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Book review

Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life, Chris Gibson, Carol Farbotko, Nicholas Gill, Lesley Head, Gordon Waitt. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham, UK and Massachusetts, USA (2013). 237 E-ISBN: 978-1-78100-621-4

Household consumption forms an essential part of the production–consumption chain, because consumers make the final choice of the goods and services they consume, and their lifestyles determine how they influence sustainability practices. Behaviours should be seen as part of the solution, and not simply as part of the problem, in promoting sustainable practices, because their values and participation must be the basis for actions and change (Cohen et al., 2010).

The United Nation Johannesburg Summit, held in 2002, recommended the development and promotion of the “Marrakech process” or the 10-Year Framework of Program on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP), led by United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). In the several task forces of this program special attention has been given to the household roles and sustainable lifestyles and education for sustainable consumption (UNEP, 2011).

Even after more than a decade after the Johannesburg Summit, patterns are still quantitatively proven unsustainable (Kubiszewski et al., 2013). So, the needs of educative tools and guidelines to help consumers doing their better options, is vital also within the huge amount of information and marketing pressing their options (Clark, 2007; Caeiro et al., 2012).

The book entitled “Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life”, written by Chris Gibson, Carol Farbotko, Nicholas Gill, Lesley Head and Gordon Waitt, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, Cheltenham, UK and Massachusetts, USA (2013). p. 237. E-ISBN: 978-1-78100-621-4 (about \$130 with Hardcover or \$40 Paperback), is a relevant educational tool for households and researcher. The authors have as central premise that household scale matters to the human response to climate change, and more broadly to problems of conservation, biodiversity protection and sustainability.

This book stems from Australia Research Council (ARC) projects and fellowships related with household sustainability, namely the Discovery Project “Making less space for carbon: cultural research for climate change mitigation and adaptation”. The various chapters of the book were drawn and written mainly based on research conducted by post-doctoral fellows and research students working at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Within these projects, data from a large Australian survey, over a two-year period, in everyday household practices, goods, consumption and attitudes were collected, as well as in-depth ethnographic materials from

longitudinal research. Based upon the international extensive quantitative and qualitative research related with household sustainability, different issues of the design and manufacture of products are discussed, alongside with available research documenting about energy, water and other resource use implications.

The book is organized in 20 chapters. It starts with a first introductory chapter followed by headings framed around an essential task, everyday item or practice of household life, like for example related with eating (chapter 2), dressing (chapter 3), warming (chapter 5), toilet (chapter 6), cleaning (chapter 7), driving (chapter 10), flying (chapter 11), solar hot water (chapter 15), garden (chapter 16), mobile phones (chapter 14) and Christmas (chapter 17). In addition broader issues related with retirement (chapter 18) or even death (chapter 19) are also presented. In each chapter the authors debates the dilemmas of each theme, based on literature and the conducted survey to households, adding as examples some quotes of the interviews. At the end of the chapters measures of what to do are also discussed. The authors assessed the household sustainability in terms of material environmental impacts like greenhouse emissions, water and energy use, biodiversity and ecosystem loss, soil erosion and pollution, according to a life cycle analysis. Therefore, throughout the various chapters of the book it is synthesized existing research on the carbon footprint and life-cycles impacts of production, according to a “cradle to grave” approach, to gain a more complete picture of their environmental imprint and to seek better the progress to collective response to climate change by airing and discussing such dilemmas of sustainability.

In many cases, in household sustainability issues, there are no easy answers as to which course of action is most appropriate. By addressing the dilemma, the authors aim to increase understanding of both the barriers to household sustainability and the unclaimed sustainability works being done by householders. According to Gibson et al. “how households are conceptualized in climate change adaptation talk, and whether this relates to the way people live and make homes, is a key tension running throughout the book”.

The book also link sustainability to related social justice concerns with equality and exploitation. As the authors stressed on the book “the best way to reduce your environmental impact is to be poor, as economic activity is strongly coupled to fossil fuel use.” Nevertheless, also as the authors highlighted “the rich and well-educated may be among the strongest advocates of “green practices”.

The authors, on the conclusions chapter, stressed several important points trying to answer the question: “is the household one place to imagine meaningful change?”. They summarized important conclusions such as the households are not homogeneous, socially or geographically, and are unpredictable, but enormous knowledge and capacities exist in the households. Also, according to the authors, for the “big solution to come”, beyond creativity

and technology innovation, humans need a stronger sense of stewardship over and interaction with material things, what will likely prove vital to human survival and possible “future happiness”.

Along the book perplexing dilemmas of household sustainability are discussed, some technical or socio-economic but others are emotional, cultural or behavioural, related to complex choices like having a baby or getting divorce. Nevertheless “non-traditional” aspects of sustainability could be better explored on the book, like those involving health needs, crimes, unemployment, religion, the blurred distinction between peacetime and wartime, collaborative learning or participative democracy (Giannetti et al., 2015; Ramos, 2009). Other researchers (e.g. Frugoli et al., 2015), also emphasized that the adoption of new measures to help societies to achieve sustainable development must ensure the link between the economy and intangible variables related to real progress and well being (like democracy, quality of life, happiness, among others). In addition, the sustainable development goals and targets of the United Nation (UN, 2015), launched in 2015, following the Rio+20 UN conference, stresses the importance of “non-traditional” variables, like for example the promotion of well being and peaceful and inclusive societies.

The integration of the micro scale of families with global climate change problem is a strong point in this book, and as authors concluded, any change that a household makes, although “microscopic details of household life matters enormously”, are limited, unless connected to large-scale actions. It is fundamental that household sustainability measures should foster dynamic interactions among all spatial levels, through a cascading process, linking with projects, plans, programs and policies at local regional and national levels. These links could be better highlighted on the book, as an important guide for researchers, decision makers and households.

Energy rebound effects, although referred once in the text are not explored and should be explained and evaluated at householders level. In fact, households should know that technological improvements on energy consumption does not necessary mean actual resource saving (see Dimitropoulos, 2007). Within the concept of sustainable degrowth, alternatives to individual purchasing actions should be applied, where innovation is driven by collective action far beyond the action of price signals. Progress is to be measured by new criteria, such as community-building, collective action, and construction of new infrastructures of provision, in which well-being is not wholly tied to consumption (Cohen et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, “Household Sustainability: Challenges and Dilemmas in Everyday Life” is a critical and comprehensive book guide, with several guidelines and advises for more sustainable household behaviours and practices, and providing signals to what to improve, not only for research’s and educators but also for decision makers and informed households, engaging them

with the demanding, hard and holistic task of being truly “green” but having always the notion that “grander international solutions” may never come.

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