**Review of the Volume
“The Sustainable
Development Theory: A
Critical Approach,
Volume 1 - The
Discourse of the
Founders” [Palgrave
Studies in Sustainability,
Environment and
Macroeconomics],
Authors: Ion Pohoăță,
Delia Elena Diaconășu,
Vladimir Mihai
Crupenschi, Palgrave
Macmillan, 2020**

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Abstract: Sustainable development is a hot topic (pun intended) in the landscape of today’s social sciences. The subject is difficult to fairly assess and it is even more difficult to draw meaningful conclusions regarding it. Yet, its importance demands that questions be answered and answers be provided. But, in order to get to that point, it is most important to understand what the topic is really about. This is the goal of the book “The Sustainable Development Theory: A Critical Approach, Volume 1 - The Discourse of the Founders” written by Ion Pohoăță, Delia Elena Diaconășu and Vladimir Mihai Crupenschi and published by Palgrave Macmillan. The three scholars endeavour to provide a clear understanding of the concept of sustainable development, of what it is and, more importantly, what it is not. They ground their analysis in the works of the founders of economic sciences, aiming to achieve two objectives. First, they wish to provide healthy foundations to the concept of sustainable development, to ground it in historical truth and actual fact. Secondly, they wish to prove that those who planted the roots of our actual economic and social structures did not overlook the matter. The book attains both of them and thus helps the readers - both specialists and educated learners - to find their way in the jungle of ideas which is the field of sustainable development today and also prepares them to understand the modern confusion on the topic that is discussed at large in the second volume.

Keywords: *sustainability, development, growth, wealth, pollution, nature.*

How to cite: Bostan, I. (2021). Review of the Volume “The Sustainable Development Theory: A Critical Approach, Volume 1 - The Discourse of the Founders” [Palgrave Studies in Sustainability, Environment and Macroeconomics], Authors: Ion Pohoăță, Delia Elena Diaconășu, Vladimir Mihai Crupenschi, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Economics and Administrative Sciences*, 6(1), 69-72. <https://doi.org/10.18662/lumeneas/6.1/30>

The book comprises seven chapters, laid out in chronological order so as to follow the natural evolution of the concept of sustainable development as it has been charted by the great classical and neoclassical thinkers. The authors follow the narrative of the idea and accurately map the inflection points that shape the becoming of the idea. Before starting on the historical path, an introductory chapter explains the current debacle regarding the concept of sustainability and the importance of sorting it out. The authors convey to the reader the message that no actual progress can be made in the real world until people settle on a clear and faithful understanding of sustainability (Pohoață et al., 2020).

Chapter 1, “The Avatars of Sustainability: A Necessary Prolegomenon” deals with the current state of sustainable development as a concept that is more form than substance. Its usage is more often dictated by ideological or political needs rather than scientific rigour. A simplification and clarification exercise is needed to restore sustainability’s original meaning. The chapter also tackles the definition proposed by the Brundtland Commission. The authors argue that the Brundtland definition is more akin to a message whose keyword is ability. The message also paints sustainability as specific to each country and not a global, uniform, one size fits all formula.

Chapter 2, “The Classical Discourse - From Start-Up to Harmony. What Is Sustainable About It?” lays down the idea that sustainability is built on specificity, not homogeneity. Nature is predestined to generate inequality and society can only compensate, not eliminate it. Work is required to maintain sustainability and the special unequal - the entrepreneur - leads the way. Individual interest is the propelling force of society. Social justice cannot take precedence and stationarity, in all its forms, does not stand up to the scrutiny of the market.

Chapter 3, “Institutionalism Drawn Upon Founding and Sustainable Roots” casts the classicists as the first institutionalists who discovered the role of formal and informal institutions in wealth formation. The virtues of education, the sense of duty and respect for human dignity are all rules that the classicists deemed important and beneficial for society. The role of the state regarding the art of government is also broadly discussed, as is its inevitable role as a costly intermediary and universal milking cow. In the end, the authors draw the conclusion that the rules of classical institutionalism are a good starting point for making sense of sustainability.

Chapter 4, “Economic Dynamics According to the Thoughts of the Founders” goes into the economic details of sustainability conveying that it is better for the beginnings of development to rest on personal

accumulation rather than loans. Savings that allow the materialisation of productive investments are seen as the right formula. The dynamics of production - distribution - exchange - consumption represents the right path to sustainability. Stationarity can be seen as nothing more than a moment of respite. It cannot represent an end goal. In this context, the idea of degrowth appears to be suspicious. The authors conclude that the classicists did not reduce happiness to material wealth, but they were certain that poverty could not lead to happiness.

Chapter 5, "The Convoluted Sustainability of the Neoclassical Discourse" starts with the exploration of the premise that the neoclassical theory is incompatible with the Brundtland message. Diverse human preferences and the priorities of the poor cannot be reconciled with the mathematical framework of the neoclassicists. Yet, as far as applied economics are concerned, the authors argue that the neoclassicists were much more mature. They outlined the shape of the future welfare state engaged in a permanent and delicate act of redistribution. On the other hand, externality analysis and the concern for cities as living spaces are ideas that were first given form by the neoclassicists and they should be commended for it.

Chapter 6, "Free Competition: An Invitation to a Less Explored Type of Sustainability" starts from the idea that the natural price of commodities and money represents the best chance of attaining sustainability. For this to be possible, the authors think necessary the existence of classical free competition limited only by the rule of law and devoid of monopolies. The attainment of such a state can be impeded by two factors: state administered social prices and central banks engaged in quantitative easing operations. Both are maladies that plague sustainability and exacerbate the worst effects of the economic cycle.

Chapter 7, "Instead of General Conclusions - A Few Additional Thoughts" lends the authors the occasion to voice the message of the book in a much concentrated form. There are three conclusions that they find particularly enlightening: the idea of a unique recipe of sustainability is obsolete, the drunkenness of words smothers the project of sustainable development and the development model suggested by the founders has remained valid and successful. If all three were to be taken to heart, sustainable development would stand a much better chance of becoming reality.

In the end, the work of the three authors, Ion Pohoacă, Delia Elena Diaconășu and Vladimir Mihai Crupenschi, "The Sustainable Development Theory: A Critical Approach, Volume 1 - The Discourse of the Founders" serves both as a stark warning and a grave reminder of the perils of

forgetting the past. In this case though, the fear is not that it may repeat itself, but rather that it may be irreversibly lost. Sustainable development is a very complicated subject. In order to figure it out, the authors strongly argue that many great lessons are already available. All that is needed is the clarity and will to once again put them to good use.

References

Pohoacă, I., Diaconășu, D. E., & Crupenschi, V. M. (2020). *The Sustainable Development Theory: A Critical Approach, Volume 1: The Discourse of the Founders*. Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54847-6>