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Review: Theories of Sustainable Development

Edited By Judith C. Enders and Moritz Remig

Reviewed by: Yves Laberge

Centr'ERE, Québec. G1V 0A6,

Enders, Judith C. and Remig, Moritz (eds.), *Theories of Sustainable Development*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, x+201 pp. ISBN: 9781138796362, hardcover, US \$140.00. This book is part of the Routledge Studies in Sustainable Development.

Theories of Sustainable Development does not pretend to present all the existing theories of Sustainable Development, but these thirteen essays undoubtedly induce a fundamental theoretical discussion, not aiming for “the drafting of a comprehensive theory of sustainability, but rather the creation of a fruitful relationship between practice and theory,” as claimed by Armin Grunwald in the second chapter (titled “What kind of theory do we need for Sustainable Development?”) (p. 25). Most contributors to this collective effort are working in German institutions; here, they present their research in English but often rely on German authors and German theoretical frameworks which are probably unknown to most Anglophone researchers in our field, and that is what makes this book relevant. Incidentally, many bibliographical references at the end of chapters are in German, but English-speaking readers can now benefit from these lesser-known perspectives and thoughts with these essays. For example, discussions and references based on the writings of thinkers such as Lothar Kühne and Martin Warnke about landscapes conceived as “*always historical places*” can be seen as an interesting renewal for non-German scholars in domains like the philosophy of the environment (p. 158).

As an elusive concept, “Sustainable Development” is defined in many interesting ways by various contributors in about every chapter; many experts reaffirm the importance for sustainability to always be critical and aware of the social dimensions of the environment. For example, Armin Grunwald conceives Sustainable Development firstly “as a process” (Armin Grunwald, p. 27). Elsewhere, in his excellent essay on “Transdisciplinary humanistic sustainability theory” (Chapter 6), Felix Ekardt gives a rich and detailed definition of Sustainable Development, covering almost two pages, “as the establishment of a permanent, globally practicable and future-capable mode of life and economics” (Felix Ekardt, pp. 65-66), but also as “a complex array of problems, involving a wide range of social-scientific and humanistic disciplines” (Felix Ekardt, pp. 65-66). On a related topic, Thomas Jahn sees sustainability as “a relational, not a substantive concept” (p. 33) as he provides a detailed and nuanced articulation of this core concept that can be characterized “as a normative category,” that “triggers a specific complex of integration problems” (p. 33). At the center of every chapter, theory itself seems to be the neglected dimension of most studies in sustainability, although its real importance remains debatable for some experts like Armin Grunwald: “...the fact that virtually no theoretical debate on sustainable development has been carried out during the past ten years is not necessarily a problem” (p. 17).

A few chapters in the second half introduce some interesting discussions about transdisciplinarity, understood by Michael Weingarten as “a practical unity of knowledge” (p. 146) and considered according to German philosopher Jürgen Mittelstraß as “a principle of research and not a theoretical principle” (Mittelstraß, quoted by Michael Weingarten, p. 146). In Chapter 4, Thomas Jahn’s conclusion goes in the same direction, aiming for “a transdisciplinary research for sustainable development” with “a focus on sustainable transformations” (p. 38). And for Hans Diefenbacher who proposes a very helpful piece titled “Ten Theses on a Research Agenda for Sustainable Development,” the emerging, new models of ecological behavior will have to be tangibly possible and not just like an alternative for a fragment of the population: “...it will be necessary to develop a narrative capable of connecting with the concrete everyday reality of people today” (Chapter 13, p. 190).

Theories of Sustainable Development is a dense but always rewarding collection of cutting edge essays for advanced graduate students who deal with sustainable development, philosophy of justice, or sociology of science. There is no weak essay in this collection edited by Judith Enders and Moritz Remig. These useful discussions and articulations would be particularly helpful for young researchers who need to conceptualize sustainability in theoretical terms. Not for the undergraduate level, this book would certainly be a logical addendum in university libraries for institutions offering graduate programs.

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