INTRODUCTION

Sociology, Society and the Environment

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Environmental issues, problems and struggles are central to human life in the 21st century. The relationship between 'society' and the 'environment' has generated much in the way of both action and analysis over the last thirty years. As local and global environments rapidly change, and as humans modify their behaviour in relation to how and where they live, the importance of studying the interface between society and environment has likewise steadily grown.

Different writers have different conceptions as to what constitutes the most appropriate way to analyse 'environment and society', and indeed what to include as part of such discussions. For some, the important thing is to consider particular environmental issues such as soil degradation, declining biodiversity, solid waste problems, chemical pollution, global climate change, use of fossil fuels – the list goes on. For others, the approach may be more conceptual, in the sense of locating debates over and about the environment within the context of social and political theory, such as analysis of different ways in which 'nature' is defined and perceived, theorising the relationship between human beings and 'nature' and human beings and non-human animals, examining the ways in which industrialisation and globalisation impinge on environments, and exploring the agency of human beings in relation to their environments and as part of social movements about the environment. The complexity and overlap of issues and approaches surrounding the environment means that there will necessarily be myriad different ways in which to study the environment–human nexus.

The aim of this book is to provide an introduction to environmental sociology, and to do so by providing an overview of key controversies within the field. The book is meant to whet the appetite for sociological analysis of environmental issues, to raise relevant questions, rather than

to provide definitive answers or one-size-fits-all theoretical models. As such, the intention is to stimulate further thinking and research in this area, and to indicate future lines of sociological inquiry. This is evident in the wide range of issues and approaches discussed in the book. From demographic changes to unhealthy living environments, perceptions of technology to assessment of risk, the chapters present insights into the nature of many different types of environmental issues. They do so by comparing and contrasting competing and often opposing perspectives, thus illustrating the tensions and conflicts in how issues are defined, perceived and responded to. Collectively they demonstrate the varieties, and importance, of environmental sociology.

ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is about people, institutions and behaviours. It is about social interactions and social structures. Ideally, sociology consists in thinking about the nature of society, and comparing any particular society with what went before and what it is likely to become. The concern is with both 'what is', and 'what ought to be'. The task of the sociologist, in this perspective, is to stand back from commonsense views of the world to investigate where we are and where we are going. It is about gaining a sense of historical and global perspective. It is about understanding the structure and processes of a society as a whole, including global societies.

Sociology is about issues relating to social inclusion – the 'insiders' and participating members of any society. What are the ways in which people behave, feel, think, and act, and why do they do so in the ways they do? What binds us together as a social whole? Sociology is also about issues relating to social exclusion – the 'outsiders' who are excluded from the mainstream of social life and social opportunities. How do we explain why it is that some people are privileged in their lifestyles and choices, while others are disadvantaged? What separates us from each other? Sociology is thus about the boundaries of the conventional and the unconventional. It is about the dynamic ways in which people are brought into and left out of the social order.

Sociology is about understanding and dealing with social problems. It is concerned with defining whether or not an issue is indeed a social problem, rather than simply a personal trouble or a natural phenomenon, and why this is the case. It is also concerned with devising social policies and/or developing practical applied strategies that can be used to address social problems. In other words, sociology is about acting on judgements made about the world around us. In my view, sociology

is about putting things into context, about challenging the status quo, and about making the world a better place. It is essentially about three important tasks: *see*, *judge*, *act*.

Environmental sociology is about translating these tasks into analysis and action around environmental issues. To illustrate this, we can consider the matter of drinking water. Sociologically, investigation of drinking water could proceed by looking at how water is managed and distributed, historically and in different cultural contexts. It could examine differences and similarities between societies in which drinking water is freely provided, and those in which it is sold for profit. It could compare the place of water in societies in which it is scarce, with those in which it is abundant, from the point of view of control, access and symbolic importance. Social differences in the use of water may be apparent within a society. So too, water may represent affluence for specific classes and castes, or for particular societies compared to others. Water, therefore, is integrally linked to certain kinds of social structures, social interactions and social processes of inclusion and exclusion.

A distinction can also be made between a 'problem' (unsafe drinking water) and a 'sociological problem' (why or why not unsafe drinking water is considered a social problem). In some towns and cities, for example, poor-quality drinking water is simply taken for granted, as no big deal. Residents may respond to the potential ill effects of the water by boiling it. Over time, they get so used to boiling their water that they don't even think twice about it. Thus they may never really challenge why it is that the water is so bad to begin with. In other places, water provision means something else. It is taken for granted by residents that water is, and ought to be, of good quality. Any negative change to water quality will be met with outrage and concerted public action to clean up the supply. In each of these cases, there may be unsafe drinking water. Sociology can help us discern why different people respond differently to what appears to be much the same problem.

Some questions to ask are:

What is the problem?

To answer this we need to identify the initial problem, such as unsafe drinking water. In order to do this we have to deal with issues of definition and evidence of harm. We have to analyse potentially competing claims as to whether or not the problem exists, and diverse lay and expert opinion on how the problem is interpreted. Does it pose a risk, and if so, to whom, and in what ways? Is the initial problem serious

enough in the public's eye to warrant a social response in the form of community action or state intervention?

Why does the problem occur?

To answer this we need to examine the social context, and to investigate the actions of key actors involved. In this instance, we might analyse matters relating to the ownership, control and regulation of drinking water. Who is responsible for water quality? Whose job is it to manage the resource and to whom are they accountable and how?

What are the social dynamics that allow the problem to persist?

To answer this we need to tackle issues pertaining to the shaping of perceptions, interpretation of events, and intervention processes. To explain why unsafe drinking water persists as a problem, we might ask the following subset of questions:

- Is the problem socially constructed as a *social problem* warranting social action; if so, how? (e.g. the emphasis might be on the financial costs of clean-up, or charging for water treatment and use, or making reference to the natural limits of a local environmental resource).
- In what ways is the problem construed from the point of view of *social regulation* and what forms of state and private intervention are mobilised to contain or manage the problem? (e.g. appeal to self-regulation, or regulation premised on the setting of standards, or strong state intervention).
- Is the problem itself to be addressed, or is the focus on how best to avoid, cover up or manage any *risk* associated with the problem? (e.g. signs telling the public not to drink water or to boil it first, installation of water filtration systems).

Regardless of the specific environmental issue or specific social problem, sociological analysis needs to take into account a wide range of concerns.

Implementing 'see, judge, act' in relation to the environment means:

- being cognisant of how environmental issues are socially constructed: *how expertise is mobilised and perceptions influenced by a variety of different actors*.
- identifying the social forces and actors involved in portraying, causing or responding to an environmental issue: *the institutions, people*

and social structures that are associated with a particular trend, event or problem.

- examining how perceptions are influenced by various techniques that affirm or neutralise an issue, how ideas are contested politically and via legal and other means, and how emotions are intertwined in and through public discourses: *the modes of communication and affectation that shape the construction of social problems.*
- investigating how social power is organised in support of particular social interests, in ways that lead to unequal distributions of actual risks and perceived risks: *the ways in which social inequalities are manifest in environmental matters.*

How to comprehend issues and events, and how and on what basis to engage with institutions and groups, are strong thematic currents evident throughout this book. Environmental sociology is, more often than not, about swimming against the tide. In furthering the endeavours of understanding the world, making judgements about it, and acting within it, it is hoped that the book will provide insights into how best to navigate the sometimes murky waters of environmental issues. Good sociology is never far from controversy.

ABOUT THE BOOK

And, of course, this book is very much informed by a sense of 'controversy'. Across a wide diversity of topic areas it is apparent that certain debates and conflicts, specific differences in approach and opinion, and opposing as well as complementary viewpoints come to the fore. The nature, sources and consequences of these controversies provide a useful and interesting way in which to frame environmental issues, and ultimately to understand better the dynamic relationship between society and environment.

The main idea behind the book is to expose the reader to a wide range of intellectual and environmental issues. Indeed, the book's contribution is that it will present ideas and information, and various authors and types of literature, to a wider audience than perhaps has been the case hitherto. The book operates at two levels of exposure. First, it brings together disparate topic areas in a way that allows different types of concerns and issues to be considered in the one volume. These have been grouped under thematic headings: social perspectives, social trends, and social issues. This enables a reasonably cohesive grouping of topics while still maintaining a sense of diversity. Social perspectives allude to ways of seeing the world; social trends refer to

patterns and developments; and social issues make reference to specific social problems and dilemmas.

Second, each chapter is structured in such a way as to provide a systematic review of important issues and debates within that particular topic area. The key to environmental sociology is to consider the specifically social dimensions of environmental issues. This requires analysis of the social dynamics that shape and allow certain types of activities pertaining to the environment to take place over time. Each chapter begins by providing a general background to the issues. This is followed by explication of the key debates within the particular topic area. The chapters conclude with a signposting of future directions in the area – analytically, empirically, and with a view to the challenges that lie ahead. The book is meant to describe, to expose, and to excite.

Not only are the topic areas diffuse and variable, but so too are those working on different problems within environmental sociology. As this book demonstrates, one does not have to be a 'sociologist' to do sociology, and sociology itself has many different analytical dimensions. Not surprisingly, we find that much of the debate about environmental issues is intrinsically sociological and certainly multidisciplinary. The boundaries of sociology are not determined by 'who you are', but by 'what you do'. A social science perspective on environmental issues is what unifies the contributions to the present volume.

CONCLUSION — THE BEGINNING

The purpose of this introductory chapter has been to give a rationale for the book, and to provide an analytical context within which the contents might be situated. While the rendition of 'what is environmental sociology' may be somewhat idiosyncratic (reflecting as it does the author's personal interpretation of the discipline), the purpose is not to establish analytical boundaries. Rather, as with the book as a whole, the intention is to open up further conceptual, empirical and action-oriented possibilities.

As a sub-field of sociology, environmental sociology has seen considerable growth in recent years, as much as anything reflecting significant changes in the environment and in public consciousness of these changes. Simultaneously, interest in environmental issues and problems has left no discipline untouched, whether this be economics, political science, geography or law. These developments have also generated extensive cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaboration. In one sense, we are increasingly talking the same language. Yet this language gets ever more complicated and complex.

This book takes its place as a contribution to the diversity of viewpoints, theories and empirical analyses evident across the broad spectrum of social science writing. It is hoped that the debates and controversies described in it will provide markers of where environmental sociology is at today – and where we need to go into the future.

Further Reading

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CHAPTER ONE

OLD TRADITIONS AND NEW AGES: RELIGIONS AND ENVIRONMENTS

Douglas Ezzy

Surely religion has little to say of significance about the environment? That is a central argument of this chapter. However, it is only half the story, and the opening sentence may not have quite the meaning that you think. It is the Christian tradition and its secularised descendant 'consumerist capitalism' that are the religious traditions that have typically devalued the natural world by ignoring it. This world is of little significance if salvation is primarily in the next world and the key encounter in this world is between an individual's soul and a transcendent deity seen as Other. Similarly, in consumerist capitalism, talk of the rights of trees, fish, or mountains seems strange when human pleasure and wealth are the criteria by which all actions are judged. I argue that at the heart of the current environmental crisis is the relegation of the environment to something of peripheral significance. This relegation derives from the religious traditions of Christianity and consumer capitalism.

Other religious traditions, such as indigenous traditions, Buddhism, and contemporary Paganism, have very different approaches to the natural world. Typically, these traditions regard this earth as important, and do not consider human pleasure and wealth to be adequate justifications for large-scale environmental destruction. The effects of these religious traditions is clearest in their outcomes: they have fostered human societies that live in a largely ecologically sustainable relationship with the forests, rivers, and animals around them.

However, it is too simplistic to blame Christianity for the current environmental crisis and point to other religious traditions as solutions. Gottlieb (1996a: 9) argues: 'religions have been neither simple agents of environment domination nor unmixed repositories of ecological wisdom. In complex and variable ways, they have been both.' Indigenous

traditions have been involved in ecologically destructive activities (Flannery 1994). Some Christians have advocated a more sensitive approach to the environment (Tucker 2003). Further, the social and cultural formation of contemporary consumerist capitalism has a quasi-religious dynamism all of its own (Greider 1997; Loy 1997) that has played a central role in environmental destruction.

Nonetheless, Lynn White (1967: 1204) was surely correct when he argued in 1967 that: 'More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.' At the heart of the contemporary ecological crisis is a theological, and sociological, problem. The destruction of huge sections of the world's ecosystems is a product of a culture imbued with theologically derived beliefs about the relationship of humans to the non-human world.

BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUES

> What they [environmentalists] want from religion happens to be, many would say, the most decisive ingredient in any effective environmental ethic: the ability to move from an anthropocentric to a biocentric understanding of the world and our human place in that world. Environmentalists have long recognized this shift as essential; recently, many are also recognizing – some with consternation, others with hope – that this shift is really 'a religious question'. (Knitter 2000: 377)

Anthropocentrism is a way of viewing the world, and choosing how to act in the world, in which human welfare and concerns are the final arbiter of what should or should not be done. In its strongest form anthropocentrism argues that the natural world only has value when it becomes a product for human consumption (Hay 2002). Another, slightly less arrogant, form of anthropocentrism argues that the non-human world is valuable when it is instrumental to human purposes (Hay 2002). Anthropocentrism is characteristic of Christianity and the Western capitalist worldview.

In contrast *ecocentrism*, also referred to as *biocentrism*, is concerned with sustaining the whole of an ecosystem. Humans are envisaged as one of a variety of beings with value in an ecosystem. Ecocentrism is common among indigenous societies, some forms of Buddhism, contemporary neo-Paganism, and the deep ecologists. It is often constructed as diametrically opposed to anthropocentrism.

Joanna Macy (1991: 32) describes *deep ecology* as an awareness of how humans are 'interwoven threads in the intricate tapestry of life'. From this ecological perspective all life is part of various open systems that

are self-organising. Deep ecology and ecocentrism argue that all beings, not just humans, have rights.

The idea that beings other than humans may not only have rights, but also be ontologically, and perhaps even metaphysically, integral parts of what it means to be human is not an easy idea for many people raised within the context of a Western philosophical and scientific worldview. Even if this idea remains marginal to much contemporary thought, it is increasingly acceptable within academic discussions of ecology, sociology, theology, and religious studies. It is one of the central points of debate in contemporary studies of religion and ecology. It also reflects a much broader debate about the nature of what it means to be human and what constitutes ethical action.

Much of Western religious thought, and the philosophical tradition that has developed alongside it, emphasises transcendent sources of morality, divine commandments, and logical categories for understanding. Following Descartes' philosophy, it also begins with isolated individuals, building the world up and out from the reality and rights of individuals. This is the dominant anthropocentric individualism of Christianity and consumerist capitalism.

In contrast, the ecocentrism of the deep ecologists has many similarities with the hermeneutical theory of Gadamer, Charles Taylor and to a lesser extent, Bauman (Ezzy 1998). In this communitarian tradition, the starting point is not individuals, but relationships: 'all real living is meeting' (Buber 1958: 11). This is a radically different way of understanding the human condition that does not proceed from the individual out to relationships, but begins with relationships, and views the individual as arising in and out of these relationships. Buber and the deep ecologists include humans in these relationships along with trees and other aspects of nature.

It is important to understand that I am making sociological and historical points, not theological. That is to say, I am not making a theological argument about what Christians *should* believe. Rather, I am describing sociologically and historically what most of the people who have called themselves Christians have believed for approximately the last 500 years. Most Christians have not defended the rights of nature. 'Instead people used Scripture to justify the exploitation of nature in the same way that the defenders of slavery used it to justify ownership and exploitation of certain classes of humans' (Nash 1989: 91).

In contrast, indigenous traditions often saw humans as one part of a broader society that included other non-human beings. Humans had an ethical responsibility for these other beings: