



The Elgar Companion to Geography, Transdisciplinarity and Sustainability. Edited by Fausto O. Sarmiento and Larry M. Frolich

Author: Perlik, Manfred

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 41(3)

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm263.1>

**The Elgar Companion to Geography,
Transdisciplinarity and Sustainability. Edited
by Fausto O. Sarmiento and Larry M. Frolich**

Cheltenham, United Kingdom: Edward Elgar, 2020. 448 pp.
Hardcover: £ 185.00, ISBN 978 1 78643 009 0. E-book:
ISBN 978 1 78643 010 6.

Manfred Perlik

manfred.perlik@unibe.ch

Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern,
Mittelstrasse 43, 3012 Bern, Switzerland

© 2021 Perlik. This open access article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Please credit the authors and the full source.

The publisher's policy likely determined the string of terms chosen as the book's title instead of more clearly stating its subject matter, which is nothing less than a new conception of mountain area research. This conception is based on the Andes as a reference that shows the specificity of the relationship between global North and South. In defense of the title, one may argue that mountain regions are only a context for the concept of sustainability, but here it is the other way around: The impact of globalization, which is more visible in mountain regions than elsewhere, serves as the starting point for conceptualizing place, scale, and time.

Divided into 26 chapters in 6 parts, and written by practitioners and academics, the book presupposes knowledge on sustainability. Instead of the boring 3 pillars discourse, sustainability is enriched with the discussion of scale (and its change over time) and the need for a transdisciplinary approach. The necessarily normative character of sustainability becomes visible in supporting the concerns of the global South, indigenous populations, and self-determination in the food cycle. Trade-offs are discussed, but mainly on the conceptual level, using the different aspects of scaling and framing. This is illustrated by binaries (one may also say dichotomies) concerning the actor relationships in a given social field. The binaries denote the extremes, but what really matters is the in-between: At what point are higher mortality rates "normal," and at what point are they extinction, for example, of an animal or plant species? This creates the context for thinking in terms of the relationships among the stakeholders of a society. Transdisciplinarity is seen as a prerequisite for sustainability. Selecting contributions from the global North and South, the book meets the claim of bridging codified knowledge of the North and tacit knowledge of the Andes in the South.

In the conceptual part I, Fausto Sarmiento (chapter 1) develops *montology* as critical geographical research. The concept introduces a bundle of new terminologies starting from the Andean research experience, including the interrelationships among the 3 subsystems of *Andeanness*

(sociocultural), *Andeanitude* (mental imaginaries), and *Andeanity* (biophysical). Its value lies in the elaboration of a framework to place mountain issues with all their complexity on the international agenda. Esmeralda Guevara and Larry Frolich (chapter 2) develop a "geography of sustainability for a high-energy, urbanizing, digitalized human species" (p 31). This is done by means of a series of binaries (poor versus rich, North versus South, urban versus rural), not focusing on the rarely appearing extremes but on the in-between. This corresponds roughly to the various concepts of social compromises or the *rappports sociaux* in the French tradition of regulation studies. Bernard Debarbieux and Jörg Balsiger (chapter 3) place sustainability in a coordinate system of scale and frame. Both dimensions depend on the needs of the stakeholders involved. *Scaling* serves to define the level of observation or the relationship between micro and macro, which makes the problem or interest manageable to address. *Framing* depicts the importance of a problem, with which a consensus is to be created with society to help certain political-social concerns to achieve a breakthrough, for example, the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Both scale and frame depend on the constellations and assertiveness of the societal stakeholders. The authors emphasize that they are less and less territorially bound but belong to a multitude of transnational, overlapping networks. Helena Norberg-Hodge (chapter 6) discusses the constitutive role of national modes of regulation for global value chains. Societal rules of hegemonic states determine the global baselines of accumulation regimes via the global division of supply chains and the investment/disinvestment strategies of the economic actors involved. This chapter is the only one of its kind; one would have wished, additionally, for a theoretical contribution showing economic logics across time- and scale-dependent value systems.

In part II ("Disciplinary Development"), Ricardo Rozzi (chapter 11) derives human cultural development from the interaction of biology and social practices, that is, materialistically, overcoming the usual generalizing "culture" as a black box. As "pristine nature" no longer exists, given early hunting-gathering societies and humans being integral to nature, one would need to go far back (to the biological separation of primates) to understand the cultural being of man. This reveals the relativity of the idea of protection: What state of the landscape does a society want to protect and on what ethical grounds?

In part III ("Resource Exploitation"), Mario Donoso-Correa and Fausto Sarmiento describe urban planning in Cuenca, Ecuador's third largest city at 2500 m above sea level (chapter 16). While European discourse emphasizes compacting and minimizing land consumption with ecologic-aesthetic arguments (while systematically ignoring social trade-offs), the authors highlight inner densification as one of the drivers of land speculation, increasing the cost of living for the urban poor, and ultimately driving their displacement from the city. This chapter illustrates what sustainability is about: It has to do with scales, or in other

words, with perceptions that vary according to stakeholders' interests and power.

In part IV ("Country Examples"), Lynn Resler and colleagues present geographic information system (GIS) analyses of land-use change in a national park region (chapter 17). It is, again, a good example for paradoxes and zero-sum games in the context of mountain sustainability. What is gained ecologically with the exclusion of human impact in the core areas is lost or negatively overcompensated by disproportionate use in the gateway towns for the parks' tourists. The work invites us to rethink the polarization of use intensities. Sebastien Boillat's chapter 19 is important because he elaborates on the differences between the Western logic of place-making and Andean indigenous place attributions. While Western sciences practice an analytical approach to decide on land use, the belief system of Central Andean indigenous peoples gives places an integrative status as living beings with agency. This seems to me to be compatible with Bruno Latour's actor network theory. In character, this chapter follows Rozzi's contribution, not in linking biological and cultural evolution, but in connecting subsistence economies and protoscientific explanations. Both chapters (11 and 19) achieve the necessary connectivity of understanding between North and South without affirmatively using terms like spirituality or religion. Parts V and VI conclude the book. Chapter 26 in part VI is a brief summary of the 4 dimensions of sustainability: (1) scale, as an instrument to take different perspectives from different actors; (2) the delineation of concepts along changing spaces with the help of different disciplines; (3) the differences in interpretations of sustainability between the interests of developed and developing countries; and (4) the relationship between persistence and change.

The book joins mountain research, sustainability, and traditional knowledge. It has 3 strengths: First, it proposes a new approach to tackling human-environment relationships, social action, and the target systems of society via a variety of dichotomies, scales, or relations. Regardless of what you call it in the end, sustainability is a man-made construct following normative consensus. It would be important in future steps to operationalize this concept via selected questions. These conceptual contributions are strategically important for mountain research as a prominent subdiscipline tackling questions of sociospatially disadvantaged territories. Second, the book breaks the bias of mountain research, which often consists of debating the landscape-aesthetic consumption preferences of urban people, culminating in the sterile debate on whether wolves or sheep should live in the mountains. It enriches the global debate on mountain development with many new aspects. These aspects differ from the US-American school of the natural park idea as well as from the European discourse, which oscillates between equilibrated territorial development and offer-oriented valorization. They also differ from the Himalayan discourse, dominated by India and China, by proposing an approach that is explicitly

critical of growth. This alone is worth reading—a kind of "biodiversity of mountain research." The increased inclusion of problems and interests of the global South in the mountain area debate and the anti-neocolonial basic attitude are important especially for the European and North American research tradition. Moreover, with the Andes, the world's second largest mountain range is now prominently represented, which allows more comparative research. The third important point to be emphasized is the transdisciplinary approach, which includes above all traditional ecological knowledge and the local actors who support this knowledge. The book rightly gives these approaches a lot of space.

Three criticisms remain. My first one is that power relations are hardly conceptualized, neither in general terms nor in relation to the internal differentiation of Andean societies. Of course, local societies are under pressure from the global hunt for resources, but at the same time, local actors are also drivers of this development: as migrants supplying remittances, as providers of commercial cultural services, or as ambitious politicians (eg during the presidency of Evo Morales, under the guise of indigeneity, forest clearing increased massively). In addition to the North-South asymmetry, the differentiation of intraregional power relations and their impacts should have been addressed, too. Second, the book lacks an interpreting synthesis. A huge compendium of texts, each written by specialists in their fields, inevitably raises contradictions and trade-offs between the approaches, the analytical methods, and the proposed solutions. A comprehensive synthesis chapter could have addressed this issue. Finally, often-used terms like "spiritual," "sacred," or "culture" create a sense of unease. As general notions, they cannot explain social acting. They need to be translated into social categories. Although mainly defined by Western scholars, they are open to critique and allow for emancipation of transformational change. In the 1950s, for example, social anthropologists and sociologists like Germaine Tillion and Pierre Bourdieu described and analyzed scientifically, and from an explicitly non-Eurocentric perspective, the agricultural society in the Algerian mountains under the French colonial regime. Uncritical use of terms like religion and spirituality hides the fact that they fueled (and continue to fuel) ethnic identity policies and are in fact affirmative categories (which mask the colonizing function of Catholicism as well as today's ultraliberal Pentecostal movement). Geography becomes toothless if it accepts narratives like spirituality without question. As an economic geographer, I feel entitled to this criticism.

Having said this, I nonetheless recommend the book. It is an important one that brings 2 new aspects to the debate. The first is in claiming resistance to the global hegemony; the second is in insisting on known aspects of mountain specificity but without ending in branding (eg the marketing of quality food). With the Andes (in addition to Europe, North America, and Asia), a fourth discussion is launched.