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Thomas E. Johnsen, Mickey Howard, and Joe Miemczyk. *Purchasing and Supply Chain Management: A Sustainability Perspective*. Oxon, United Kingdom: Routledge (2014) pp.

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The year 2015 marks a turning point for sustainable development as a global political concept. World leaders adopted the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September that includes a new set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals. One of these goals broadly addresses responsible production and consumption, signaling the importance of transforming production and consumption networks to progress towards sustainability. Like any other goals, however, it should not be considered in isolation as it forms part of the complex and interrelated challenges that are at the core of the very notion of sustainability.

The contribution by book authors Johnsen, Howard, and Miemczyk on purchasing and supply chain management (SCM) from a sustainability standpoint is thus very timely. Businesses have increasingly become viewed as primary actors in the exploitation and depletion of natural resources as well as responsible for much of the harm to society through their global operations and supply chains.

Global supply chains span international boundaries and connect a multitude of stakeholders through flows of material, money, and information. The field of sustainable SCM has become a major field of academic and managerial interest over the last two decades (Carter & Easton, 2011). As a growing community of scholars, we have notably become concerned about the need to embed sustainability within our teaching and educational practice.

This book by Johnsen et al. is a welcome addition because it embraces the notion that

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“sustainability needs to become an integrated part of purchasing and SCM rather than a separate add-on consideration” (p. 22). In this way it echoes recent influential contributions in the field (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014). It also departs from previous textbooks in the field that have tended to adopt fairly narrow views of sustainability (i.e., green supply chains) and / or SCM (i.e., logistics). Moreover, the book takes a very strategic perspective on the question of sustainable purchasing and SCM rather than providing an operational and technical approach. It, however, does not compromise on its practical contribution by providing topical examples and cases throughout.

Conceptually, the book embraces a triple bottom line view of sustainability (i.e., economic, environmental, and social aspects) combined with a long-term perspective on the journey that sustainable development implies. The book appears to be a true consolidation effort, building on the authors’ own previous research and also drawing on a breadth of contributions from the field. It adopts the authors’ following definition of sustainable purchasing:

The consideration of environmental, social, ethical and economic issues in the management of the organisation’s external resources in such a way that the supply of all goods, services, capabilities and knowledge which are necessary for running, maintaining and managing the organisation’s primary and support activities provide value not only to the organization but also to society and the economy. (p. 12, adapted from Miemczyk et al., 2012)

Theoretically, the authors draw on the Natural Resource-Based View of the firm, hence affirming their strategic take on the question, but also acknowledge influences from the

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Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) Integration approach and institutional theory (p.15) that place purchasing and SCM as external and relational concepts. This conceptual positioning is clearly articulated in the introduction and shows the authors' intention to ground their discussion in existing theoretical debates and current research.

Although the fact that the authors do not propose their own theory and instead draw on existing lenses may be considered a limitation, considering that most research to date in the field of sustainable SCM fails to show any grounding in theory (Touboulic & Walker, 2015), the adoption of this theoretical framework must be commended. The theoretical perspectives adopted by the authors are delved into more deeply in Chapters 4 and 5 in particular but it feels that they somewhat get lost in the rest of the book. However, to appreciate the book's full contribution, it is important not to solely consider its adopted theoretical perspectives but to include three additional key aspects: its unit of analysis, its educational contribution, and some of the specific themes it addresses.

Although sustainable SCM is about the connection between several organizations (including at least a buyer and a supplier), much of the research to date has primarily captured the perspective of the focal company with studies beyond the focal firm and the dyad remaining rare. Following from their own research (Miemczyk et al., 2012), Johnsen et al. propose a multilevel view of sustainable purchasing and SCM that enables exploring vertical relationship dynamics between buyers and suppliers as well as more complex network management aspects. This implies a consideration for nontraditional actors in supply chains, such as nongovernmental organizations, that play a critical role in driving the advancement of social and environmental agendas.

From an educational perspective, one is bound to ask what does it mean to educate for

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sustainable development? Much has been written on this issue and there is no agreement on the best approach. Nonetheless, many authors seem to converge towards the importance of promoting a nuanced and systemic view of sustainability and fostering critical thinking via situational and problem-based learning (Christensen et al., 2007; Dale & Newman, 2005; Steinemann, 2003).

Johnsen et al. have structured the book so that it includes practical notes as well as cases that can be used to illustrate the concepts discussed in the various chapters and to encourage problem solving. The different cases cover a wide range of industries and sectors from aircraft manufacturing, logistics, and food to financial services. This is particularly interesting as it allows an exploration of sustainability as a common challenge but one that entails diverse practical implications that may vary from sector to sector.

There is a clear deeper managerial underpinning to the book that is particularly well reflected in Part C, considering policy, tools, and implementation. Hence the book noticeably contributes towards developing the skills of future responsible managers to deal with the complex challenges raised by sustainability. Sustainability may often be perceived as a gloomy notion in the classroom with little opportunity to stimulate positive action. Johnsen et al. deal with this issue by providing a critical presentation of some of the possible approaches and practices that can be implemented in relation to sustainability.

Of additional practical relevance are some of the themes that are touched upon throughout the book, especially in relation to innovation, urban transport, partnership, and carbon foot-printing. These themes closely resonate with other Sustainable Development Goals (e.g., 7, 9, 11, 13, and 17). Johnsen et al.'s contribution can therefore be seen as bridging policy and practice.

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The conceptualization of sustainable purchasing and SCM already discussed is very much rooted in previous research that embraces a three-dimensional view of sustainability and a collaborative paradigm of interorganizational relations. A more critical reading of the book may lead one to challenge some of its underlying assumptions and suggest areas for further exploration.

As mentioned earlier, sustainability is viewed here from a triple bottom line perspective. Towards the end of the book, Johnsen et al. present some of the recent work around planetary boundaries (Griggs et al., 2013; Whiteman et al., 2013) to discuss the extent that the three pillars are, and can be, integrated. Somehow the discussion falls short of providing a true exploration of the meaning of, and implications posed by, sustainability as a concept. This is important in several ways.

First, in the sustainable SCM literature, including this book, the dominant assumption seems to be that economic, environmental, and social sustainability can be achieved simultaneously. This is problematic as it legitimizes more traditional practices that “make business sense” over less economically focused practices that may have a positive social and environmental impact (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014).

Second, the contributions by Griggs et al. (2013) and Whiteman et al. (2013) suggest moving towards a systemic and ecocentric view of sustainability where the economy and society are embedded within, and ultimately depend upon, the preservation of the natural system. It would have been interesting to see discussion of what the possible implications for purchasing and sustainable SCM may be from this perspective. Questions that may be interesting to address include how would a supply chain need to be organized to replenish natural resources rather than harm and deplete them?

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Throughout the book it seems that sustainability is taken as a nonproblematic concept. But, there are important managerial implications in dealing with the complexity of sustainability as a notion. For example, how might managers deal with trade-offs between the different dimensions?

Recent research in the management literature suggests that developing a paradoxical mind-set is crucial to dealing with the concept of sustainability and so has started to embrace the theme of trade-offs (Hahn et al., 2015; Hahn et al., 2010; Hahn, Pinkse, et al., 2014; Hahn, Preuss, et al., 2014). Similarly the question of “value” that constitutes a central aspect within the book would deserve some further unpacking to explore its full implications.

Finally, the conceptualization of relationships and collaborations in supply chains seems overly positive. Although the IMP approach does include considerations of power as part of the relationship climate, some deeper reflection on how power influences the way that social and environmental practices are developed and implemented would have provided a richer picture. This issue appears reflected in the choice of cases throughout the book that primarily feature the activities of large Western buying-companies and hence seem to support top-down compliance-based approaches (e.g., codes of conduct) to sustainability in supply chains. This leaves little room for the exploration of more inclusive and alternative perspectives, such as those of small suppliers or emerging-economy companies.

Overall, although some aspects could be strengthened and more fully explored, Johnsen et al. offer a comprehensive text that reaffirms the strategic importance of purchasing and SCM in business but also in education for sustainability. This strategic perspective is certainly the main take away from the book that in turn makes it particularly valuable for managers.

Questioning some of the book’s premises in light of alternative perspectives as previously

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mentioned would actually be a good way to open up some interesting conversations in the classroom and encourage critical thinking. The book represents an important contribution that hopefully will become influential as we transform marketing channels from production to consumption to address social and environmental challenges, and as business schools increasingly rethink their position as positive educational contributors to sustainable development.

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NOTE

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