

Book Reviews

***Methods of Sustainability Research in the Social Sciences*, edited by Frances Fahy and Henrike Rau. London: SAGE, 2013, xiii+213 p.**

This collection of ten commissioned, scholarly essays by noted European scholars investigates in various ways the apparently vague and often contested concept of sustainability, with a focus on conceptualisation and emerging methodologies. While in engineering and sciences, sustainability is sometimes seen as a license for an almost unlimited exploitation of nature and resources, other thinkers, mainly social scientists, environmental educators, and especially sociologists (but not all of them) remain highly critical and suspicious toward sustainability as a “green” label because it implicitly implies an overexploitation of resources within a very short period of time, without ever thinking about complex problems such as overconsumption, waste, and the issue of unstoppable growth. As Henrike Rau and Ricca Edmondson explain in Chapter 9 (entitled “Time and Sustainability”), these very different views regarding “*human society, sustainability and the nature of society-environment relations may come to the fore and even clash during the research process*” (p. 186). As a consequence, co-editors Henrike Rau and Frances Fahy (both from NUI in Galway, Ireland) acknowledge the fact that some scholars now prefer to refer to sustainability instead of sustainable development, in order to avoid semantic or conceptual debates and focus on the future: “*There are also proposals to substitute ‘sustainability’ instead of ‘sustainable development’*” (p. 5). Some academics have even considered ‘sustainability’ (or the underlying ‘sustainability research’) as going beyond disciplines into the spectrum of transdisciplinarity, within which sustainability would represent “*a goal, an ideal, an umbrella, and a sub-discipline of multiple disciplines*” (p. 11). Incidentally, many interrogations

related to development studies will reappear in many of the following chapters.

Specific methodologies for the sociology of the environment have not been much explored yet if researchers are to rely on interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary methods which are typically hybrid in their construction. Co-editors Frances Fahy and Henrike Rau argue that many contributors to this book try the almost impossible task of linking sustainability with economy in a fair and balanced way, “*thus adopt and advocate inter- and transdisciplinary work as a way of addressing the pressing problem of reconciling economic development with social equity and environment integrity*” (p. 11).

The first chapters (1-4) deal with palpable dimensions of sustainability research: everyday life and green lifestyles in British households (Chapter 2, based on surveys), decision-making which take environmental issues (and environmental values) into consideration (Chapter 3, using focus group approaches), or dialogic research understood here as “*a process of empathic listening with local actors over a prolonged time period in a wide variety of settings, formal and informal, which involves a slow unravelling of local meanings and language, recognising that these meanings emerge from social interaction*” (p. 73). Indeed, a clear, frequent example is presented in Chapter 4 (“Local Lives and Conflict: Towards a methodology of dialogic research”), when an industrial project implying gas transportation breaks the harmony in a small community living in peace with its environment, creating new, direct conflicts between jobs and prosperity opposed to the protection of the environment (p. 74). In this case, as for most essays gathered here, Mark Garavan’s chapter proposes a dialogic methodology to address these issues, explaining how discourses and debates can be analysed in order to highlight opposite points of

views, rhetoric, the impacts and limits of collective action, and in this case distress in the local population studied (p. 84).

Elsewhere in Chapter 5 (“Sustainable Development of What?”), scholar Su-Ming Khoo (from the National University of Ireland) proposes a rather critical definition of sustainability: “*a boundary term, signifying complex interactions between science, politics, policy making and development*” (p. 91); she nevertheless adds that our societies are only reproducing inequities that were put in place some centuries ago, since the “*Current patterns of global development were shaped by a history of capitalist and colonial power relations which structured uneven and inequitable flows of resources, benefit, and harm over centuries*” (p. 92).

In this *Methods of Sustainability Research in the Social Sciences*, issues of sustainability are central and explored in very different approaches and renewed methodologies. However, the main focus is always the construction of new methodologies. Among the most creative case studies proposed here is for instance the multi-authored Chapter 6 on “Biophysical Indicators of Society-Nature Interaction”, which measures the ecological footprint of a population as indicators for empirical analysis, implying a strong interdisciplinary bridge centred on socio-ecological metabolism and their effects on natural carbon flows (p. 123). Further on, Chapter 7 (about environmental noise and health) highlights the links between excessive noise exposure and the negative cardio-vascular outcomes, not to mention the “disruption in the stages of the sleep cycle”; the authors use various tools in noise research such as noise modelling, population exposure and noise mapping (p. 137).

Not all collections of essays include a general conclusion, but this one does and it is much appreciated. In the last pages, the co-editors note that “*it seems important to move sustainability questions to the centre of social-scientific theorising, research and debate*”, insisting on the relevance of issues linked with “*inter- and transdisciplinarity that focuses on conceptual, methodological as well as practical issues*” (p. 206).

Clearly, this *Methods of Sustainability Research in the Social Sciences* is an important and original book which should be recommended in methodology

courses. Obviously, *Methods of Sustainability Research in the Social Sciences* is not a “How To” book with tips made for debutants or graduate students in search for a textbook to start their masters; it is rather for doctoral students and academics who feel they need interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary methods for the understanding of environmental issues. This is the main strength of this volume which does not concentrate on results or conclusions as such but rather on the studying and comparison of fresh methodologies related to sustainability. Indeed, environmental studies are among the very few domains which absolutely need to rely on many disciplines (or have to go beyond disciplines’ limits) in order to seize the complex challenges brought nowadays with the task of protecting nature.

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