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Document Version

Final published version

Published in:

Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research

DOI:

[10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146907](https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146907)

Publication date:

2014

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Citation for published version (APA):

Ren, C. B., O'Dell, T., & Budeanu, A. (2014). Sustainabilities in the Cultural Economy. *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, 6(5), 907-911. <https://doi.org/10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146907>

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Download date: 16. Oct. 2024



Sustainabilities in the Cultural Economy

By Carina Ren, Tom O'Dell & Adriana Budeanu

How does sustainability manifest itself when examined from within the broad field of the cultural economy? This was the pivotal question of the call for contributors originally sent out for this special issue of *Culture Unbound* on *Sustainabilities*. The reason for “multiplying” the concept of sustainability was a wish to critically address and examine its multiple applications and tensions through different disciplinary lenses. By looking at how the three pillars of “people, planet and profit” intertwine, or as also noted in several of the contributions, remain detached, we were eager to capture and address the concept not as a coherent entity, but rather as multiple – as a matter of *sustainabilities*.

As sustainability has become an increasingly recognized or even essential label, some would say add-on, for tourism and retail products, corporate and educational profiles, development policies and place brands, the concept is also becoming increasingly (or at least more visibly) entangled in paradoxical and controversial relationships, which render clear that it is far from an uncontested or easily applicable term. Also, multimedia exposure reveal time and again the difficulties or ambiguities, for instance, in producing, tracing and trusting organic produce or “green” retail products, responsibly investing public and private funds, or in maintaining a balanced triple bottom line. The question is whether the difficulty of handling the concept is equivalent to its failure. Is what we are seeing in the media an early sign of its future disappearance? Are the current “cracks” a sign of the concept’s pliability or a sign of its collapse?

With this special issue, we wish to contribute to the ongoing interrogations into the usability and value of sustainability as a concept. What does it actually do to organize or focus a common effort for the people, profit and planet which it claims to include into its equation? Ultimately, we hope that the ongoing investigations and testing of its manifold and disputed features, uses and manifestations, its pliability, continuous reshaping and boundaries may lead to new ways of transgressing the limits of this notion so widely (mis)used in today’s society.

The Contributions

The present special issue is composed of four articles, which all revolve around the concept of sustainability. However, and nicely fitting the special issue title of *Sustainabilities*, they do so very differently. While three of the articles devote particular attention to its linkage to environmental issues (Kopnina; Smythe; and

Johnson), its attachments to questions of economy (all be it as an aspect of the social) (Smythe) and its socio-cultural implications (Johnson), a fourth (Fuentes) is concerned with how green consumers are enacted through a sustainability centered marketing strategy. In the following, we will introduce the contributions and reflect on how the contributions as a whole inform us on the concept of sustainability,

In the article *A Historian's Critique of Sustainability*, Smythe proposes – as the title suggests, to critically challenge “the three-pronged diagram that integrates economic, social and environmental factors of planning and decision-making” (p. 914). Through the classic humanistic approach of examining origins, in this case of the sustainability framework, she shows how scholars and professionals are more bound “by past formulations of society, economies and the environment than they realize” (p. 914f). In her critique of the sustainability model, Smythe calls for a new holistic sustainability paradigm, which does not isolate the economy, but rather integrates it back into the social, where – she argues - it rightly belongs.

In *Contesting “Environment” Through the Lens of Sustainability: Examining implications for environmental education (EE) and education for sustainable development (ESD)*, Kopnina reversely discusses the implications of seeing not the economy, but the environment as a social construction, that is a culturally and socially mediated concept. Showing how this approach limits the understanding of nature to its human perception, she further elaborates on how nature is commodified and rendered instrumental in environmental education. As she argues, education must be re-instated as being for and not of nature, in order to sustain nature.

By the third article, *Work at the Periphery? Issues of Tourism Sustainability in Jamaica*, the alert reader begins to discern why sustainability has been so difficult to delimit or define, as Johnson directs our attention to the third “leg” of sustainability, namely the social, hereby completely shifting the perspective upon sustainability. Johnson does so by means of an ethnographic exploration of the impact of the all-inclusive resort on local communities and economies. By focusing on tourism related local impacts and responses, which specific communities stand confronted with, Johnson seeks to address the contested term of sustainable tourism from a socio-culturally or local economic point of view.

After a three tiered tour de force, sustainability stands before us as a highly malleable – some would say ambivalent, concepts as they all question, as Kopnina puts it, “whether the objective of balancing (the) social, economic and environmental triad is achievable” (p. 933). In the fourth contribution, Fuentes shifts the attention away from the difficult questions of defining the concept or balancing its components through a performative approach to the concept. He does so by asking not what sustainability is, but rather how it works, in the present case as part of the enactment of the green consumer. Through an analysis of the sustainability strategies by which so-called green retailers market their products, Fuentes

describes the coming together of a knowledgeable green connoisseur, a green hedonist in search of the good life. This consumer, as noted by Fuentes, is neither rebel nor activist. In the described case, the consumer is not political, but rather a pleasure seeker with a green conscience.

As argued by Smythe in the present volume, simply bringing society, economy and environment “together in a polygon has not created and cannot create sustainability” (p. 915). The current contributions display great disparity in addressing and describing the polygon, for instance by turning to deep ecology (Kopnina) or to the social deconstruction of economy as external to society. However, all contributors seem to agree that sustainability will not do in addressing the serious challenges which it was conceived as an answer to.

In spite of their notable differences in academic backgrounds, methodologies and field of study, the four contributors point to the concepts’ political substance (or lack thereof). When Smythe asserts that “concerns for both people and planet calls for thinking more deeply and rigorously about the interconnectedness between people and the environment” (p. 926), such concerns are not strictly “academic” as noted by Kopnina in regards to her discussion of deep ecology. They are also political. Therefore, as Fuentes notes, it is vital to study cultural phenomena such as the green consumer, because “by determining whom the green consumer is/should be we are also to some extent determining how sustainability is to be approached” (p. 974).

It is this struggle over how sustainability is approached – or perhaps rather how sustainability multiplies into sustainabilities in a variety of contexts and practices, which needs to be continually addressed by scholars. As such, our wish in opening this call for papers was not to raise attention to the lack of clear definitions of what sustainability *is*, but rather to consider how we may come to terms and deal with its inability to perform as a coherent concept.

As editors to this volume we had asked contributors to reflect on sustainability in relation to the cultural economy. We received over twenty proposals and we chose four submissions for publication. But we still miss a very different perspective on what sustainability can imply, which none of the contributions directly addressed, although Smythe’s discussion of the human spirit (and human qualities such as truth, beauty and goodness) does approach. That is, as we reflect upon sustainability we are surprised, dare we say worried, by the degree to which this cultural economy focuses upon very public, and rather impersonal relationships to the subject. Why don’t we frame sustainability more in very personal and emotional terms? In a time in which stress, burn-out, divorce, and feelings of inadequacy are so prevalent, why aren’t these issues framed more often in terms of sustainability. How do we sustain love in a time so preoccupied with career success and economic return, because while very many people succeed in doing this, very many people do not. The triple helix which so many scholars interested in sustainability circle around is bound to the three “p’s” “people, planet and profit”. All too

often this is framed as the “social, the ecological and the economic”. But the magic of life is so often bound to the realm of the emotional. How can we better understand sustainability on a private plane between individuals? This is also a cultural economy of affect in need of further attention. As editors for this volume we wonder why discussions of sustainability remain so anchored in discussions of rationality, choice, morality, and public engagement. In the literature there exists a field of study focused upon the cultural economy of the emotional and private plane, not least developed by scholars such as Hochschild (2003; 2012), but perhaps it would be fruitful to more explicitly develop this field in relation to the question of sustainability.

The contributions to this volume relate critically to the notion of sustainability, pointing to the limits of the concept, but the case may be that sustainability as a subject needs to be focused much more on a personal, emotional and thereby cultural plane. If we can't save the world (and the authors to this volume and so many others are in agreement that discussions of sustainability seem to be ineffective at best in moving in this direction) maybe it's time to sink the bar, and reflect upon the cultural economy of sustainability and personal relations. That would imply shifting the focus of discussions of sustainability from the political and economic plane to the personal and social plane. To this end we would argue for a need to follow Smythe's line of argumentation, and even push it further, reframing sustainability not in terms of the economic, environmental and social, but removing the first two of these three legs upon which sustainability has been framed over the past 50 years (or at least diminishing the focus upon them), and adding a new one... the emotional/personal – and testing the premises upon which sustainability might be framed, not as a project of political strategy or rational choice, but as one of emotional orientation and cultural disposition.

An introduction is not the place to fully develop such a position, but perhaps we can encourage readers and other scholars to take this as a point of departure for further contemplation and debate. In closing, we would like to thank the contributors and the editorial team at *Culture Unbound* for joining us on the journey that completing this special issue of *Culture Unbound* implied, and look forward to following the debates on sustainability that will follow in the years to come. We are keen to learn what may come next in the common endeavor to develop appropriate and useful concepts and tools to create a world – and worldly practices – accommodating people, culture, nature, and the realm of affective engagement as inclusively as possible.

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