

Sustainable Cities

Gwendolyn Hallsmith, *The Key to Sustainable Cities: Meeting Human Needs, Transforming Community Systems*, New Society Publishers, 2003, 256 pages.

An Index can be a good guide to a book's theoretical position. Take this one. "Capitalism?"—No. "Economic sub-system?"—Yes. "Nature?"—No. "Natural systems?"—Lots. "Society?"—No. "Social subsystem?"—Many. "Cities?"—Amazingly given the title, no! "Community systems?"—Lots and lots. This book combines ideas and concepts from systems theory with a somewhat denuded notion of sustainable development, but unfortunately is neither a reliable guide to either nor a productive mixture of both. Although systems theory is the centerpiece here, this is without the rigor of a Talcott Parsons or the creative reworking of a Niklas Luhmann, whatever your ultimate conclusions about the success or otherwise of these two theorists' work. Instead, the book applies certain systems-theoretical concepts—cycles, stocks and flows, leverage points, dynamics and feedback loops—to cities and communities (these two are consistently conflated throughout) in an attempt to show how city planning and local governance can produce sustainable urban development. This book is clearly aimed primarily at city planners, business managers and government officials. This means the text is replete with systems-management-speak, which becomes extremely wearisome very quickly unless you have an overwhelming desire to know why "servant-first leaders" are better than "leader-first leaders" (answer: they are more "emotionally intelligent").

It is almost impossible to be *constructively* critical about a book that contains a seemingly endless supply of anecdotes and homilies rather than evidence ("a stitch in time saves nine," "home is where the heart is," "no man is an island," "a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step" and more—they are all in here) and slides effortlessly from legitimate optimism about the possibilities for progressive social change into naïve quasi-spiritual solutions to urban problems. The book trades on a series of morality tales from the author's home state in the U.S. and adopts an idealist approach to systems theory by proposing (rather than demonstrating) that ideas and "mindsets" are system "leverage points"—small changes that can have large social impacts. The consequence for the book's general argument regarding sustainable cities is that it repetitively advocates the transformation of people's ideas and beliefs without a genuine appreciation of the obstacles and difficulties involved in turning good intentions into transformed behavior. These arguments read as rather tired and increasingly labored.

In spite of its many critics, sustainable development probably deserves better. In its original formulation, sustainable development contained the germ of a potentially unifying program aiming at long-term solutions to global problems. Combining "sustainability" from the "new" environmental movement and "development" as something other than more market-led "reforms" imposed on the developing world created a common space for all those pursuing the highest goals of the sustainable development platform. It is perhaps partly due to the mainstreaming of sustainable development that such a large pool of support and goodwill exists for the anticapitalist protests of recent years. Sustainable development in this form, as a motivating ideal, or in Zygmunt Bauman's terms, an "active utopia," at least performs a useful function within an emergent international social movement.

And yet, reading Hallsmith's book, you would hardly notice. This is because it works with another form of "sustainable development," one that, in spite of its language of "citizen participation" and "meeting human needs," is a top-down version capable of inspiring only managers, planners and governments. This form perceives that relatively small changes can bring about sustainability and that experts and systems theorists who understand community systems, social systems, political systems and economic systems can plan these. In this version, sustainability is transformed from active utopia into a proselytising mission with all of the problems that follow. The missionary approach appalls more than it inspires, and the missionaries become increasingly inward looking, relying on a hopeless idealism cut adrift from the real circumstances of life for the majority.

In summary, this is not a book for anyone genuinely trying to understand how sustainable development may be possible in modern cities or for those seeking to better grasp the potential utility of sustainability in long-term human development. However, if you liked Robert's *The Natural Step* (he provides an endorsement here) then you will enjoy this book, which is in essence, a religio-therapeutic self-help guide for planners of "community systems."

—*Philip Sutton*