

Eric Neumayer

Weak Versus Strong Sustainability: Exploring the Limits of Two Opposing Paradigms

Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2010, 272 pp., \$29.95.

Eric Neumayer published the first edition of this book a decade ago. The distinction between the two paradigms of ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ sustainability has since become commonplace in the environmental movement.

Weak sustainability denotes a primary concern with amelioration of the environmental stresses that accompany continued economic growth. It results characteristically in the advocacy of economic policy instruments, such as emissions trading and carbon taxes, to promote behavioural changes conducive to reduction of adverse environmental impacts. It is an extension of neoclassical welfare economic theory. Proponents of strong sustainability, by contrast, contend that natural assets are non-substitutable, identify the quest for economic growth as the more fundamental problem, and posit the need for comprehensive deep ‘green’ solutions to looming ecological catastrophe.

Neumayer’s book, updated since the first edition to include more recent data and reference to studies such as Nicholas Stern’s report for the UK government, presents a clinical consideration of the two rival approaches to sustainability. It analyses their conceptual underpinnings and the problems of appropriately measuring the key variables, (sustainable economic welfare, genuine savings, defensive expenditures, resource depletion, ecological footprints, material flows, greened national statistics and modelling procedures, etc).

The result is a rather ‘technical’ work, in which the economic and political interests and institutions actually shaping global warming and environmental policy responses are eerily absent. It is also a somewhat ‘problem saturated’ analysis, showing the difficulties of developing conceptually consistent and quantifiable paradigms in environmental and ecological economics, but presenting little that is problem solving.

The author himself concedes that this may appear as a rather pessimistic view of the state of play. Perhaps the problem derives from where the analysis begins – in the realm of orthodox economic theory. Starting from there significantly limits where you can get to in understanding ecological concerns. There is an old joke that comes to mind in this context: one person, when asked in the street by a stranger about how to get to particular place, replies ‘well, if I wanted to get there, I wouldn’t start from here’...

Mark Diesendorf

Climate Action: a Campaign Manual for Greenhouse Solutions

UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009, 256 pp., \$34.95.

This is a well-targeted book for concerned citizens who want to be personally active in confronting the challenge of climate change. The author is an environmental scientist who has had considerable experience with community and professional groups struggling for a more sustainable future. His approach is refreshingly ‘down to earth’, looking at what can usefully be done within the sphere of non-violent action to confront the corporate interests who would ‘put their profits before the planet’.

The book considers who these vested interests are in what he dubs the ‘greenhouse mafia’. It goes on to examine the fallacies they have advanced to justify inaction despite the emergent scientific consensus on global warming. Seventeen such fallacies are systematically reviewed and refuted. Diesendorf thereby provides powerful ammunition for activists who might otherwise not quite know how to respond.

The book also reviews what could be done in practice to produce more sustainable outcomes. It considers the array of policies that could help to reduce energy consumption, accelerate the switch to renewables, stabilise population growth and foster a socially just transition. A multi-pronged approach is advocated. Equally important is the author’s review of strategies and tactics for winning campaigns – developing goals, organising groups, forming coalitions using the media, taking non-violent direct action, and so on. No environmental activist can afford to ignore the issues that this very readable book addresses.