

Review

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Demography and
The Environment

Rationality and Nature: A Sociological Inquiry into a Changing Relationship, by **Raymond Murphy**. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994. 294 pp. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-8133-2168-9. \$21.95 paper. ISBN: 0-8133-2169-7.

Development Betrayed: The End of Progress and a Coevolutionary Revisioning of the Future, by **Richard B. Norgaard**. New York: Routledge, 1994. 280 pp. \$59.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-415-06861-4. \$18.95 paper. ISBN: 0-415-06862-2.

Social Theory and the Global Environment, edited by **Michael Redclift** and **Ted Benton**. New York: Routledge, 1994. 271 pp. \$59.95 cloth. 0-415-11169-2. \$17.95 paper. ISBN: 0-415-11170-6.

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The emergence in the 1980s and '90s of an increasingly global approach to ecological problems—marked by the ascendance of such issues as the destruction of the ozone layer, global warming, tropical deforestation, and an annual loss of species possibly in the tens of thousands—has altered forever the relation of ecology to the social sciences. Recognizing that the entire planet is increasingly subject to ecological depredations and that the time available for addressing these problems is extremely short, social scientists concerned with ecological issues are becoming more aggressive in their demands for the ecological transformation of their disciplines. "Sociology," as Raymond Murphy declares in the preface to *Rationality and Nature*, "has been constructed as if nature didn't matter. It has failed to take the processes of nature into account, perceiving only the *social* construction of reality. Environmental problems are beginning to send shock waves through this myopic sociological structure. Sociology fabricated as if nature didn't matter constitutes pre-ecological sociology" (p. x).

The social sciences as we know them today arose largely as responses to the dual revolutions—one industrial, the other political—that began at the end of the eighteenth century. Ecological social scientists now commonly believe that the general framework of analysis that arose at this time was rooted in a fatal separation between nature and society, and that the social sciences (along with the whole modern scientific world-view that had its origins in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) must therefore be rethought completely if they are to provide any guidance in the face of planetary crisis.

Like postmodernists, ecological social scientists thus frequently challenge the Enlightenment tradition in fundamental ways. But, unlike postmodernists, their emphasis is not on deconstruction or discourse but on the radical reconstruction of social theory on new foundations that will allow it to address the global ecological crisis. While postmodernists are critical of grand historical narratives and large social projects, ecological social scientists are dedicated to promoting reform and revolution on the grandest scale imaginable.

Hence, all of the traditional concerns of sociology are being recast along lines that merge with this project of ecological change. Recent years have seen the rise of ecofeminism, theories of environmental racism, and the growth of class-based ecological analysis as exemplified by the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*. These developments have mirrored the rise of an environmental justice movement concerned above all with the relation between the environment and sociology's traditional concerns of race, class, gender, and Third World underdevelopment.

Nevertheless, ecological social scientists are divided among themselves in myriad ways. Attempts to reconstruct social science to embrace ecological concerns are simultaneously occurring on quite different foundations, among which are Marx, Weber, and postmodernism.

Raymond Murphy's *Rationality and Nature* is an explicit attempt to "draw out the implications of Weber's work for the development of an environment sociology, or what could be expressed in more Weberian terms as an ecology of social action" (p. x). Murphy acknowledges that Weber did not

analyze natural processes in any detail. Yet, he employs Weber's concept of formal rationalization as the framework for analyzing ecological (and antiecological) ways of thinking. There are, of course, precedents for this. The critical theory tradition, as reflected in the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, developed an ecological argument based on a critique of instrumental rationality that owed as much or more to Weber's notion of rationalization as to any single concept (including alienation) employed by Marx.

Murphy uses Weber's critique of formal rationality to scrutinize ecological rationalization in several of its most prominent guises: (1) the old myth that nature is "plastic" and can be reconstructed at will by humans through technology; (2) the now dominant idea of "sustainable development," which is all too often taken to mean that present forms of development can be sustained; and (3) neo-Malthusian research, which tends to be "class-blind." Each of these modes of thinking, he contends, constitutes formal "rationalization under the premise of greenness."

Murphy is at his best when he analyzes, in more Marxist terms, the political economy of waste and the reality of "environmental classes." His discussion of the differing relation of owners/managers and workers to environmental destruction is one of the best analyses available in this area.

Yet, in the end, this emphasis on political economy and class fades from his analysis. Hence, we are told that the hope for the future lies in new "ecological experience and ecological knowledge," as if the only escape from the iron cage of ecological rationalization is the development of a new form of human reason, rooted in substantive (value-based) rather than formal rationality. But what this would entail in concrete terms is never clear, and the reader is left hanging: "Weber's work," the final paragraph states, "helps us keep in mind that objective situations do not necessarily bring about consciousness and organized, effective action. . . . Global environmental change will be determined . . . by the interaction of the forces of nature with the distinctively human quality of reason."

In contrast, the essays in *Social Theory and the Global Environment*, edited by Michael Redclift and Ted Benton, are probably more closely related to Marx than to any other

founding figures in sociology, though none of the contributions is explicitly Marxist (or eco-Marxist).

Indeed, Marx is subjected to severe criticism in more than one contribution. Redclift and Graham Woodgate claim that Marx regarded "relations with the environment . . . as ubiquitous and unchanging, common to each phase of social existence. . . . Such a perspective does not fully acknowledge the role of technology, and its effects on the environment, in altering fundamentally what it is possible to do with nature" (p. 53). At this I rubbed my eyes in disbelief! Is it really possible to believe—particularly given the vast scholarship on Marx and ecology in recent years—that Marx thought that the human relation to nature (or anything else for that matter) was "unchanging" or that he underestimated the effects of technology on nature (so much so that he is singled out for special criticism)? After all, Marx is now sometimes seen, along with Liebig, as one of the most prescient thinkers on the question of the degradation of the soil resulting from the capitalist mechanization of agriculture. Although Redclift and Woodgate refer to how we should "organize ourselves to exploit nature" (pp. 53, 51), this form of discourse is quite foreign to Marx, who argued in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* that "Man lives from nature, i.e., nature is his *body*, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die."

Still, while some of the harshest criticisms are directed at Marx, his concrete emphasis on political economy and class and on the critique of capitalism is evident throughout the collection. As Frederick Buttel and Peter Taylor argue in an important contribution, the experience of the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio suggests "that environmental sociology, particularly that which seeks to understand global environmental change, should be reconstructed by giving more attention to international political economy." Leslie Sklair scrutinizes the dominant concept of sustainable development, emphasizing the role of the "transnational capitalist class." Michael Jacobs provides a devastating critique of mainstream, neoclassical environmental economics from the standpoint of institutionalist economics. Cecile Jackson discusses ecofeminism and ecological Marxism in Third World contexts. Steven Yearly provides a thoughtful discussion of the environmental movement from a European perspective. Yet, one thing missing from the book, which would

surely have been included if it had been produced in the United States rather than the United Kingdom, is any reference to the environmental justice movement (not to mention the struggle against environmental racism that has been its leading element in the United States). Elizabeth Shove ends the volume with a piece on “sustaining developments in environmental sociology,” concluding that the aim of environmental sociology should be to find ways of transforming sociology in order to engage the ecological problem (even at the risk of seeming outside and out of step with sociology), rather than the much more modest and safe professional goal of incorporating environmental sociology as a key subdiscipline within the existing discipline.

Richard Norgaard's *Development Betrayed* is related to the various critiques of the idea of progress and modernity evident in the work of today's postmodernists. What Norgaard has to offer to this critique derives from his important concept of “coevolution.” On this basis he argues that “the world is far too complex for us to perceive and establish the conditions for sustainability” (p. 23). Essentially, his view is that ecology and society coevolve, each affecting the other at each stage with numerous feedbacks. One of the best examples of this, he argues, is the attempt to fight pests with pesticides. As pests adapt to the pesticides, larger and larger quantities have to be introduced, creating a “pesticide treadmill.” The creation of an economy based primarily on fossil fuels is another example. Multinational corporations, automobiles, the modern city, etc. all coevolved around the exploitation of these resources. A new coevolutionary environmental history, Norgaard believes, must be constructed that shows the dynamic interrelationships between nature and society at each stage.

Thus far, Norgaard's analysis is a useful corrective to the tendency to see nature and society in dualistic terms. Yet as he goes on to address the problem of “revisioning progress,” his analysis displays a very obvious failure to address the social terrain in a serious way. More than this, Norgaard seems to raise questions about society's ability to take *any* rational actions with regard to the environment—an attitude more common to postmodernist thought than green thinking. The whole phenomenon of coevolution seems to be too complex for social action to redress environmental problems. Conse-

quently, Norgaard slips into a form of idealism minus the concept of effective rational action: “We are trapped by the templates of our minds, or more specifically by the dominance of too few templates, which pattern our choices with respect to social organization. Additional templates are our best hope. Understanding coevolution as a process provides an additional template” (p. 135). Norgaard gradually relies more and more on a single metaphor to describe what he calls a “new cosmology”—namely, “a coevolving patchwork quilt of differing cultures”—as a counter to “the exchange of material goods and flows of opportunistic capital” (pp. 174–75). We need, he insists, to engage in a process of “reculturalization” in which we exchange the idea of a “coevolving patchwork quilt future” for Adam Smith's invisible hand (pp. 179–80). What is missing here is not only a historical agent, but also any genuine confrontation with material reality, even in a theory that in its depiction of the relation between nature and society is remarkable in its material realism.

The unevenness of these works suggests that the environmental revolution in sociology is still in its infancy. In order for its challenge to be taken more seriously, environmental sociology will have to prove itself capable of simultaneously addressing both ecological issues and the social issues that have been central to sociology throughout its history. In my view, this will only occur when the challenge represented by the environmental justice movement, which is now being articulated at the global as well as the national level, and the struggle over the dominant concept of sustainable development come to be reflected in a fully developed critical environmental sociology.

Ecology and Society: An Introduction, by **Luke Martell**. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994. 224 pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-87023-945-7. \$16.95 paper. ISBN: 0-87023-946-5.

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The battle cry of environmental sociology is “bring Nature back in.” Contrary to Durkhe-