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Review: Sustainability
by Leslie Paul Thiele

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Thiele, L. P. *Sustainability*. Second ed. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016 [2013], 240pp, ISBN-13: 978-1509511068 hardback, US \$69.95; ISBN-13: 978-1509511075 paperback, US \$22.95. Note: Part of the Polity Press series, *Key Concepts*.

Sustainability and sustainable development have become key concepts in various disciplines and they sometimes sound almost like buzzwords that still need to be (re)defined, explained, situated, and reconceptualised. Understanding sustainability and sustainable development is critical for environmental studies, and translations of these terms can sometimes be even more challenging: for example, in French, sustainable development is usually translated by the expression “développement durable” and sometimes by “développement soutenable”, and both expressions don’t exactly imply the same dimensions and nuances. Whenever people or experts refer to sustainable development, they should always explain how they conceive it; obviously, sustainable development is more than just an attitude, so it must be conceptualised and delimited. That is exactly what political scientist Leslie Paul Thiele (from the University of Florida) aims to do here.

To begin his revised and updated edition of *Sustainability*, Leslie Paul Thiele writes that “Sustainability is typically understood as the effort to use natural resources less wastefully” (p. 3). However, this general definition of sustainability is not totally satisfying, so the author adds that “it cultivates a sense of responsibility for maintaining the integrity and improving the health and resilience of the ecological, social, and economic networks that support us” (p. 3). In a concise formula, Thiele argues that “Sustainability requires change” (p. 3), and draws from social sciences and indirectly from Foucauldian social theory to indicate that sustainability “needs to be a practice” (p. 9). With these details in mind, readers are provided with a starting base and a driving force for understanding and encompassing the idea of sustainability.

Thiele’s *Sustainability* is comprised of seven chapters; the first half is inevitably more historical and revisits the fundamentals and major trends; but these pages must not be skipped because of authors and studies featured as part of this opening discussion — for example the book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, by Jared

Diamond (Allen Lane, 2005) (p. 94). The second half of Thiele's *Sustainability* is more rewarding, focusing on political theory but also on culture (mainly in the final chapter).

In some passages, Thiele's argument and opinions can be debatable, for example in chapter 4, about "Technological Solutions and Their Problems", which raises the issue of new technologies' usefulness whenever facing environmental hazards: should we see technology as "a panacea" (p. 114) despite its numerous and unpredictable side effects? Thiele answers "No" (p. 114). And do we need more technology to solve environmental hazards? Most scholars would rather contend we need more efficient, and more creative technology. Finally, the seventh chapter about a possible culture of sustainability should be seen as the most original and the most innovative. The first six chapters prepare the reader who is led to this final demonstration about how individuals are set into a general narrative, even in terms of environmental issues, through various schools of thought, for example utilitarianism (p. 179). Referring to philosophical, ethical, and even spiritual dimensions that are needed to reach "an ethic of sustainability" (p. 179), Thiele explains that "our cultural practices place us in narratives that provide a sense of direction and make our lives meaningful" (p. 176). Elsewhere, when referring to sustainability education, Thiele argues that it "must foster a sense of responsibility, develop investigative and problem-solving skills, and cultivate the experience of empowerment or agency" (p. 192).

Thiele's refreshing *Sustainability* has three main qualities: it provides dozens of enlightening definitions for sustainability; the numerous works cited are efficiently brought and synthesized; and throughout this whole text, there is clarity and forthright style. Recapping its salient ideas, Thiele cleverly concludes that "In many respects, sustainability is a 'lifestyle' movement" (p. 193). This kind of affirmation can only be appreciated once the reader has gone through the whole book; it incorporates all the author has taught us. As for its possible readership, Thiele's *Sustainability* will be of interest firstly for university students at all levels in environmental and sustainable development education; moreover, scholars in science and political theory will find an original, instructive, rigorous, and creative work as well. Public libraries should own this book and decision makers should read it.

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