

SUSTAINABILITY FRONTIERS: CRITICAL AND TRANSFORMATIVE VOICES FROM BORDERLANDS OF SUSTAINABILITY EDUCATION

Review by Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti

David Selby and Fumiyo Kagawa (2015) *Sustainability Frontiers: Critical and Transformative Voices from the Borderlands of Sustainability Education*, Opladen: Barbara Budrich Publishers.

This book, edited by David Selby and Fumiyo Kagawa, presents fourteen chapters written by educators practicing in Asia, Europe and the Americas. In the introduction, the editors offer a useful definition of ‘borderlands’ as special spaces where:

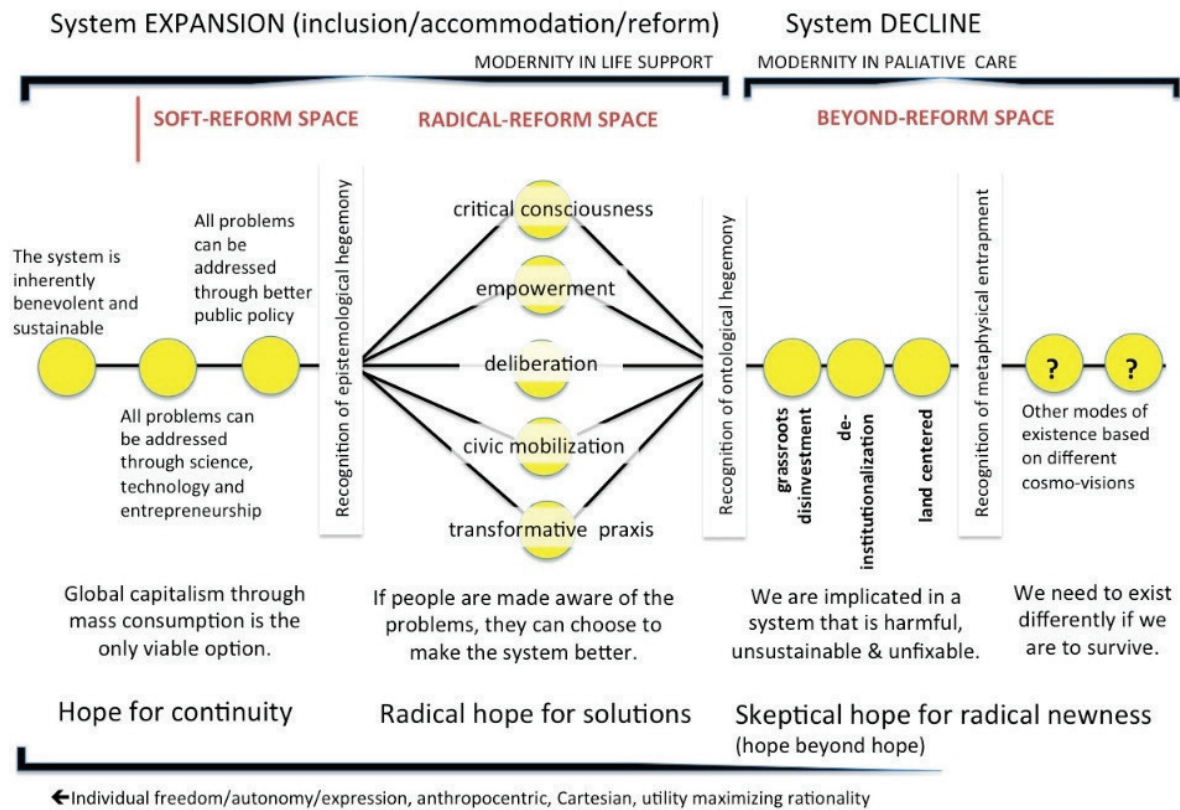
“people go to emancipate themselves from the trammels of ingrained assumptions, orthodoxies, habits and practices, to escape the tentacles of overwhelming power and influence. They are shifting, mold-breaking spaces catalyzing the production of hybridized knowledge, understanding and insight. As such, they are spaces of resistance, reconfiguration and renewal. They are also uncomfortable spaces marked by alienation and discomfort with dominant culture and trends, and by processes of negotiation between those who are equally discomfited, but of different mind. In this space, ambiguity is to be lived with and worked through” (13).

The volume as a whole raises important questions that are also significant for development education: What are the borders of our thinking (about development, sustainability or education)? What desires inform and circumscribe the dynamics of reproduction and contestation within it? And how can we access that which lies beyond its realm of intelligibility? The different chapters/voices represented in this edited collection of essays reflect the hybridity and ambivalence represented in the editors’ definition of borderlands. Some of my work in this area has also tried to offer social

cartographies about global change in education. These social cartographies illuminate tensions and differences that are often glossed over in attempts to prioritise measurable or ‘feel good’ educational results, especially in modern institutions like schools and universities. This instrumentalising tendency enforces a consensus that is averse to complexity, uncertainty and plurality, and that tends to reinforce systemic inequalities.

With that in mind, I re-constructed one of these cartographies of borderlands based on my reading of and responses to the texts.ⁱ The cartography I present in Figure 1 (which was best visually represented as a line, but which is not linear) shows three spaces of change in relationship to the wider phenomenon of (Enlightenment informed) modernity: soft reform, radical reform and beyond reform. Each of these spaces shows different clusters within them that represent attempts to respond to aspects identified as challenges to be overcome. Soft and beyond reform spaces are located within the framework of ‘modernity in life support’, while the beyond reform space is located within ‘modernity in palliative care’. Modern subjectivities underscore each space to different degrees. The recognition of epistemological, ontological or meta-physical hegemonies mark the limits/borders of each space, and they characterise different borderlands.

Figure 1. Cartography of perspectives on social change



All the texts in the edited volume share a common critique. This critique points to the space of soft reform as the location of mainstream practices of sustainable development and education for sustainable development. In the first chapter, Selby argues that soft reform practices of sustainable development are characterised by a number of myths, including the myth of civilisation, linear upward progress, unending growth, human centrality, and rational, scientific and technological dominion over nature. In terms of propositions for change, each text speaks back from a different location within the radical or beyond reform spaces – or between the two. I have tentatively classified the chapters in the cartography according to whether the strategy for resistance proposed focused more on epistemological, ontological or metaphysical hegemonies.

Educational practices within the radical reform space propose solutions that centre knowledge, human agency, dialogue, citizen

participation, identity, and intellectual normative stances on ethics. Chapters broadly located in this space, written by Sauve, McCloskey, Kagawa, and Elshof emphasise the critical work needed to question power relations and change institutions from within. Educational practices that gesture towards dis-investment in modern desires, subjectivities and institutions are located in the beyond reform space. Chapters broadly located in this space, written by Gonzales-Gaudiano & Silva-Rivera, and Trellez-Solis, Judson, Kato and Garlick emphasise solutions that attempt to localise, de-institutionalise and re-centre bio- and ethno-diversity in their experimentation with a wide range of alternatives ranging from indigenous approaches to intercultural relations to having wild animals as teachers of emotional/environmental literacies. Chapter 14, written by McGregor, presents a helpful summary of seven initiatives of sustainable education with useful comments on topics such as chaos, paradigm shifts for uncertainty, knowledge hybridisation and integration, and fear, denial and hope.

The concluding chapter, written as a type of manifesto ‘unlearning unsustainability’ at the borderland, offers a list of drivers for learning that can re-orient discussions and practices. These drivers include ‘must do’ statements such as: the interrogation of the root drivers of the crisis of sustainability; challenging articulations that fuel a reckless disregard for people and planet; opening up to the pain of the world and to different possibilities of existence; moving beyond anthropocentrism, and modern institutions (if need be); amongst others.

As with any text, especially one situated at very specific borderlands, there are also gaps and limitations to what could be covered in the book, including contributions arising from different fields of study and modes of critique. For example, the premise that we need to ‘unlearn’ unsustainability still seems grounded on the notion that unsustainability is primarily perpetuated through the spread of flawed information, which can be excised and replaced by more sustainable knowledge and ethical frameworks. However, what if the problem is not one of misinformation and ignorance, but rather one of satisfaction (with the comfort, and illusions of certainty and

control offered by the current system)? If these satisfactions are linked not to rational calculations and practiced intentions, but rather rooted in unconscious attachments and desires, then unlearning may be important but inadequate to the task of existing differently on a finite planet. If we are taught to desire things that are harmful to other people, if we cannot fully rationally identify these desires and if we tend to deny that which will bring us face to face with our own complicity in systemic violence, what can education do to support people to desire (at an embodied level, beyond cognitive choice) something radically different?

This book offers an important starting point for broaching such questions in the field of sustainable development, particularly those focused on the need to pluralise different modes of being. However, this is only the start of the kinds of conversations that will be necessary if we are to address the relationship between the historical construction of our present and the political and existential necessity to open new possibilities for the future.

Notes

i) Two important caveats need to be highlighted. First, cartographies are not to be interpreted as normative or representational devices, but as pedagogical/performative tools that can offer new ways of visualising a landscape/borderlands by shedding light on what has been normalised, what has been made invisible and what is perceived as ‘too difficult to deal with’. Second, part of the pedagogical task of cartographies, once new visualities are established, is to point again to what the tool itself has made invisible, in a never ending exercise of subjecting our educational practice to on-going reflexivity, exploration and engagement with the limits of our thinking, doing and being.

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti is Canada Research Chair in Race, Inequalities and Global Change, at the Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia in

Vancouver, Canada. She has extensive experience working across sectors internationally in areas of education related to international development, global citizenship, indigeneity and social accountability. Her work combines poststructuralist and postcolonial concerns in examining educational discourses and designing viable pedagogical pathways to address problematic patterns of international engagements, flows and representations of inequality and difference in education. Many of her publications are available at: <https://ubc.academia.edu/VanessadeOliveiraAndreotti>.