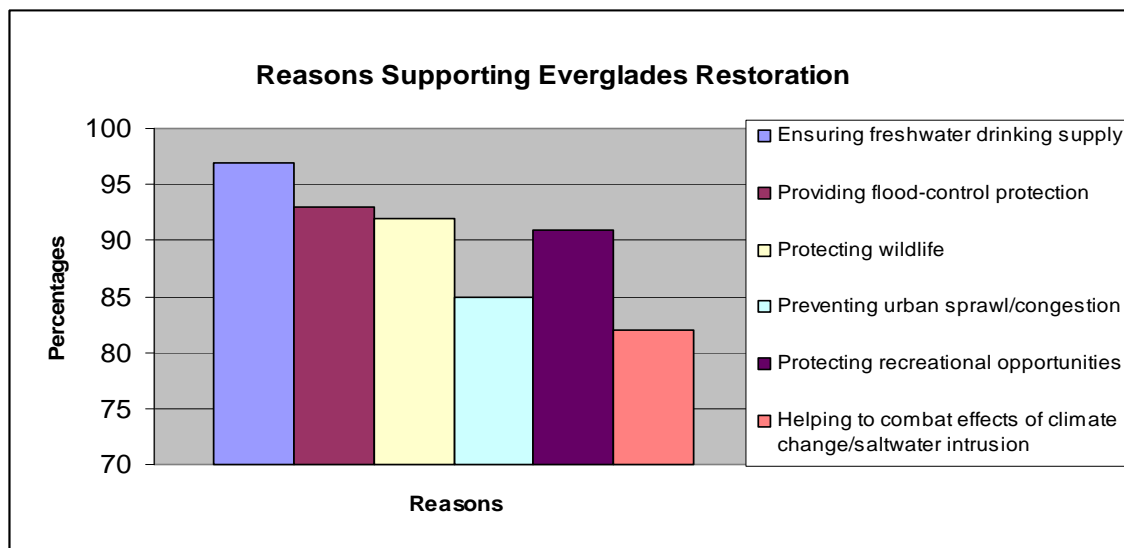
A second reason to keep the narrative going is that these capitalist interests have been able to have government, namely the tax payers, pay to drain their lands. For example, the government's intervention into the economic system with the building of the Hoover Dike around Lake Okeechobee, and constructing the Central and South Florida Flood Control Project. In addition, the sugar industry's political and monetary influences have persuaded taxpayers to fund the majority of the industry's pollution cleanup. In 1993, after it was quickly realized that the taxpayers would be paying the sugar industry's pollution bill, Charles Lee, Florida Audubon Society's senior vice-president, stated:

It does not seem to make a lot of difference whether the politician is a Bob Martinez, a Lawton Chiles, a Bob Graham, a George Bush, a Bruce Babbitt, or a Bill Clinton...the reality is the same. Sugar's mess in the Everglades is still something political figures just have press conferences about...The courage, candor, and moral strength necessary to look across the table into the eyes of the sugar industry lobbyists and tell them they are going to have to significantly change their ways isn't there (Lee as quoted in Perry & Perry, 1994, pp. 168-169).

The government continues to create new programs or policies by using the narrative of "Everglades restoration" to legitimize their actions. The 2007 Northern Everglades and Estuaries Bill (Senate Bill 392) is an example of government intervening further into the economic system by allocating more money for the Everglades, passing more policies, and managing more land (north of Lake Okeechobee), all while under the guise of "Everglades

Restoration". Government is expanding its role to provide more water for utilities, the sugar industry, growing population, and wildlife in south Florida. The government is using "Everglades restoration" as a narrative to justify its expanding managerial role and its limits or expectations about its responsibilities. The new title of "Northern Everglades" is a catchphrase to expand government water management for sugar interests, expanding urban development (as witnessed in Miami-Dade County), increased population, and utilities under the narrative of "Everglades restoration".

Polls are showing that the public believes this narrative although they know very little about it. A September 2009 study of 600 Floridian voters found that 82% of those polled agree that Everglades restoration is important to them. Of the six reasons offered to the participants of why the Everglades should be restored, "ensuring a freshwater drinking supply to Floridians" ranked highest with 97% supporting that statement (Everglades Foundation, 2009). While the public is supporting the narrative of "Everglades restoration", a 2004 survey for the South Florida Water Management District indicates that approximately 66% of the south Florida population is unfamiliar with Everglades restoration plans, including the groundbreaking 2000 Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) (Conway, 2004).



Graph 1: Reasons for supporting Everglades restoration (Everglades Foundation, 2009)

Conclusion

By applying Habermas's Critical Theory, the narrative of "Everglades Restoration" becomes evident, as well as the fact that policymakers in this advanced industrial democracy are being caught between conflicting imperatives: they are expected to serve the interests of their nation as a whole, but they must prop up an economic system that benefits the wealthy at the expense of the environment. This conflicting imperative is leading to the reengineering, not the restoring, the Everglades that is opposite of nature (dry during the wet season and wet during the dry season), and is allowing for additional urban and population growth in south Florida, and limestone mining permits to be granted.

References

Conway, K. (2004). Statewide survey of 804 with an oversample of 100 SFWMD residents, unpublished report conducted by the Polling Company, inc. for the South Florida Water Management District.

deHaven-Smith, L. (1988). *Philosophical Critiques of Policy Analysis: Lindblom, Habermas, and the Great Society*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press.

Everglades Foundation. (2009, Oct). Executive Summary. Retrieved Oct. 30, 2009, from www.drivecms.com/uploads/evergladesfoundation.org/1366055623Evergladesopinionv5.pdf

Finlayson, J. G. (2005). *Habermas: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gonzalez, G. A. (2005). The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan: Environmental or economic sustainability? *Polity*, 37(4), 466-490.

Haggman, M. (2009, May 13). Judge: Miami-Dade county commission wrong to expand UDB for Lowe's. *The Miami Herald*. Retrieved Jan. 16, 2010, from www.udbline.com/articles/miami_herald/05_13_09.htm.

Historical Census Counts for Florida and its Counties. (2004). Bureau of Economic and Business Research. University of Florida. Retrieved Oct. 30, 2009, from www.bebr.ufl.edu/system/files/Hist_Census_Counties_0.pdf

Hollander, G. (2005a). The material and symbolic role of the Everglades in U.S. national politics. *Political Geography*, 24, 449-475.

Holub, R. C. (1991). *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*. London: Routledge.

Klas, M. E. (2009, July 28). Florida cabinet thwarts plan to alter Miami-Dade development boundary. *The Miami Herald*. Retrieved Jan. 16, 2010, from www.udbline.com/articles/miami_herald/07_28_09.htm.

Perry, J. & Perry, J. G. (1994). *The Nature of Florida*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Claire Connolly Knox
Florida State University
Askew School of Public Administration and Policy
14747 Kristenright Lane
Orlando, FL 32826 USA
Ph: (850) 766-6454
clairecknox@hotmail.com