

Review: The Elgar Companion to Geography, Transdisciplinarity and Sustainability

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This impressive *Elgar Companion to Geography, Transdisciplinarity and Sustainability* is not just a geography handbook; it effectively deals with sustainability using geographical concepts through a transdisciplinary approach. Therefore, contributors base their research with a term, for example “wilderness” (p. 6) or “mountain” (p. 16), or even “Quinoa” (p. 384), then they conceptualize it from various perspectives, and they finally apply this idea or term without the usual disciplinary limits to finally capture all the possible dimensions, changes, diverging applications, and unforeseen issues related with the resulting concept. As argued by Sébastien Boillat in Chapter 19 (on “Decolonizing ecological knowledge: transdisciplinary ecology, place making and cognitive justice in the Andes”), transdisciplinarity enables new forms of collaborations and can in return open new organizations of knowledge: “Theoretical transdisciplinary postulates a general, philosophical openness to plurality of knowledge due to uncertainties that question the attribution of science as the only global form of knowledge” (p. 315).

Topics covered here are diversified, but it is the links being made between infrequent associations of concepts that are really stimulating, inspiring, and refreshing, for example: “Urban monology: mountain cities as a transdisciplinary research focus” (Chapter 9), “A biocultural ethic for sustainable geographies” (Chapter 11), plus many references to cultural sustainability (see Chapters 17, 20, 21). All contributions are rigorous and engaging.

Nowadays, in terms of sustainability, a holistic approach is often needed, not just because previous attempts have not resolved the previous issues and challenges, but mainly because the experts who try to address these ongoing issues usually observe that current problems related to the Environment are multi-faceted, complex, constantly evolving, and global. Therefore, emerging solutions must be multileveled, interactive, and adjustable, with an indispensable social dimension. This is confirmed in Chapter 8 (titled “Why sustainability matters in geography”) by Friedrich Zimmermann and Susanne Zimmermann-Janschitz: “Participation, empowerment and social learning can be seen as the most effective tools for sustainable spatial development” (p. 130).

We get 25 commissioned chapters (plus a welcome epilogue) that aptly illustrate how transdisciplinary approaches can foster renewed ways to do research whenever the focus is not just geography but spaces and places; not just cities but also urban centers, crossroads, and metropolises, with some inevitable but predictive issues such as cosmopolitanism, gentrification, and mixed identities. Moreover, the *Elgar Companion to Geography, Transdisciplinarity and Sustainability* gathers a real spectrum of international experts — and not just the selected experts from the usual Anglo-Saxon universities, and that is a plus. As for its potential readership, this handbook is mainly fitted for professional researchers and open-minded scholars who are willing to accept the principle of transdisciplinarity, without the temptation of seeing these colleagues from other fields as “impostors”. Even young researchers are sometimes fiercely resisting to transdisciplinarity, and on the other hand, some experienced academics have been applying these transdisciplinary principles for decades; it is not a matter of age, but it rather depends on how a researcher has been trained. Some people in academe see themselves as the “guardians of their discipline”, and it is almost impossible to transform them or to convert them into apostles of transdisciplinarity. But thinkers such as Georges Canguilhem (1904-1995) and his doctoral students like Fernand Dumont and Michel Foucault (not quoted here in this book) have been transdisciplinary academics during their whole career.

Obviously, this hefty *Elgar Companion to Geography, Transdisciplinarity and Sustainability* is not a “history of the transdisciplinary methods” and does not aim to teach you how to “think transdisciplinary”. In fact, most contributors do not even provide their own definition of transdisciplinarity in their chapters. Taken altogether, these essays nevertheless succeed in many ways in depicting the new advances made possible whenever using a transdisciplinary framework in sustainability studies. My only (minor) quibble would be about a passage in the Introduction: co-editors Fausto O. Sarmiento and Larry Frolich should have acknowledged French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) for the paternity of this famous slogan “Think Globally, Act Locally” (p. 8). This formula is used here, but the author’s name does not appear anywhere, as if it came from the sky or from the lonely crowd. Jacques Ellul, too,

was a great pioneer in global and transdisciplinary thinking; he should get (belatedly) some recognition for that.

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