

Väitösikkuna

Hayley Stevenson^a

Opponent's statement of Erkki-Jussi Nylén's doctoral dissertation

The dissertation is a mature piece of scholarship, and the candidate defended his research confidently and clearly in the oral defense. He responded to the questions thoughtfully and in a way that demonstrated his expertise and familiarity with the field. He provided solid justifications for the decisions he made throughout the research process. The fact that the candidate was able to publish four articles in very good journals (including *Environmental Policy and Governance*, and *Environmental Politics*) is testament to the excellent quality of his research and supports my impression that it makes a solid contribution to the field.

Overall, this is a commendable dissertation that makes a valuable contribution to the field of environmental policy analysis. As the candidate correctly observes, environmental governance is increasingly concept-driven and characterized by increasing conceptual innovation as actors try to find novel ways to reverse patterns of unsustainable development. In this context, it is important to analyze how some concepts achieve salience and then evaluate the material impact of this salience (i.e., whether salient concepts achieve their objectives). This dissertation presents an original analysis of the concept of Circular Economy. This is a concept that is growing in salience in environmental policy discourse, but the policy and governance context of this concept has attracted little academic attention. The dissertation is novel and significant in this respect. It advances our understanding of when and how an environmental policy concept can succeed in shaping and reshaping political responses to the environmental crisis.

The dissertation is an ambitious project combining theorization and empirical analysis. Many doctoral theses make an original empirical contribution by applying an existing theoretical framework to a new empirical context. This dissertation is commendable for aiming to make both a theoretical/conceptual contribution and an empirical contribution to the field of environmental policy analysis. In my judgment, the candidate achieves this aim, notwithstanding some minor weaknesses in the theorization, which I will outline below.

In both the dissertation and defense, the candidate has demonstrated strong knowledge of the relevant academic literature; it is extensively reviewed, and the candidate engages well with this literature throughout the dissertation and publications.

The research project was very well designed and resulted in a coherent piece of work. The research questions and objectives are very clearly defined, and the dissertation plus the four publications form a very logical and consistent whole. The dissertation itself is

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well structured and the reader is carefully guided throughout. The theorization is particularly complex, and this makes it all the more important for the text to be well organized and signposted; the candidate has done this well.

The main weakness in the dissertation is the occasional lack of clarity. At times I think the candidate could have found a simpler and more intuitive way to express his ideas. The lack of clarity emerged in (a) multiple neologisms, and (b) occasional unclear expression. Many novel terms are used in the dissertation, and this makes it more challenging for the reader to understand the theorization and how its distinct parts fit together. The neologisms sometimes sounded a bit awkward, e.g., “projectified governance” and “combinatorial development”. Ideally, a neologism should resonate with everyday language or with our existing understandings of terminology. In these two examples, the terms are not intuitive and in the dissertation itself they were not clearly defined; I had the impression that the candidate assumed that the reader would be familiar with them. I don’t think this literature is sufficiently well known in the environmental policy community to assume that the reader will understand. These terms were, however, very clearly explained in the corresponding publications.

The role and importance of agency could have been given more attention, and I encourage the candidate to incorporate this into future research. I believe that the agency of the actors who have used this concept warranted further attention in the theorization of ideological steering. But during the defense, the candidate defended his argument that a concept can indeed have agency because it enables or pushes actors to do things they would not otherwise do.

The characteristic of internal tension was clarified in the final version of the dissertation. The candidate further explained this very clearly during the defense and was able to illustrate this with an empirical example.

As I mentioned in my pre-examination report, I was dubious about the use of the term “ideological” in the theorization. Nevertheless, the candidate confidently and convincingly defended his decision to use this term, while also demonstrating that he had seriously considered the suggestions I outlined in my original report. I consider this a display of intellectual maturity.

The candidate has a promising future as a researcher, and I look forward to reading his future publications.

Doctoral dissertation: Nylén, E.-J. (2023) *Theorizing Ideological Steering. The journey of the circular economy*. Tampere University Dissertations 837. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-2994-5>