

August 2018

Book Review: Competing Responsibilities: The Ethics and Politics of Contemporary Life by Susanna Trnka & Catherine Trundle

Linda Quest

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quest, Linda (2018) "Book Review: Competing Responsibilities: The Ethics and Politics of Contemporary Life by Susanna Trnka & Catherine Trundle," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 94 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol94/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Trnka, Susanna, and Catherine Trundle, eds. *Competing Responsibilities: The Ethics and Politics of Contemporary Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, VI + 273 pages. Paperback, \$23.95.

Competing Responsibilities features eleven contributors—anthropologists, with cultural, medical, and sociological credentials who are faculty members at Auckland, Amsterdam, Colorado, King’s College, Ontario, Princeton, Sussex, Tufts, Wayne State, and Wellington. They met at workshops, forums, and conferences to collaborate (p. 23). Their stated intent is a book to take a *step toward a new direction for scholarly and public understanding of responsibility* (p. 22). It would bring readers up-to-date on contemporary life in post-colonial, post-conflict, post-socialist, post-traumatic-stress societies. Intellectual influence of Michel Foucault is evident. Other icons of political theory and history are acknowledged. However, very recent references are most abundant—at least 642 individuals (academics for whose CVs it matters) have single, multiple, or coauthored entries. The intent of the book, as well as responsibility and care for the other in contemporary life, confer an obligation—each of those authors should receive a book announcement and off-prints of articles in which they were references.

Oddly missing from the responsibility project is Garrett Hardin’s 1968 *Science* article “The Tragedy of the Commons” (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1724745>). It raised our hopes and fears of a post-“gimme,” post free-rider, post-greed world. Controversy highlighted its impact as a potent evolutionary catalyst. Hardin’s work addresses *The Ethics and Politics of Contemporary Life* (subtitle of *Competing Responsibilities*) apropos the anthropologists’ concerns with responsabilization, harm reduction, self-care, prudentialism, resilience, the Other, critique involving neoliberalism.

Chapter authors deconstruct urban, civil, industrial, scientific, industrial, commercial, communist, judicial, medical, and environmental *commons* in Britain, Canada, Christmas Island, Cyprus, Czech Republic, New Zealand, Poland, and Sierra Leone. “Uncertain Times” (Chapter One) bridges from the Introduction to cases (Chapters Two through Ten). Editors and contributors standardized their definition of the key term, *responsibility*, tied firmly to accountability or answerability when institutional and individual obligations collide, and linked to rational capabilities, legal liabilities, and moral blame.

Ethnographic analyses of responsibility are offered across a range of geographic and cultural settings. Some generalities appear. Post-conflict situations such as Cyprus and Sierra Leone are likely to thwart anthropologists whose job it is to unearth the past. A Cypriot householder defended a driveway laid over a place where at least one body had been buried. Equivocations and ambiguities rather than truth-telling sufficed to protect Sierra Leone paramilitary warlords in processes of judicialization. Acceptance and assimilation were necessities for living in post-conflict communities.

Post-socialist examples such as Czech Republic and Poland exhort citizens to take more personal responsibility with self-care, self-cultivation, and prudentialism. Many citizens retired as early as possible. They counted on state-provided health care and pensions during the 3rd Age (young-old, 55-75 years) and beyond (p. 196). Post-1989, Third and Fourth Ages brought unplanned uncertainties. People became more anxious about themselves and their kin or cronies, and less caring toward “Others.”

In historic societies organized around industries and mining, neoliberal elements came into being alongside other models of connection and care. Paternalistic habits came into conflict with voluntary participation. Managerialism, cost-cutting, and profitability competed with

autonomy and decentralized accountability. Religious-right coalitions and conservative partisans behave suspiciously toward outsiders and skeptical about risks of infrastructural or intergenerational issues that might (or not) lead to cost or loss.

The blue-ribbon case is Downtown Eastside Vancouver, Canada. This sector was diverse and comparatively leftish. Historically it was a center of business, commerce, government. Urban development left behind vacated buildings that gave harbor to squatters, sex workers, and drug-sellers. Commuters found it repulsive. A protest group of drug-users called it “the killing fields” (p. 63). Transcending ideology and partisanship, local organizers instigated harm-reduction to salvage the area by whatever means necessary (“meeting them where they are at,” self-management, accountability, responsibility), recreating human livability and habitation. The resulting design was rhizomatic, familiar aesthetically in Vancouver (p. 67): Each entry point networked with any and every other. With a background of everyone knowing everyone else, at least at secondhand, it worked interactively. The anthropologists call it *attunement* (pp. 12, 63-67). They see conflicting responsibilities: not only the post-political allies who were “Other”-wise but also the rehabilitated participants might have narrowed their job opportunities to being peer-advisors, mentors, and consultants. Readers are left wondering how these cohorts *attuned* and interfaced with linear, non-rhizomatic worlds? Could the rhizome analogy hold and fascinate public imaginations as fractal geometry did? Could it *go viral*? Scholars might question the relevance of responsibility in post-linear, even post-Foucaultian worlds? Are these next steps any part of the ethnographic, anthropological research agenda?

Actually, ingrained habits, conflict, trauma, stress, and debility surface in past and present time; left-overs affect futures. Complaints accumulate for weeks, months, years, decades, easier to ignore than confront. The last sentence in the final chapter “Bystanders...of Nuclear Tests” reads: “Responsibility is not simply the product of ideological, ethical, or political projects, but also reflects the basic demands that our bodies make on relational and political life” (p. 230). “Uncertain Times” starts this book and also brings it to a close, while leaving options open for next, new steps into research, conferences, and publication about *Conflicting Responsibilities*.

The title is inspired and magnetic. Evaluators will see a professional-looking book. Political Science and Economics students may object to non-rigorous Style Manuals: numbered notes appended to chapters are not footnotes, just acknowledgements and aide-mémoire or *hupomnēmata* by ethnographical contributors about gathering information (pp. 7-8). Although many of the references were “common knowledge” and unnecessary, the index entries are insufficient and inconsistent, the index includes negligible things and skips consequential ones—e.g., harm, judicialization, rhizomatic, self-care, and Vancouver. There is room for more science (and less jargon) in future *responsibilities* publications.

Linda Quest, Ph.D.
Professor of Political Science
Pace University
New York City, New York