

*Review of Mariella Nocenzi & Alessandra Sannella (eds.),  
Perspectives for a New Social Theory of Sustainability,  
Cham (Switzerland), Springer, 2020, pp. 123*

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*Review of Mariella Nocenzi & Alessandra Sannella (eds.),  
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**Abstract:**

Review of the collective book *Perspectives for a New Social Theory of Sustainability*, recently edited by Mariella Nocenzi and Alessandra Sannella.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Social Theory, Contemporary Societies.

The collective book *Perspectives for a New Social Theory of Sustainability* (2020), edited by Mariella Nocenzi and Alessandra Sannella for the Springer publisher, has an ambitious goal which makes it particularly interesting both for scientific exchanges in the field of social sciences and for political debates in the public sphere. As often happens in work aiming at re-founding a paradigm thinking that orients new research methods and action programs it holds together a *pars destruens* and a *pars construens*. And this internal dialectic of overcoming, between negations and proposals, is present in all the essays, in those that focus on particular aspects as well as in those that elaborate a systematic framework.

So, what is the object of this cognitive and practical turning point?

In short, the book aims to provide a new perspective to describe and explain the constituent elements and reproduction mechanisms of contemporary societies. This is a complex project that integrates theoretical and methodological aspects and requires a step forward in the interdisciplinary collaboration of the social sciences. The aim is to generate a paradigm shift that defines in a new way which phenomena have to be studied, what questions have to be asked, how to carry out the problems and what rules have to be followed in interpreting the responses obtained. The systemic crisis that affects our age justifies the urgency of the challenge – a crisis that becomes

evident if we take a global viewpoint on ideological conceptions and implementation policies for the development models of social systems.

In recent decades, the exploitation of the planet's resources and the "time-space compression" of social relations have grown exponentially, with increasingly less governable structural effects on nature, communities and people's lives. This driving force of globalisation is moving along the tracks of a purely economic model that is indifferent to the principle of balance between man and the environment and the principle of social redistribution of wealth. To emphasize the human factor, many scientists call Anthropocene this geological era characterized by the destruction of natural and social ecosystems and the incapability to face a series of dysfunctional consequences – well documented by data on pollution and inequalities – without an evolutionary learning that focuses on unexpected aspects of modernization.

The inadequacy of the development model demands to rethink some principles of social theory equally shared by the different traditions of thought founded by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber and by the past century's revision. A first credit of the book edited by Nocenzi and Sannella is to underline how much the categories and analysis tools of contemporary researchers depend on the legacy of their "fathers" and how much there is a need for a deep cultural discontinuity.

The Archimedical point of this breakthrough is the concept of sustainability, indicated as humanity's goal for the human ecosystem balance (homeostasis). While the sustainable development question has become a central issue in the policies of nation-states and international organizations – as attested most recently by the "Agenda 2030" programme, signed in September 2015 by the governments of the 193 UN member states – on the other hand, sustainability has not yet been assumed as an effective knowledge paradigm for the exploration of social structures and processes, in order to revise the tools of analysis of the social sciences. As a logical consequence, the book has the ambition to make it starting from an epistemological perspective that introduces a "double hermeneutics" on the dialectic between human agency and non-human agency, and redefines the conceptual framework, first of all the most fundamental categories, such as time, space and social relation: «It is no longer possible to define time in a linear or circular way such as Nietzsche's (1964) assumption for Modernity, when it was compressed to the "now, the very soon." Thanks to the digital

revolution, projection to the future and the disintegration of the present fostered a rethinking of this basic sociological category, and also a re-interpretation of the other constituent concept, namely space. Subsequent to globalization and the coexistence of human and non-human actors, the compression and extension of time has affected the spatial dimension of the agency, position, and role of non-human actors, their shape and the dynamics of their relations. It was so effective that, taking into account temporal and spatial dimensions, we can now consider social relations as another essential element of society, probably the most strategic for the profile of a new social paradigm to adopt in an interpretation of current society» (Nocenzi & Sannella, 2020: 10).

To lead the world on a sustainable path, there must be a redesign of governance, but first and foremost a radical change in the mindset of individuals and collectives is needed. Without a real paradigm shift in the perception of problems, the choice of sustainability as a key criterion in development policies is inconceivable. The second credit of the book is to propose an integrated approach that considers sustainability as a permanent reference point, both avoiding the usual split between social theory and social research, that is between analytical frameworks and measurement techniques, and bridging the gap between the knowledge of social sciences and the strategic planning of public and private institutions. All specialist knowledge is involved, in order to overcome the restricted boundaries of the scientific-academic divisions and work according to innovative trans-disciplinary approaches. It is necessary to consider sustainability in the economic, social and environmental dimensions through a coherent theoretical and methodological model. It is for this reason that Enrico Giovannini highlights the importance of international organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as an area in which to define a “holistic approach” to sustainable development. As Franco Ferrarotti points out, in the chapter *Social Research: On Participation and Critical Detachment*, first of all, this requires a reflective effort by sociologists, who must realize that the indispensable and irreplaceable research tool is their experience as social beings, totally involved in the reality under investigation: «This is certainly a sign of maturity, and indicates that sociological research, at least in certain fields, has progressed beyond the purely academic stage. The social scientist knows that he cannot take cover and keep discretely to one side. The process of research demands fieldwork, in direct contact with the

human reality that is under examination; it is based on the exchange of information; it is essentially a dialogue that cannot take place without leaving traces. The notion that the social scientist is not setting out to do anything, but is only trying to understand and to analyze, can no longer be regarded as acceptable. The questions that the investigation asks his interlocutor-subjects are not lost in the empty air; they become part of a situation of change, and are to some extent decisive in determining its course and further development» (2020: 100).

To understand this complex reality, a self-reflexive step concerns the fundamental theoretical frameworks of traditional sociology. The three essays in the first part of the book –*Theoretical Overview on Social Sciences and Sustainability*– in fact, examines their possibilities of adaptation to the changing new reality, considering the material and symbolic reproduction of global society. In *Sustainability and the Crisis of the Theoretical Functional Model*, Paolo De Nardis discusses the functionalist approach seeking to prove that the sustainability paradigm is grounded in that sociological tradition. By drawing on critical revision of Talcott Parsons' AGIL theoretical model, we could redesign the logic of intervention in the social systems organization that helps us to pursue the sustainable development goals (SDGs), and appeal to common ideals, and thus ensure the functional integration of social structures in the Agenda 2030 transition. In *Environmental Sustainability and the Evolution of Capitalism*, Uliano Conti compares traditional and contemporary capitalism, trying to actualize above all the sociological research of Alan Touraine. He argues that, thanks to technical progress and scientific research, under the pressure of collective movements on a global scale, social systems could redefine the idea of human life and the conditions of existence of human beings, while the capitalist system could co-evolve from the perspective of environmental awareness. Paolo Corvo's essay – *The Thought of Zygmunt Bauman as a Key for Introducing a New Social Theory* – explores the importance of Bauman's work in order to acquire a critical sociological imagination. This would make it possible to interpret in an innovative way the social transformations on the questions of freedom, justice and the suffering of human beings. And it would help us to understand how essential it is to realize that sustainability could transform both social systems and consumer lifestyles. The first part of the book thus proposes some sociological approaches that could find a social transferability of the

research results, in order to carry out analyses that are not detached from social reality.

The second part – “Methodological Paths and Perspectives for a New Social Theory of Sustainable Development” – aims to develop analytical paths for social research that can promote sustainability and sustainable development in three important fields: the definition of methodological and statistical tools, the detection of pathological phenomena in social reproduction and the planning of public policies.

In the international scientific literature and in the programmes of world organisations, sustainable development has been operationalised from three main dimensions: environmental, economic and social sustainability – although the definition of the concept of “threshold” and the related choice of measurement criteria for the latter dimension are still much debated. In the chapter *Sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): From Moral Imperatives to Indicators and Indexes. A Methodology for Validating and Assessing SDGs* by Angela Delli Paoli, Felice Addeo and Emiliana Mangone, the assumption that sustainability is a multidimensional concept but not directly measurable (apart from indicators and indexes), allows precisely to introduce a more efficient methodology to assess the different moral dimensions of sustainability. As the Authors point out, this is done through three steps: «Firstly, we aimed to clarify the conceptual and normative framework that underpins SDGs. Secondly, we aimed to suggest a methodology for assessing SDGs that is able to go beyond single indicators, without losing the information on individual moral imperatives and their compatibility with each other. Thirdly, we aimed to validate such a framework, and through it, to assess the performance of European Union (EU) Member States with regard to SDGs» (2020: 49).

The following chapter – *Toward an Understanding of Psychopathological Syndromes Related to Social Environments* – by Paolo Cianconi, Federica Tomasi, Manuela Morello, and Luigi Janiri provides a psychological analysis of social change, looking at some of the most common effects and problems, from the collective macro-social level to the individual micro-social level. In this case, the sustainability paradigm offers a new form of social pathology criticism, giving useful perspectives and methodological tools and showing how psychopathologies react and expand through technological, political, communication and economic fields.

Finally, the chapter *Sustainability as a Key Imperative in Project Cycle Management: Sociological Considerations* by Maurizio Esposito analyzes the results of the implementation of Project Cycle Management strategies in Western societies, with particular attention to “sustainable welfare” programs. In this way, the social sciences can recommend a methodological path for an executive application phase.

Ultimately, the book can be interpreted as an attempt to renew the tasks of the social sciences, regarding: a) the clarification of cognitive, value and expressive models in the public sphere, in order to generate a cultural change; b) the rationalization of instrumental and strategic action in the reproduction of social systems, where knowledge is put at the service of decisions in economic and administrative organizations (social technology); c) the elaboration of a social theory able to reconstruct the structural components and mechanisms of change of social formations and evaluate pathological phenomena in the processes of material and symbolic reproduction. The paradigm of sustainability returns these tasks in an innovative way to the social sciences, in particular to sociology. And yet, not least, a reflexive dimension concerns the awareness of the limits of all forms of knowledge. For this reason it is good that the book contains the essay *Sustainability Through Unsustainability? Unintended Consequences and Emancipatory Catastrophism* by Carmelo Lombardo and Lorenzo Sabetta. The two Authors, in fact, use Robert K. Merton’s analyses of the undesirable and unforeseen effects of human actions within the framework of Ulrich Beck’s sociology of risk, to confront us with a warning. While it is true that the “positive” reform of thinking, lifestyles, law, economics, science and politics has also been triggered by something as negative as global climate change (“emancipatory catastrophe”), on the other hand, the sustainability paradigm could also conceal pitfalls. Rather, the lesson to be learned is to get used to ambivalence.