Book Review Essay

THE CANONIZATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

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Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate, editors. *The Sociology of the Environment* (3 volumes). Brookfield, VT: Edward Elgar, 1995.

Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate, editors. *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 1997.

Environmental sociology first arose, as a distinct subfield of sociology, in the 1970s. The Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association was formally launched almost one quarter of a century ago, in 1976. The rise of the subfield was a direct response to the rapid growth of environmentalism in society at large in the 1970s. Sharing the fate of the environmental movement as a whole, environmental sociology seemed to peak in the mid-1970s and then to lose ground in the early 1980s, only to resurge once more with the renewed growth of concern about the global environment in the late 1980s.

Yet, despite the urgency of the movement that it represents and the growth of a substantial body of research that has reverberated far beyond sociology, environmental sociology has faced great obstacles in obtaining recognition from the larger discipline. During the second half of the 20th century, sociology has, for the most part, distanced itself from the natural and physical environment, indeed from biology itself, emphasizing social construction of the human environment and downplaying all environmental conditions and limits. This was directly challenged with the rise of environmental sociology, most famously by William Catton and Riley Dunlap (1978), who contended that received sociology was characterized by a "human exemptionalist paradigm" that excluded all natural influences, and who argued on behalf of a "new environmental paradigm" founded on the view that human beings were part of the natural environment, not exempt from its conditions. Sociology, Catton and Dunlap insisted, needed to abandon its anthropocentric assumptions and develop new ecocentric ones.

Mainstream sociology, however, largely ignored this critique and went on as before, leaving the new subfield marginalized. The problem may be traced, in part, to the fact that the critique emanating from environmental sociology, although fundamental, remained largely undeveloped. Whereas sociology's shortcomings were emphasized, no new beginning was provided. Hence, environmental sociologists themselves tended to graft their environmental concerns on a classical, sociological tradition that remained essentially the same. They failed to take seriously Bacon's (1620/1994) injunction that

> We can look in vain for advancement in scientific knowledge from superinducing and grafting of new things on old. A fresh start (*instauratio*) must be made, beginning from the very foundations, unless we want to go round for ever in a circle, making trifling, almost contemptible progress. (p. 51)

Organization & Environment, Vol. 12 No. 4, December 1999 461-467

Nevertheless, environmental sociology has continued to grow and to challenge sociology's traditional exemptionalist framework. Moreover, the subfield has reached a new stage of maturity, in that attempts are increasingly being made to consolidate what has been learned and to put environmental sociology on more solid foundations. The set of reference works edited by Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate represent perhaps the greatest attempt to accomplish this thus far, providing an invaluable starting point for anyone trying to understand environmental sociology as it now stands. In effect, this is an attempt at the *canonization* of environmental sociology (both in the original Greek sense of *canon*, which meant standard of judgment, and in its later sense, as constituting accepted doctrines within a discipline). In this regard, it demands our close attention. The three-volume set on *The Sociology of the Environment* seeks to delineate the main historic contributions to environmental sociology, based on a selection from classical and contemporary texts. *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology* seeks to further define the subfield through a collection of 30 essays, written expressly for this purpose, by leading exponents of environmental sociology.

SELECTION OF THE CANON

Redclift and Woodgate's massive, three-volume set, *The Sociology of the Environment* (each volume is more than 600 pages long), is a collection of what the editors believe to be the most important readings in environmental sociology, preceded by an introduction by the editors themselves. Because this is an attempt at establishing the canon of environmental sociology, what is excluded is just as important as what is included. In their introduction to *The Sociology of the Environment*, Redclift and Woodgate emphasize that there are three traditions of work in environmental sociology: (a) empirical, (b) interpretive, and (c) structuralist (in the sense of emphasizing "that what really exists are structures—cultural or economic—which 'cause' the real world of experience"). Although all three traditions are represented in the three volumes, it is the last, we are told, that is given the heaviest emphasis, whereas the more interpretive tradition is accorded the least attention.

More significant, perhaps, is a distinction that the editors do not quite make. Recently, environmental sociology has been deeply affected (somewhat ironically) by social constructionist accounts of the relation to the environment, which challenge the realism that characterized most environmental sociology from its inception. In emphasizing the structuralist tradition and even the importance of empirical research while downplaying more interpretive (i.e., social constructionist) approaches, the editors, in effect, attempt to canonize environmental sociology along lines that reinforce environmental sociology's traditional realist critique of the social constructionist character of sociology (a critique that threatens to be lost through the rapid growth of social constructionism within environmental sociology itself). Because social constructionist accounts and the influence of postmodernist, poststructuralist thinking are most prominent in Europe, are somewhat weaker in Britain than on the Continent (due to the relative prominence of structuralist and Marxist accounts in the former), and are weakest in the United States (where empiricism is still strong), it should come as no surprise that *The Sociology of the Environment*, in emphasizing the empirical and structuralist traditions, also ends up stressing British and American contributions. "The foremost example of structuralism," according to the editors, "is probably Marxism" (1:xvi). Both *The Sociology of the Environment* and *The International Handbook* therefore give considerable space to Marxist contributions to environmental sociology—which are considered,

prior to other approaches, more commonly associated with Green theory, such as Malthusianism.

In my view, it is the strong commitment to ontological realism that pervades these volumes, allowing Redclift and Woodgate to present a view of environmental sociology that retains a radical relation to sociology as a whole—challenging the dominant social-constructionist approach to the environment while fighting a rearguard action against most postmodernist environmental theorizing with its even more radical social constructionism—that makes these volumes valuable. Environmental sociology grew out of an environmental movement that, at its base, was overwhelmingly realist in character, concerned with the fact that a society that emphasized human exemptionalism was essentially undermining the very conditions of life as we know it. If it is to remain practical and committed to this movement, environmental sociology can afford only a "cautious constructionism" (Dunlap, cited in Redclift & Woodgate, 1997, pp. 31-32). It cannot give in to a radical social constructionism that denies a realist ontology (i.e., the existence of the world of nature prior to human beings and as a precondition of human existence) if it is to retain a meaningful relation to praxis.

An indication of the alienation of environmental sociology from the classical roots of the discipline is the absence of selections from Marx, Durkheim, or Weber in the section on "Foundations" at the beginning of the first volume of *The Sociology of the Environment* and indeed in the three volumes altogether. In Marx's case, given his frequent discussion of environmental problems, this is a questionable omission. To be sure, Marx's environmental critique is embedded within his larger critique of political economy, making it more difficult to come up with readable, short selections for volumes of this kind. But the editors could certainly have published extensive excerpts from Marx, following the lead of Howard Parsons (1977) and Carolyn Merchant (1994). Or they could have printed Marx's best known environmental statement: the section on "Large-Scale Agriculture and Industry" at the end of the chapter on "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" in Volume 1 of *Capital*. Instead, Redclift and Woodgate chose (albeit not entirely without justification) to emphasize two key selections from Friedrich Engels: the "Introduction" to *The Dialectics of Nature* and "The Part Played by Labour in the Transformation from Ape to Man" (also included in Engels's *The Dialectics of Nature*). Oddly, this is accompanied by the claim, in Redclift and Woodgate's "Introduction" to *The Sociology of the Environment*, that "Marxism is imbued with the [mechanistic] Promethean spirit which pervaded the 19th century. Nature presented obstacles to the fulfillment of human aspirations" (1:xvi). Yet, as is now conceded even by some of those, such as Ted Benton (1989), who have themselves previously made this charge (directing it against Marx and Engels as well as at Marxism more generally), Engels's argument in "The Part Played by Labour in the Transformation from the Ape to Man" (incorporated by Redclift & Woodgate as Item 2 in *The Sociology of the Environment*) "is certainly not the unqualified Prometheanism sometimes attributed to Marx and Engels" (Benton, 1996, pp. 77-78). Hence, a more nuanced interpretation would seem to be necessary—given the editors' own selections. How is the editors' sharp criticism of Marxism, including the work of its classical founders, for its Prometheanism to be reconciled with Engels's clearly anti-Promethean stance?

This dilemma is reproduced in the section on "Marxism and the Environment," which relies on essays by such figures as Peter Dickens, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Alfred Schmidt, Rudolf Bahro, Andre Gorz, Michael Redclift, James O'Connor, David Pepper, Michael Perelman, Martin Ryle, and Ted Benton. This

selection is a good representative sample of the state of the debate on Marx and the environment, as it was in the mid-1990s, before much systematic research (apart from Perelman) had been done into the ecological aspects of Marx's mature critique of political economy. Here, the greatest prominence is still given to those like Schmidt and the early Benton who argued that Marx presented a naturalistic dialectic that was ultimately to be subsumed in his mature work under a mechanistic Prometheanism and who insisted that he had fallen short of the recognition of natural limits that existed in the Malthusian-Ricardian tradition. Yet, this charge of Prometheanism has been effectively called into question in recent years in the work of various authors (notably Paul Burkett, Walt Sheasby, and me), who have provided systematic responses to this charge based on Marx's mature critique of political economy and his revolutionary political-cultural-ecological vision (Burkett, 1997, 1999; Foster, 1997; Sheasby, 1999).

If the first volume of *The Sociology of the Environment* is dominated by Marxian approaches, the second volume is dominated by Malthusian ones. Part 1 of Volume 2 begins with Chapter 2 of the first edition of Malthus's *Essay on Population*. Unlike Engels, Malthus is not treated as constituting part of the foundations of environmental sociology in Volume 1 of *The Sociology of the Environment* but rather is left for later consideration in Volume 2. Nevertheless, he is seen as representing the original source of inspiration for today's neo-Malthusian tradition, with its emphasis on population growth as the primary ecological problem. Unfortunately, the reading from Malthus gives a distorted view of Malthus's *Essay*, which was much more directed at defending a given class system than seriously addressing the ecological problem. "The principal argument of this *Essay*," Malthus (1970) wrote in his *Essay on Population*, "only goes to prove the necessity of a class of proprietors, and a class of labourers" (p. 177). It is in this section on "Neo-Malthusianism and Environmental Determination" that the editors include Garrett Hardin's well-known essay on "The Tragedy of the Commons." This is followed by a section on "Biocentric Theories: Deep Ecology, Gaia, Ecofeminism," which are seen as related to the Malthusian emphasis on natural limits. Included here are selections from such important deep ecologists as Bill Devall, George Sessions, and Arne Naess, as well as a critique of deep ecology by Timothy Luke. Also mixed in here—though somewhat peculiarly because they would generally distance themselves from Malthusianism and even deep ecology—are selections from notable ecofeminists such as Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva, Mary Mellor, and Val Plumwood.

Not content to end the volume with deep ecology, per se, the editors include, at the end of Volume 2, a section on "Radical Ecology" that encompasses mostly radical Green thinkers, such as Wolfgang Sachs, Nicholas Hildyard, Rudolf Bahro, Ivan Illich, Herbert Marcuse, E. F. Schumacher, Jonathon Porritt, and Carolyn Merchant, among others. This is obviously the political thrust that the editors themselves are most comfortable with.

Volume 3 of *The Sociology of the Environment* is defined less by the politics of environmental sociology and more by the need to connect it to broad issues such as science and the environment, international perspectives on the environment, and social movements and the environment. The volume ends, however, on a political note that is closely related to the radical ecology orientation at the end of Volume 2. In this case, the emphasis is on "post-industrial utopianism." Here, selections are included from such notable figures as Boris Frankel, David Harvey, Jonathon Porritt, and Aldo Leopold.

THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK

One of the strengths of *The Sociology of the Environment* is that it draws heavily on the writings of two of the founding figures of environmental sociology in the United States, Riley Dunlap and Fred Buttel (a third founding figure in the United States, Alan Schnaiberg, is nowhere to be seen in the volumes, indicating the failure to incorporate the important concept of the "treadmill of production" and political-economic approaches generally). Unfortunately, the selections from Dunlap and Buttel in these volumes do not sufficiently tap into the theoretical context of their work. Rather, Dunlap is presented in *The Sociology of the Environment* series as the primary representative of "empirical" (read *empiricist*) tendencies in environmental sociology in the United States, rather than as a thinker who, together with William Catton, challenged mainstream sociology by raising the question of its reliance on the human exemptionalist paradigm and, hence, its failure to recognize that nature mattered. (This designation of Dunlap as primarily an empirical thinker is explicitly articulated by Redclift & Woodgate in their Introduction to Volume 1 of *The Sociology of the Environment*.) Likewise, Fred Buttel's work is incorporated into *The Sociology of the Environment* series, in relation to certain specific issues on which he has usefully commented (often together with coauthors), such as the question of neo-Malthusianism addressed in Volume 2 and environmentalism as a social movement, addressed in Volume 3. But nowhere in these volumes does one find any of the magisterial essays on the progress of environmental sociology that Buttel has periodically written over the course of the past two decades—essays that have played a large role in guiding the development of the field in the United States and on which his reputation as a theorist in the field is largely based.

In this respect, *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, published only 2 years later, marks a startling improvement. In this volume, the two leading essays in Part 1 on "Concepts and Theories in Environmental Sociology" are authored by Dunlap ("The Evolution of Environmental Sociology: A Brief History and Assessment of the American Experience") and Buttel ("Social Institutions and Environmental Change"), followed by essays by such important figures as Redclift and Woodgate, Wolfgang Sachs, Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Arthur Mol, Richard Norgaard, and Peter Dickens, among others. In the introduction by Woodgate, it is explained that it is precisely the critique of mainstream sociology offered by Dunlap (and Catton), together with Buttel's analysis of the larger agenda of research within environmental sociology, that constituted the original foundation for the subfield as it emerged in the United States. Hence, their reflections on the past 20 years of environmental sociology are given pride of place in *The International Handbook*. What one discovers, of course, if one carefully reads the introduction and the contributions by Dunlap, Buttel, and Redclift and Woodgate that immediately follow, is the extent to which environmental sociology still sees itself at odds with the larger discipline. If environmental sociology has made major contributions, it has been within this context of its semimarginalization from mainstream sociology—a consequence of its principled rejection of the ecological blinders of the latter.

Many of the other essays in this volume are pathbreaking as well. Peter Dickens's essay on "Beyond Sociology: Marxism and the Environment" is one of the more important discussions of Marx's contribution (particularly in his early writings) and on the potential of Marxism in this area. Marina Fischer-Kowalski (as well as other contributors to the volume) focuses on the important concept of

"ecological metabolism," first developed by Liebig and Marx in the 19th century. Wolfgang Sachs offers a powerful critique of the concept of "sustainable development" as it is now being employed within mainstream discourse. Arthur Mol provides a state-of-the-art look at "ecological modernization." Richard Norgaard gives us a précis of his argument on coevolution.

The remaining parts of *The International Handbook* concern substantive issues (in Part 2) and international perspectives (in Part 3). In the former, we encounter a useful piece by Mary Mellor on "Gender and the Environment," which recounts much of the ecofeminist literature in a brief space, ending with her own work and that of Ariel Salleh on "embodied materialism." Part 2 also includes selections on "Science and the Environment," by Stephen Yearley, and on risk, by Alan Irwin, along with essays on environmental consciousness, energy and the environment, industrial metabolism, politics and the environment, and the environment and nationalism. Strikingly absent from this otherwise useful selection are the topics of environmental justice and, more specifically, environmental racism. Perhaps nothing other than this particular silence so clearly distinguishes the discourse within environmental sociology in Britain, where this volume was edited, from that in the United States. It would be inconceivable for such a volume to be published in the United States in the late 1990s, without close consideration of environmental racism and without contributions by leading analysts of this all-important topic such as Robert Bullard, Richard Moore, and Dorceta Taylor.

Part 3 consists of a series of important, mostly empirical essays on environmental movements and ecological modernization in Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, India, Japan, and Ghana. The most noticeable missing piece in this survey of the world is one on China, which, given the speed of both its economic development and its ecological degradation (not to mention the sheer weight of its influence), demands our full attention.

The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology, especially when coupled with the three-volume *The Sociology of the Environment*, is an indispensable source of information and insight into environmental sociology. These volumes are intended mainly as reference works, not for use directly in courses, but they are so important in their attempts to canonize the subfield that many practitioners will see them as more than mere works of reference. In a sense, they represent the maturation of this whole realm of inquiry and an attempt to codify what has been discovered thus far as well as to point in new directions. Redclift and Woodgate provide a way for us to begin to rethink the position of environmental sociology within the larger discipline. As volumes that are dedicated throughout to a realist approach to environmental questions, they help to define (and canonize) environmental sociology as a field that remains open to a cautious constructionism (see Dunlap, cited in Redclift & Woodgate, 1997, pp. 31-32) and not to radical constructionism. These volumes thus constitute a standard of judgment in the original sense of canon and canonics (as introduced most notably in the work of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus). They help us to understand what environmental sociology is and what it is not. Attempts at canonization (in this sense) are always to be regarded as attempts at clarity and consistency—as providing a system of inquiry from which we can proceed. Yet, it would be a mistake to regard this as an attempt at final closure. Environmental sociology, as Redclift and Woodgate and their many authors would all agree, is a dynamic, rapidly changing field of investigation, which derives its dynamism largely from the larger environmental movement of which it is a part. The value of these volumes is that they are constructive in the movement sense, that is,

they seek to deconstruct social reality as it is given to us but not deconstruct (as all radical social constructionisms threaten to do) the environmental movement itself.

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