

Seeking Sustainability

What does sustainability research do to help the environment? One might well wonder when observing the annual conference season with various academics and professors in sustainability science, ecological economics or environmental ethics driving to the airport to fly off to international meetings to discuss how bad things are getting, what should be done about it, and how time is running out for action. In fact, singling out a few academic groups is highly unfair because the link between practice and profession seems absent for many if not most. In the age of the environment and sustainability as a business opportunity or international agency career the room for simple precautionary practices, like not flying and not driving a car, seems increasingly small. You might even be liable to branding as unprofessional, or worse an eco-fundamentalist.

I can hear the defensive retort: ‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs’. True, but neither can you make an omelette when there are no more eggs left to break! Anyway, who said we needed omelettes in the first place?

Therein lies the illogical reasoning which drives the environmental crisis ever onwards. A severe dysfunctionality between what is needed and what is claimed to be necessary. In this issue papers explore different aspects of this problem, its behavioural repercussions and philosophical underpinnings.

Most of the papers follow the convention of citing the single sentence from the Brundtland report about meeting needs (present and future) as ‘the’ definition of sustainable development. Another convention in sustainability research is to ignore the rest of the report or at least the most anti-environmental and orthodox economic statements. That is, where the report infamously promoted 5–10 fold increases in growth rates for developing countries and a minimum of 3–4% growth rates for industrial countries. This ‘new era of growth’ was going to be the means for getting to a sustainable future and reducing poverty within a few decades (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1991). Some 27 years later, with increasing wealth disparity and as many billions below the poverty line, our social, ecological and economic problems seem even worse, and only aggravated by sustained economic growth and capital accumulation.

Hector et al. point out that sustainable development should indeed be conceptualised as a growth-oriented project and as an alternative to the discourse on sustainability, and not some kind of complementary pathway. The central issue they identify is a distinction between the instrumentally driven conservationists and intrinsically driven preservationists. This will be familiar territory to environmental ethicists. Although an old debate, it has been somewhat brushed aside by the type of environmental pragmatism that claims outcomes are all that matters and if we agree on ends the reasons are irrelevant. That line of reasoning continues to support the dominant market capitalist approach to

the exclusion of all else. So we find that achieving sustainability is then consistent with neo-liberalism and economic development via increasing energy and material throughput. Hector et al. argue that the lines need to be redrawn and the divisions on moral grounds made clear once again. They rightly criticise ecological economics for failing to clarify how strong sustainability can be made operational and instead falling back onto a set of tools compatible with a weak position. More generally, what is then identified as absent in the arguments arising from the preservationist camp is exploration and development of an alternative pathway (or what the authors refer to as a problem structuring approach) that is more consistent with the philosophical foundations of the position.

Jolibert et al. follow up on this request by offering a methodology for addressing regional planning problems based upon analysis of human needs. They aim to show that a needs-based approach can foster long-term regional environmental planning and achieve social change by creating more dynamic interactions between stakeholders. The method seeks to identify areas of agreement amongst social actors, but also to highlight conflicts that arise between competing values and strategies (a necessity identified by Hector et al.). Jolibert et al. employ Max-Neef's classification of needs as distinct from the means of achieving them (i.e. satisfiers), with the former constant and the latter being contextual and dynamic. A case study of urban development involving eight stakeholders shows how this approach can be combined with scenario analysis to identify individual strategies and catalysts for positive social action. Typical amongst participatory approaches, the authors desire a consensus seeking process and outcome, although this is highly problematic where principled value positions are concerned and differential power is involved. At the same time the study indicates a potentially useful method for mapping out value differences.

This needs-satisfiers analysis appears to be the type of approach, requiring further research and development, that Hector et al. indicate we lack. Yet humans and non-humans need help now, so can we find extant good practice and/or learn from the past to complement more innovative work? The papers by Vail and Suh both explore this question in relation to sustainable food supply.

Vail presents a detailed case study of the role farmers markets could play in leading towards a more sustainable society in the context of the Czech town of Brno. For Vail, the existing farmers' market offers a practical alternative to the techno-capitalism of ecological modernisation and the back-to-land low technology regarded as deep Green. Vail shows that a farmers market, such as in Brno, can in fact contribute to a multiple set of criteria for achieving a better social, ecological and economic future.

Yet the existence of this 800-year-old market is threatened (as are similar markets and practices in other countries) by the spread of multi-national supermarkets. Support might be expected from the Czech authorities, who have

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committed to the WHO Healthy Cities initiative. However, goals are narrowly defined in terms of traffic safety, sports, recreation and ageing, rather than in terms of healthy living from local food that helps maintain a healthy planet. The values and culture of the farmers market appear diffuse and intangible by comparison. External structural forces focused on measurable outcomes are then potentially more threatening than helpful. Can the farmers market survive, let alone flourish, without reliance on ‘the state’? Vail seems to hope so, although there are also clear indications of both the difficulties and the positive potential for enhancing the functioning of the farmers market through government support.

While severe scepticism of government seems common in Eastern Europe (often with good cause, e.g., see van Assche et al., 2012), there is clearly a need for forms of government and associated institutions to make any such markets work (e.g. money, property rights, rules of exchange). The local market may be left to develop its own socially enforced norms (e.g., quality control). However, as classical institutional economists have long noted, markets as social organisations involve formally sanctioned rules enforced by a higher authority. Tension lies in the gap between an ideal authority being honest, transparent and sharing power and the experience of corruption, secrecy and authoritarianism. However, the role of higher-level authorities is also a communitarian tradition in creating trust. In markets this can operate to remove threats such as rogue traders and bad practice (e.g. selling rotten food amongst the good) and prevent crime (e.g. extortion by organised crime, gangs or similar). Research has a role in identifying tried and tested social structures that already contribute to sustainability, and could do a lot more. Vail’s work is in fact an example of the potential for preserving and enhancing extant traditional institutional practices. These are themes picked up in the paper by Suh.

Suh raises the topic of a sustainable, or permanent, agriculture (i.e., permaculture). The permaculture movement is one aiming for food production through self-sufficiency, small-scale production, low energy intensity and resource recycling. As Suh explains, this appeals to centuries (or millennia) of traditional techniques and practices that were only relatively recently displaced on a large scale by fossil fuel and capital intensive high technology farming and monoculture. Yet, production systems go hand-in-hand with social systems and the downside of the past was often dictatorial regimes, enforced labour and oppression of the peasant farmer (e.g. feudalism). A modern permaculture, if advocated as the dominant food production system, therefore needs to address how social and economic systems might be structured. This is a problem shared by the degrowth community (Asara et al., 2013; Dobson, 2013).

Organic gardening, energy-efficient building and eco-village development are all components of permaculture. In terms of the values underlying permaculture there is a strong link to Eastern religions such as Taoism and a form of ‘Buddhist economics’, which the paper explores. More broadly a set

of values are encapsulated in the ideas of communitarian living, although Suh is concerned that this, and self-sufficiency, might act more against popularising permaculture than in its favour, especially in countries like Australia. So we face the problem of how to change the system while appealing to those who are adverse to such a change, or have a vested interest in maintaining the system as it stands.

Just as Suh sees the need for permaculture to address a broad range of social, ecological and economic issues in order to establish itself, so Mason sees the need for the Green, or ecological, building movement to be more encompassing in its understanding of environmental problems and intragenerational equity. Mason favours a virtue ethics approach. Equity is then a virtue to be debated in the public realm, a space for agency and dissensus, demanding respect. Mason then uses this framing to review eco-building practice in the UK.

In building construction the selection, use and disposal of materials has far-reaching consequences both environmentally and socially. The headline scale of material and energy consumption alone demands our attention. While the link between the social, ecological and economic factors seems self-evident, this is apparently ignored by the formal framing of requirements by the eco-building sector (and in a similar way to the WHO Healthy Cities initiative criticised by Vail). A common narrow priority is energy efficiency reduced down to carbon emissions and running costs. Materials imported long distance, from rare materials made by forced labour under oppressive conditions will be ‘just fine, thank you’, because such factors are simply not considered. As Vail notes, perhaps something could be learnt from the Fair Trade movement. Instead, social justice is kept separate as a distinct independent realm of sustainability; following in the footsteps of the flawed and unreal ontology of the United Nations which they have encapsulated in their three pillars metaphor. Mason notes some pioneering exceptions in eco-building that offer hope, but also a general failure of concern over linking the social, ecological and economic.

Here we see the ideological shadow of the Green economy and techno-fix ‘solutions’, e.g. the passive houses. In the drive for the zero, or positive, energy-in-use target the embodied energy and pollution in the construction materials and the existing infrastructure destroyed (for new housing) is ignored. New is assumed best. Eco-housing then becomes limited to high technology and a luxury item for the rich or Green hedonist. As Mason notes, aesthetics are likely to come before environmental or social concerns. Purchasing an eco-building is then merely a lifestyle fashion statement for the individual or marketing image for the corporation.

For many the very concept of sustainability raises scepticism as to content. Certainly seeking sustainability through traditional economic growth makes sustainable development simply an oxymoron, like the associated metaphor of natural capital. Yet, sustainability as a movement has offered the potential for

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bringing together important criticism of current systems, structures, organisations and actors. It helps unite the concerns of small-scale food producers with eco-builders, disparate discourses on environment and development, and activists from the global North, South, East and West. As with other banners rallying those in social justice and environmental movements, the problems lie in filling the gap between recognising positive ways forward and implementing them both personally, professionally, socially and institutionally.

So, while wanting to transform society away from impending disaster, we also need to make room for everyday practice as well. For example, creating urban activities such as wildlife gardening and gardening as environmental stewardship may act to engage, empower and help humans and non-humans alike (di Paola, 2013; Shaw et al., 2013). These are not revolutionary acts *per se*, but they may also have a serious role to play in social, ecological and economic transformation. In Vienna (as throughout Germany) the *kleingarten* (small garden) developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, like allotments in the UK, as a means of self-sufficient and local food production in hard times for an expanding urban population. On-going loss, and changes in use, of these (and other) green spaces mean losing ways of being in the environment and their associated values and institutions (conventions, norms and rules). Thus, projects for the radical transformation of society, such as *décroissance* (Muraca, 2013), could be complemented by seeking sustainability in forms of daily practice which are immediately implementable for many. This implies both challenging ourselves by pushing the boundaries of personal development (Raterman, 2012), while also becoming more active for reform to change the development path of society (Booth, 2012). The two should be complementary.

What the papers in this issue point to is the fragmentation and compartmentalisation of modern thinking whether about individual action or public policy. This appears in the neglect of the hierarchically structured relationship between the economic, social and ecological systems and the perpetuation of the myth that they remain substantively independent. Related to this are the hidden decisions over which values humans choose to express, protect and destroy: the neglect of value differences (Hector et al.), the judgment of value (Jolibert et al), the loss of traditional values that protect and enhance the environment (Vail; Suh), selecting the right way to value things (Mason). The ground is shifting beneath our feet, individualism to the exclusion of the social, market values to the exclusion of the humane and ecological, anthropocentrism to the exclusion of the non-human world, and the private good to the exclusion of the common good. In seeking sustainability we are really seeking a more meaningful existence for all humanity. An existence that enables us to relate to, rather than divorcing us from, biophysical reality and the non-human world within which we are embedded.

CLIVE L. SPASH

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