

Social Sustainability, Past and Future

In this Open Access book, Sander van der Leeuw examines how the modern world has been caught in a socioeconomic dynamic that has generated the conundrum of sustainability. Combining the methods of social science and complex systems science, he explores how western, developed nations have globalized their world view and how that view has led to the sustainability challenges we are now facing. Its central theme is the coevolution of cognition, demography, social organization, technology, and environmental impact. Beginning with the earliest human societies, van der Leeuw links the distant past with the present in order to demonstrate how the information and communications technology revolution is undermining many of the institutional pillars on which contemporary societies have been constructed. An original view of social evolution as the history of human information-processing, his book shows how the past offers insight into the present and can help us deal with the future.

Sander van der Leeuw is Foundation Professor in the Schools of Sustainability and Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University. Trained as an archaeologist and historian, he specializes in long-term interactions between humans and their environments and pioneers the application of the complex adaptive systems approach to socioenvironmental challenges, technology, and innovation. Van der Leeuw is the author and editor of eighteen books. In 2012, he was awarded the “Champion of the Earth for Science and Innovation” prize by the United Nations Environment Program.

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Social Sustainability, Past and Future

*Undoing Unintended Consequences
for the Earth's Survival*

SANDER VAN DER LEEUW

Arizona State University and Santa Fe Institute



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Preface

This book condenses some thirty years of working in archaeology, complex systems theory, sustainability, and the wider social sciences. It is therefore simply impossible to thank all those people who have contributed, directly or indirectly, to the ideas it presents. I will have to limit myself to the most salient ones, colleagues and friends in many countries and working on many disciplines.

I will begin with some close friends who are no longer among us, but from whom I have learned lots and lots, and with whom I have collaborated closely over many years in different parts of the world: Roel Brandt and Willem Willems in the Netherlands were there at the beginning; Serge Cleuziou and Jean-Luc Fiches not much later in France. I miss them very much.

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But I want also to express my deep gratitude to the institutions that have supported me during the writing of this book. First of all Arizona State University which granted me leave to work away for most of the spring and summer of 2016 and then gave me a full year’s sabbatical from August 2016 to August 2017. That first spring and summer of 2016 were spent at the Institut Méditerranéen de Recherches Avancées (IMÉRA) of Aix-Marseille University in France, where the staff not only housed us magnificently, with a view over the whole old city of Marseille, but created the ideal atmosphere in which to write and work in a relaxed and productive manner. I also owe much to colleagues at that University, in particular Joel Guiot, Wolfgang Cramer, Alan Kirman, and Daniel Contreras, who made sure we also had a pleasant social life and inspiring discussions at OT-Med, one of the very prestigious Laboratoires d’Excellence funded by the French central government.

After an intermezzo in Beijing and other parts of China, we took up residency among our old friends at the Research Institute for Humanity and Nature (RIHN) in Kyoto, Japan who very graciously (and exceptionally) granted us a second fellowship of four and a half months from September 2016 to mid-January 2017. Those who know RIHN and Kyoto will not be surprised that that was another ideal place to be writing, unconstrained by obligations, with interesting colleagues and a very effective and pleasant staff. Here, I particularly want to thank the Director-General, Tetsuzo Yasunari, his two Deputy DG’s, Jumpei Kubota and Makoto Taniguchi, and several of their many colleagues with whom we created strong bonds: Kenichi Abe, Junko Habu, Hein Mallee,

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Our stay at these institutions enabled me to write unrestrained by appointments, meetings, and other obligations, and that meant I could write when I was really in the mood, and not squeezed between other events as I had been doing for a long time. In so far as this book is understandable, it is entirely due to the largesse of these institutions and the colleagues peopling them. Bliss!