ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL REVOLUTION

A 25th Anniversary Assessment

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It is a great honor to be asked to respond to articles by individuals who can all be rightly considered to be founders of environmental sociology, legendary figures in the field. If I have something distinctive to add to this symposium, it mostly arises out of my own standpoint as a representative of what I like to think is the second wave of environmental sociology. Environmental sociology arose in the 1970s and then waned for a time in membership and influence in the early and mid-1980s. In the late 1980s, however, new interest was sparked in the field as a result of the globalization of environmental issues, with growth of world concern about the destruction of the ozone layer, global warming, and species extinction (see Dunlap, 1997, pp. 28-29). At the same time, these years saw the emergence of new kinds of radical environmentalism, incorporating the environmental justice movement, ecofeminism, and ecosocialism. Environmental sociology is much more diverse than it was 25 or even 10 years ago—and that fact has to be a crucial part of any quarter-century assessment. I want to reflect here, then, not only on the past but also on the future of environmental sociology—its condition of long-term health.

In this regard, I will raise some reasons for disquiet as well as congratulation. Environmental sociology has scored great successes, as Fred Buttel has noted, but there is no getting around the fact that within the larger discipline this field is still regarded as something of a birth defect. For sociologists in general, the concept of nature is still something to be avoided as much as possible. One might even go further and say that avoidance of any concept of nature (not simply subsumed under a radical constructionism) is almost the definition of sociology for many of our colleagues. The obstacles that the founders of environmental sociology faced in confronting what Dunlap and Catton called the "human exemptionalist paradigm" are therefore still with us—and have hardly lessened in 25 years. Of all the social sciences, it might be argued that sociology has been among the most resistant to change in this respect. At the same time, many of the newer adherents of environmental sociology, particularly in Europe and especially among those approaching the field from the standpoint of postmodernism and cultural theory, have tended to put forward an irrealism, which is at odds with the realism/naturalism that was almost a founding principle of environmental sociology as it first arose in the United States. Finally, these reasons for disquiet must include the fact that the sec-

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ond launching of environmental sociology as an organized field, especially of the Environment and Technology Section itself, made necessary by the appearance of a second wave of environmental sociologies in the late 1980s, has been much delayed. This has kept the field from advancing with the inner dynamism that it should have at this point.

REASONS FOR CONGRATULATIONS

As the articles in this symposium make clear, environmental sociology now has solid institutional foundations in the United States, giving us many reasons for congratulation. There is a solid core membership in the Environment and Technology Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA) that can be expected to grow steadily over time, given the increasing salience of environmental issues. There is growing visibility of environmental sociology and the sociology of the environment in elite journals. A few elite departments have environmental sociology as one of their core specialty areas, with some second-tier departments also establishing impressive foundations in the area.

Beyond such issues of institutionalization, environmental sociology has also fashioned for itself some impressive intellectual foundations. In the United States there is a clear emphasis on environmental sociology rather than sociology of the environment, in Dunlap's terms. That is, there is a recognition that an unchanged sociology cannot be used effectively to analyze the environment as if the latter were simply an object or datum; rather, sociology itself must be changed to make it environmental in its preconceptions (letting nature back in). In this respect, a critique of the human exemptionalist paradigm is a starting point for most environmental sociology. And this means that the problem of "the treadmill of production"—belying sociology's traditional, unthinking emphasis on modernization and development at all costs—is central. Environmental sociology thus embodies a critique of sociology as a whole—though environmental sociologists have not been at all sure how far to go with this critique. Finally, there is a commendable emphasis on realism (the notion of the existence of the natural world independent of human cognition) in environmental sociology in the United States that has kept it attuned to the naturalist concerns of the environmental movement, even while putting it out of step with fashionable trends within social theory as a whole.

REASONS FOR DISQUIET

Having given all of these reasons for congratulation, I want to emphasize a number of reasons for disquiet regarding the future of environmental sociology. The founders of environmental sociology (certainly those participating in this symposium) were environmental revolutionaries. They wanted to make all of sociology (or as much of sociology as possible) environmental by attacking human exemptionalism. To be sure, there was always the question as to what Catton and Dunlap's "new ecological paradigm" would ultimately mean. But the clear intent of environmental sociology in its first wave in the United States was to change the discipline and through that, society.

There have been some notable successes in greening the discipline on the margins, such as the connections established in the last couple of years between Environment and Technology and the World System Sections of the ASA. But most of sociology has continued to view environmental sociology as something of an aberration because it takes the coevolution of nature and society seriously (something

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that sociologists are more reluctant than ever to do, out of fear of sociobiology). What increased influence environmental sociology has gained, as the previous articles have indicated, has had much more to do with the growing salience of the issues it addresses than the impact of a new ecological paradigm on the discipline. A quarter century down the line we can say that there has been no environmental revolution in sociology, even though there has been something of an environmental revolution occurring within society at large. Sociologists may be slightly more sensitive to environmental issues—brazen assertions of human exemptionalism are less common—but the discipline as a whole has only inched forward in this respect—arguably less than society as a whole.

Over the past decade, in particular, there has been a startling growth of environmental sociology in Europe. There the basic presumptions of environmental sociology are more likely to appear in the works of leading theorists such as Giddens and Beck. Articles that deal with the environment seem to appear with much greater frequency in the elite European sociological journals than is the case in the United States (though I know of no empirical study of this). But environmental sociology in Europe tends to be influenced to a greater extent by postmodernist theory and to take a more cultural/constructionist direction. Such radical constructionism often resembles, in certain ways, the human exemptionalism of the past. Partly for this reason, U.S. environmental sociology, which is predominantly realist, has had relatively little influence within Europe, and the spread of postmodernist environmental sociology predominantly from Europe often appears as a threat to what has been achieved here. (The main exception to this is the ecological modernization tradition, which, though emanating mainly from Europe, shares a similar commitment to realism.)

Once we abandon realism, our capacity to deal with the real ecological crises arising out of the dialectical interaction of nature and society are much reduced. But if U.S. environmental sociology takes pride in its realism/naturalism, it is important to acknowledge that it often lacks philosophical sophistication in comparison to European theory. Hence, the confrontation with more philosophically and theoretically nuanced environmental sociologies coming out of Europe could—provided U.S. environmental sociology does not abandon its realism—lead to a more complex and defensible approach to theory, that is, a more *critical realism*.

There can be no doubt that this theoretical underdevelopment, despite solid initial foundations, is one of the overriding reasons for disquiet in looking at the future of environmental sociology in the United States. Beyond the struggle over realism/irrealism, theoretical underdevelopment means that environmental sociologists are unable to confront the profession theoretically—to take the environmental revolution into the very definition of how we see sociology as a human practice. Emphasis on the need for a new ecological paradigm is a start. Yet, to establish such a paradigm requires a full-fledged critique of sociology—something that few environmental sociologists wish to entertain. Environmental sociologists in this country generally have a centaur-like existence. One part of the typical environmental sociologist is devoted to sociology largely conceived "as if nature didn't matter" (in Raymond Murphy's apt phrase). The other part consists of an environmental sociology component, which, if taken to its logical conclusion, denies the reality of the first part. As environmental sociologists, we are thus frequently in conflict with ourselves. At a time when technology is making the world more transgenetic, we live simultaneously in a number of separate compartments that are to some extent sealed off from each other to disguise the incompatibility of the whole.

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In this, as in other respects, the second wave of environmental sociology, which began in the late 1980s and which has not yet had its full effect on the discipline (due to the long apprenticeships within our field), marks a distinct break. The second wave of environmental sociology in the United States is more theoretical, without abandoning its realism and empiricism. It is more political-economic, reflecting the changes in the environmental discussion generally (which include the increasing preeminence of environmental economics and the growth of the globalization controversy). It is more interdisciplinary—more inclined to borrow from history, economics, geography, anthropology, cultural theory, and other disciplines. It is possibly even more animated by a sense of growing ecological crisis and the rage against the treadmill. It has been heavily influenced by the environmental justice movement in the broadest sense so that it is more sociologically radical, bringing race, class, and gender into the argument. And it tends to be more, not less, movement based, reflecting the growth of environmental justice concerns that have linked up with social movements generally—labor, race liberation, feminism, and antiglobalization. Nevertheless, the appearance of a second wave of environmental sociologies has not yet resulted in a second launching—a fully revitalized environmental sociology—within the Environment and Technology Section itself, and this constitutes a final, ultimate reason for disquiet.

REASONS FOR HOPE

Still, it is here—in the emergence of a second wave of environmental sociologies—that hope for the field, in my view, mostly lies. Environmental sociology got off to a remarkable start in the United States. The contributions of Buttel, Dunlap, and Schnaiberg, along with other founding figures, have given us a basis for solid, critical work that pushes forward the environmental revolution and that questions sociology where it most needs questioning. The guiding threads that they laid out have lost none of their importance over the years. But to fulfill the role of promoting the environmental revolution, environmental sociology has to become a home for much that is new. There needs to be more attention directed to environmental justice—that is, the struggle against environmental racism, environmental sexism, the environmental injuries of class, and the ecological consequences of imperialism. There has to also be an opening up to new, more global issues, such as the failure of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the growing impact of biotechnology on our environment and our food. We need to reinvent ourselves and our section as representing a second wave of environmental sociologists but without forgetting what we have been (the first wave) and what we have aimed at all along—an environmental revolution directed at creating a sustainable relation to the earth.

REFERENCE

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