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A pathway towards true sustainability: A recognition foundation of sustainable supply chain management

Stefan Gold ^{a, *}, Martin C. Schleper ^b

^a Chair of Sustainability Management, Faculty of Economics and Management, University of Kassel, Kleine Rosenstraße 3, D-34117 Kassel, Germany

^b International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (ICCSR), Nottingham University Business School, University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Nottingham NG8 1BB, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable supply chain management has developed at an exponential rate into a distinct research field, but its progress towards sustainability is rather modest, and a coherent theoretical foundation for guiding companies towards a stronger integration of sustainability into their operations and supply chains is still missing. This article outlines how the tradition of critical management studies could foster higher levels of sustainable business and sustainable supply chains. We argue that the underlying instrumental logic of contemporary corporate engagement with sustainability, driven by stakeholder pressures, is a key obstacle when aiming for 'truly' sustainable supply chains. Referring to a recognition perspective may dissolve the reified pursuit of profit-seeking and other merely economic performance targets to recall the genuine—and in its essence truly radical—claim that the concept of sustainable development is inherently a normative one imposed on all of us. Recognition may lead the way for companies to adopt a caring stance for people and the surrounding environment and to respond to the legitimate expectations of all groups in society while conceiving themselves as an integral part of such a society. We conclude by discussing how far the theoretical perspective of recognition is enrooted in the European tradition of institutionalised business–society relationships and therefore could be seen as a rediscovery of a genuinely European way of making business and managing supply chains.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) is a young and powerfully growing area of research (Ansari & Kant, 2017), which has emerged as an academic sub-conversation among European and Northern American supply chain management (SCM) scholars. Although initially focussing on environmental aspects of supply chains often labelled as 'green' SCM (Srivastava, 2007), some studies already highlighted the importance of social practices in purchasing and SCM from the beginning (Maignan, Hillebrand, & McAlister, 2002). More recently, however, interest has also shifted towards emerging and developing countries with a high percentage of population at the bottom of the pyramid that are plagued by a variety of negative impacts from unsustainable production practices (e.g. Huq, Chowdhury, & Klassen, 2016), epitomised, for

example, by instances of slavery (Gold, Trautrim, & Trodd, 2015), the consequences of conflict minerals trade (Hofmann, Schleper, & Blome, 2015) or the Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Sinkovics, Hoque, & Sinkovics, 2016).

Conceptualisations of SSCM keep advancing (e.g. Beske & Seuring, 2014; Carter & Rogers, 2008; Pagell & Wu, 2009), and the subject of enquiry continuously differentiates, thereby covering areas such as supplier development (Busse, Schleper, Niu, & Wagner, 2016), decision-making (Brandenburg, Govindan, Sarkis, & Seuring, 2014), sustainability reporting (Turker & Altuntas, 2014), power imbalances (Touboulic, Chicksand, & Walker, 2014), socially sustainable supply chains (Moxham & Kauppi, 2014), sustainable supply chain risks (Hofmann, Busse, Bode, & Henke, 2014) and multi-tier supply chains (Wilhelm, Blome, Bhakoo, & Paulraj, 2016), just to name a few examples. However, confusion and inconsistencies persist regarding the motives of companies to engage in SSCM and the fact that the progress in SSCM is rather modest (Pagell & Shevchenko, 2014).

In this article, we strive to present a first outlook on how to create 'truly' sustainable supply chains, i.e. supply chains that could

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gold@uni-kassel.de (S. Gold), Martin.Schleper@nottingham.ac.uk (M.C. Schleper).