

ORGANIZATION THEORIZING FOR SUSTAINABILITY: UN-MAKING PEOPLE AND NATURE EXPLOITABLE

“We have to be responsible for our products from the very beginning. We have to ask ourselves: how are men and women being treated when they’re creating our clothes? What can we do to affect their situation, their lifestyle and their working hours?”

“Becoming more mindful about clothing means looking at every fiber and every seed and every dye and seeing how to make it better. We don’t want sustainability to be our edge, we want it to be universal.”

The words above appear on the website of a women’s clothing company *doing sustainability* as part of the way in which its members run the \$400 million corporation. At stake for them is social inequalities –be they class, race, and gender– and environmental issues such as the toxicity of dyes used in production processes and the mounting landfills that result from the ‘One-Third World’¹ consumption habits. ‘Sustainability’, as the members of this organization refer to it, entails the company’s approaches for maintaining fair working conditions and improving undesirable environmental effects in global value chains.

Within management and organization studies, the notion of ‘sustainability’ emerged as a gateway for questioning the very purpose of management theorizing (e.g., Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995). While a stream of research has shown critical efforts for analyzing inequalities and unsustainabilities in management sustainability discourses, a set of more instrumental perspectives for theorizing the relations of organizations, nature, and sustainability have gained increasing acceptance in the field. Managerial and strategic conceptualizations have appeared widely in the literature, directing the focus of the field towards particular economic concerns such as costs, risks, competitive advantage and deflecting attention away from *power relations* when discussing sustainability. Of major concern is that these concepts are informed by a specific political-economic view which has become normalized in management and organization studies, preventing us from seeing contradictory intentions in theorizing efforts for sustainability.

Hence, in this paper, my focus is on *knowledge-production practices* in management and organization studies, highlighting contradictions and offering other conceptual possibilities. Specifically, I engage with a well-known theoretical framework, the natural resource-based view (Hart, 1995). This frame explicitly discusses concerns regarding ‘nature’ and ‘people’ living in poverty, particularly in the global South, and it is widely accepted and utilized in management scholarship inquiring sustainability. My critical engagement allows me to articulate prevailing political-economic, ontological and epistemological assumptions in this framework, and brings attention to its contradictory purposes. My close reading shows that the NRBV frame proposes a competition-centered worldview and, in so doing, its theorizing efforts *make* people and nature exploitable. In order to escape from these prevailing premises, I argue that management and organization studies need new vocabularies and analytic concepts.

For this purpose, I bring in various theoretical arguments from feminist ecological perspectives and explore discursive possibilities for *un-making* people and nature exploitable.

¹ The terms ‘One-Third World’ and ‘Two-Thirds World’ are used to refer to the groups that share similar ways of living in different locations of the world. Specifically, these categories are based on the criteria of quality of life, and indicates haves and have-nots in both advantaged and disadvantaged locations. These terms are proposed and popularized by the works of Chandra Mohanty (e.g., Mohanty, 2003).

In particular, I propose the analytic concepts ‘social provisioning’ (Power, 2004) and ‘social reproduction’ (Bakker, 2007) which offer a focus on the processes of everyday life, and the analytic concepts ‘metabolic value’ (Salleh, 2010) and ‘commons’ (Federici, 2010) which enable paying attention to the well-being of natural and cultural ecologies. Finally, the figuration ‘nature-culture continuums’ (Braidotti, 2013) provides intellectual resources to imagine posthuman subjectivities, perhaps capable of escaping from exploitative thinking. I illustrate the value of these analytic concepts with empirical examples from my multi-sited ethnographic research in the aforementioned women’s clothing company’s global value chains. While this company’s practices offer exemplars to *think-with*, I further discuss how feminist ecological perspectives offer a way for re-framing sustainability in management and organization studies.

Research Setting

This paper is part of a larger project in which I follow the thread of ‘sustainability’ through multi-sited ethnography. Specifically, I trace transformation of cotton seeds along the value chain of a US clothing company in Turkey, until seeds become ‘sustainable’ t-shirts to be purchased at retail stores in the US. In the paper, I use the pseudonym ‘Sustainable Company (SC)’ to refer to this company.

This organization is a design and sales company with products manufactured in various US and international suppliers. SC is pioneer in promoting engagement for social and environmental issues in the fashion industry, and is currently in the process of attaining Benefit Corporation legal status according to the State of New York laws. Recently, SC initiated a project for mapping the global supply chain of every item it sells, in order to establish transparency and accountability for where its products come from.

Methodology: Multi-sited Ethnography

In conducting this fieldwork, I am informed by ethnographic methodologies. My interest in studying sustainability and following the transformations of cotton seed from farm to retail stores direct me to employ a particular approach, *multi-sited ethnography* (Marcus, 1995). This specific approach emerged in the 1990s as part of an intellectual shift for postmodernism in anthropology. Its formulation enables researchers to study complex objects such as contemporary phenomena that are global and simultaneously manifested in diverse local sites.

In localizing ‘sustainability’ within textile value chains, I explore *how sustainability is done in everyday encounters* at the production facilities, and attempt to *think-with* the people who practice ‘sustainability’ on the ground. Van Maanen (2011) reminds us that ethnography is constituted by several social practices in gathering data, and the most fundamental principle in these is the researcher’s subjecting herself as an instrument in this process. As such, in the summer of 2016, I followed the path of the cotton seeds in becoming an organic cotton t-shirt, and visited the cotton fields, spinning, dyeing, knitting and cutting-sewing facilities. All the facilities in this supply chain are located in the Aegean region of Turkey, making it accessible for me to travel between locations. Throughout this process, I gathered data through engaging in participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and obtaining documents from each company I visited. All in all, the ethic of doing accountable and good qualitative research have been central in all the phases of this ethnographic work (Tracy, 2010).