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## Reviews

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**Toward sustainable communities: transition and transformations in environmental policy** edited by D A Mazmanian, M E Kraft; MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2009, 365 pages, 2nd edition, £32.95 cloth, £16.95 paper (US \$50.00, \$25.00), ISBN 9780262134927, 9780262512299

Can anyone define 'sustainability', 'sustainable development', or one of the many other permutations of the word 'sustainable' that permeate our culture today? That is a question that many people are asking and contributors to this book are seeking to answer. But it does not propose a new and embracing definition to add to that of the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) or the 3 Es (environment, economy, and equity) of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998). That task would be as unsatisfying as it would be unsuccessful. "Sustainability, like democracy, faith and freedom, is hard to define concisely" (page 33). I suspect it will always remain so; forever standing as an aspiration more than an end goal or defined state. So, wisely, the contributors seek to define sustainability by history and example. They focus their lens on the policies that sought to foster environmental protection and track them as they evolved from 1970 to the present. The reader is then left to the task of creating his or her own definition. The book is highly satisfying and informative.

The opening chapter sets the stage; the three epochs through which "people think about and frame the issues of environmental protection, and the strategies and policies used to address them" (page 7) are described. The first epoch, 'Regulating for Environmental Protection', runs from 1970 to 1990 and marks the foundation of federal environmental regulation in the United States. The third epoch, 'Towards Sustainable Communities', began in 1990 and runs through today, bringing into focus the potentiality of sustainable development as we begin the 21st century. The intermediate second epoch, 'Efficiency-Based Regulatory Reform and Flexibility', is described as a transition stage (perhaps a bit optimistically) that began in 1980 and ends at some time ambiguously called "the 2000s" (page 8). In fairness, the editors point out that "epochs are never as clear and crisp in practice as described analytically" (page 26).

Those who have read the first edition of the book (Mazmanian and Kraft, 1999) already know this. The three-epoch model (and the preface for that matter!) remains virtually unchanged from that offered ten years ago. But overall the book has been expanded from nine to twelve chapters, with seven of them updated and five offering brand new material.

The book is nicely structured and appropriately bounded. It points out that sustainability is a global phenomenon but narrows its focus to the movement as it is unfolding in the United States, a point that may deter some international readers. Further, while it would be intriguing to speculate on *why* or *how* we have come to be where we are, the authors stick to the *what* of this evolution. To cover all of these aspects would require far more pages than the publisher would likely allow. Finally, the contributors do not stoop to pedantic definitions of the issue or provide an overly moralistic litany of the environmental ills of our day. They carefully and clearly lay out a series of case studies that describe the phenomena they are studying and offer a nice structure within which to analyze and understand it.

The editors claim "an interdisciplinary orientation appropriate to the subject matter" (page 29). But there is a distinct predominance of the policy and political science fields. This seems natural and appropriate. The use of both academic and practitioner writers is refreshing and adds to its impact. The chapters themselves cover a wide range of environmental issues and policy domains designed to address them (air, water and watersheds, land use, regional and urban planning, climate change). And, while in the case-study chapters themselves there is scant attention paid to the three epochs that open the book (I would have preferred to see more connections within the chapters themselves), the concluding chapter offers a very lucid and helpful roadmap to help the reader pull it all together. You may not know how to define sustainability in a ten-second elevator pitch after reading this, but you will have a pretty good

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understanding of the evolving process that is leading towards sustainability and the multiple dimensions on which to evaluate it. And then to top it all off the editors offer ten research questions and areas of needed inquiry to send you on your way.

In the end, I must admit that I am still not clear about the distinction between sustainable communities and the other sustainable permutations that exist. Perhaps not much has changed since authors in the first edition proclaimed, "most definitions of sustainability and of community yield enough ambiguity to frustrate even the most careful attempts at conceptual linkage and integration" (page 45). But overall this book is a very nice addition to the sustainability literature and I recommend it to students of sustainability and policy, whether they are in the worlds of practice, scholarship, or are simply interested observers.

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#### References

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