



# **POSTSCRIPT**

The contribution  
of social sciences  
to building a more  
sustainable  
common future

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Publications on sustainability and sustainable development are countless and very diversified. So what does this book tell us that is new on this subject? What value-added does it bring to the multiple debates on concepts that are so frequent in the academic, political, and media agendas in the last three decades?

This book provides a comprehensive and refreshing approach from the viewpoint of the social sciences. It aims to rehabilitate, broaden, and strengthen two key concepts for critically re-thinking contemporary societies, different desirable futures, and possible transition pathways to achieve them.

The book brings together contributions that stem from projects developed autonomously, unrelated to each other, from very different perspectives, disciplinary areas, themes, and methodologies. This plurality of viewpoints and objects of study could have had high costs in terms of lack of coherence and unity. However, explicitly or implicitly, the various chapters share a series of unifying elements that award an interesting and innovative related variety, to retake a concept that is now widely used in some areas of the economy. The reading of this book allows, therefore, a diversified, but cohesive, panoramic view departing from the social sciences and based, in my opinion, on seven main aspects.

First, the authors acknowledge the overly polysemic and ambiguous nature of the concept of sustainability, the contradictory character of the objectives, and the often allegedly neutral formulation of the idea of sustainable development, its role in legitimising unacceptable situations, the theoretically inconsistent use with which both have been applied, and the huge distance separating the objectives from the results achieved. They thus encompass the wear and tear that the two concepts tend to suffer – turning into vague ideas or mere politically correct words – and the disenchantment of many of their advocates – faced with exercises of wishful thinking of dubious effectiveness and questionable utility.

This critical analysis of the nature of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development and the way they are often used and appropriated does not discourage the authors but rather inspires them to re-conceptualize them from innovative and broader perspectives. This is the second aspect that deserves to be highlighted in this book. Although following different paths and using different arguments, the authors aim to contribute to the construction of a new paradigm of sustainability and sustainable development. Maintaining as a central reference the principles of justice and intergenerational distribution present in the initial formalization of sustainable development enshrined in

the so-called Brundtland report (1987), several authors point out that a new paradigm of sustainable development is possible only outside the rationalist, anthropocentric, technocentric, and post-political readings that continue to prevail in much of scholarly production. But they also stress that a new paradigm of sustainable development cannot fail to challenge the current processes of globalization, liberalization, financialization of the economy, and growth without limits. It is therefore a question of looking at sustainable development as a political project and at sustainability as a programmatic concept of societal transformation, redefining ends and means, priorities and values, social norms and practices.

The third aspect concerns how the various chapters contribute to the construction of a new paradigm of sustainable development and, consequently, to more sustainable processes, systems, relationships, and actions. In some cases the scope of the concept of sustainable development is broadened and made more comprehensive and inclusive by looking beyond its three canonical pillars (environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and economic growth) and the recently added fourth (governance), or even the 17 sustainable development goals of the United Nations (2015) Agenda 2030. In others, alternative visions of sustainability and sustainable development are adopted from perspectives that, although with no fully coincident focuses, share the objective of seeking to replace the rationalist, anthropocentric, technocentric, and post-political readings still prevailing today, as previously mentioned: thick and deep green, ecocentrism, ecoeconomy, biocentrism, amongst others, exemplify this epistemological and theoretical turn. In others still, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development are interspersed with inter- or transdisciplinary scientific agendas, some recent (e.g. climate change), others emerging (animal studies, ignorance studies, etc.).

The reconceptualization and construction of a new paradigm of sustainable development introduces elements of epistemological and theoretical disruption, but also integrates previous legacies. This is a fourth important element to highlight in this publication, in which several authors reconstitute the genealogy of recent concepts – circular economics, food security, media sustainability, etc. – from contributions that go back directly to the mid-twentieth century and sometimes, indirectly, to concerns already present in works of the nineteenth century. In the same sense, the geohistorical approach adopted in some case studies demonstrates the importance attributed by the social sciences to the understanding of emerging realities in

their relationships of connection and tension with previous social, cultural, and political contexts.

The broadened and enriched vision of sustainability and sustainable development underlying the various chapters of this book ascribes a crucial role to some cross-cutting concepts. We will emphasize three: transition, coevolution, and societal transformation. Several chapters focus on the processes and conditions of transition to sustainability in different domains: agricultural systems, energy-efficient and low-carbon systems, dietary patterns and sustainable eating habits, good governance, climate change transformative adaptation practices, etc. Also the concept of coevolution – between different actors, but equally between humans and nonhumans – pervades several of the chapters of this book, reflecting the relational approach adopted by many of the authors. Finally, the concept of societal transformation – including the components of social and institutional innovation – emerges naturally as an essential medium in a publication in which the need to build new paradigms of sustainability and new models of sustainable development is the element shared by all the authors. The fifth element to be emphasized is therefore the indispensable role of the social sciences in understanding values, norms, actors, social and institutional practices, and forms of governance that can stimulate transition regimes, forms of coevolution, and modes of societal transformation towards desirable futures, because they will be more sustainable, and possible futures, because they will be socially more accepted.

The sixth aspect to be emphasized, partly incorporated in the previous one, relates specifically to the role, responsibility, and capacity of action of the various types of actors, from international organizations to citizens, from companies to scientists, from policy makers and public sector employees to social movements and activists. The mobilization and empowerment of these actors for societal change is crucial. But within a debate that views sustainability as a collective design and sustainable development as a political project, it is particularly interesting to see how several authors see this debate as a way to go beyond prevailing perspectives in studies on inequalities or human rights. They do this by defining broader references, such as planetary life and the rights associated with all the species that inhabit the planet Earth and the various biophysical systems that sustain it.

Finally, and as the seventh aspect, it is worth highlighting the concern shown by several authors in proposing suggestions for new research agendas and a new generation of public policies in very diverse fields. From agriculture

to digital technologies in the field of energy or the fight against corruption, from food safety to the role of pets in children's lives, from adapting to climate change to the digital media ecosystem.

Is the concept of sustainability an oxymoron, and is the idea of sustainable development just wishful thinking? And have both been used too often to legitimise questionable decisions or in a theoretically thin, inadequate, and even inconsistent manner? This book, and the gaze from the social sciences it reveals, shows that it is not an inevitability to answer affirmatively to the questions posed. Conversely, it is inevitable to consider sustainability as a mobilising collective design and sustainable development as the central objective of a transformative political project. As long as they are based on rigorous and critical perspectives and social and institutional practices of change, these two concepts are crucial for building a liveable planet and a more just society, that is to say, a more sustainable common future.

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