
Environmental Sociology: A Brief Introduction

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The emergence of environmental sociology in the 1970s has been attributed to factors such as widespread awareness towards environment problems and large scale support for protection of environment during that decade. (Dunlap 2011:189) The mobilization of support towards environmental protection led to the celebration of the very first Earth Day in 1970. (ibid) The study of environmental problems has become a multidisciplinary phenomenon and the various disciplines are increasingly acknowledging the significance of sociology in the study of environmental problems. (Dunlap and Marshall 2007:329) This is due to increasing awareness regarding the point that environmental issues are essentially social issues i.e they are consequences of social behavior; they impact humans and other species and social effort is required for their solution. (ibid) Initially, sociologists focused on examining society's response to environmental issues but gradually they shifted their attention towards analyzing the relationship between the biophysical environment and modern societies which led to the emergence of environmental sociology as a distinct field of study. (ibid)

The Emergence of Environmental Sociology

According to Dunlap, the energy crisis of 1973-1974 highlighting the industrialized society's dependence on fossil fuels as well as the expanding awareness towards water and air pollution during the 1970s contributed towards the development of the study of environmental problems within sociology. (Dunlap 2011:189)

Sociologists began to focus on the impact of societies on their environments and how in turn societies were being affected by environmental factors such as scarcity of resources and pollution. (ibid) Environmental sociology focuses on the point that the biophysical environment can influence human behavior and society as a whole. Thus, this can be seen as a deviation from the traditional sociological perspective that “social facts can be explained only by other social facts” (Dunlap and Catton, Jr. 1979:244). The importance given to environmental factors in impacting human behavior sets apart environmental sociology as a distinct field of study.

Sociology emerged as a distinct field of study through its emphasis on the social rather than physiological, psychological and geographical factors on human behavior. (Dunlap 2011:189) Its development took place during a period of technological progress, economic growth and resource abundance. Thus sociology grew with the contention that technological and scientific progress had liberated human societies from the influence of the biophysical environment. (ibid 189;190) Sociological enquiry regarding factors such as the societal effects on the shortage of energy led to the development of environmental sociology as an important discipline. (ibid 190) Earlier works in this field was soon supplemented by research on issues such as the impact of societal factors on various forms of pollution such as toxic contamination and also studies of social influence of environmental degradation. Within a decade, a number of sociologists deviated from traditional sociology’s emphasis on social factors; they took into account environmental factors as well. (ibid)

Environmental sociology as an expression first appeared in North America in the year 1971. (Vaillancourt 1995:11) In 1976, it appeared as a specialized subsection in the American Sociological Association. (ibid) In fact, in 1974, a research unit based on forestry

was created inside the Rural Sociological Society. Later, its name was changed to Natural Resources Research Group. (ibid) The unit formed the Environmental Sociology Group in 1972 within the Society and in 1974 within the American Sociological Association. (ibid) Later, in 1976, the American Sociological Association finally created the specialized subsection of Environmental Sociology. (ibid)

Environmental sociology also emerged as a critique of traditional sociology's ignorance to environmental factors. In their attempt to codify environmental sociology as a discipline, Dunlap and Catton criticized the Human Exemptionalism Paradigm (HEP) which influences mainstream sociology and provided an alternative perspective – New Ecological Paradigm (NEP). (Dunlap and Marshall 2007:330) They did not reject the point that human beings are exceptional species but argued that the special capabilities and skills of humans do not exempt them from the impacts of the natural environment. (ibid) The New Ecological Paradigm acknowledges the dependence of human societies on the ecosystem. (ibid)

Moreover, in order to delineate the scope of environmental sociology, an analytical framework had been proposed by Duncan. (Dunlap and Catton, Jr. 1979:251) It is based on the concept of 'ecological complex' which in turn is based on the biologist's idea of the 'ecosystem'. (ibid) According to the, Encyclopædia Britannica, an ecosystem is the "complex of living organisms, their physical environment, and all their interrelationships in a particular unit of space" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015). This definition is based on the biologist's definition of the ecosystem. Since this concept is based on a multispecies perspective, Duncan had developed an alternate version of it, which focuses only on humans. (Dunlap and Catton, Jr. 1979:251) Duncan's concept of ecological concept "focuses on the web-like interdependence among Population, Organization, Environment, and Technology (P, O, E, T); it stresses

that each element is reciprocally related to every other element” (ibid). It thus focuses on the interrelationship and interdependence among the four elements. (ibid)

The Link to Classical Sociologists

Although the founder fathers of sociology have often been discredited for not acknowledging the interaction between society and environment, many scholars have argued that there are ecological aspects in the works of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. According to Hannigan, there is implicit mentioning of nature and society in the works of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. (Hannigan 2014:22) Humphrey and Buttel were also of the opinion that the traces of environmental sociology can be found in classical sociological thought. (Frederick H. Buttel 2000:20) They classified the ecological relevant works of the classical sociologists into four categories – “materialist ontologies....biological analogies...use of Darwinian/evolutionary arguments or schemes..and concrete empirical analyses of resource or environmental issues” (ibid).

The works of Marx and Engels are based on materialist ontology which implies that the predominance of social labour and production can only be understood in regard to nature. (ibid) In the philosophical works of Marx, there is mentioning of the dialectical relationship between the material world and nature. (ibid) Moreover, Marx and Engels in their later works have referred to capitalism’s penetration as a result of mammoth air pollution and many other such conditions which affects the health of the labours. (ibid) They were also of the opinion that political economy should acknowledge the relation between nature and society. (ibid)

Elements of the evolutionary scheme are found in the works of Emile Durkheim. (ibid 21) His concept of social change was based on evolutionary perspectives – a transition from primitive societies

based on low division of labour to modern societies based on complex division of labour which was also accompanied by a transition from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. (ibid) Moreover, biological concepts are found in the theories of evolution and solidarity (as found in the notion of organic solidarity). (ibid) In his explanation of the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity, he referred to factors such as population density, scarcity of resources and the competition for survival which strongly resemble modern concepts of human ecology. (ibid) Moreover, according to Catton, Durkheim's theory involved an attempt to provide a solution to an ecological crisis which was a result of rising population accompanied by scarce resources. (Hannigan 2014:24)

Max Weber strongly opposed the notion that the concepts and methods of social science should be based on the concepts and methods of the natural sciences. (Frederick H. Buttel 2000:21) However, he acknowledged the relationship between nature and society. For instance, in the *General Economic History* and *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, he had referred to "the impacts of social structures on natural resources or the impact of natural resources on social organization" (ibid 22). The environmentally relevant aspects of Weber's works have been examined by the neo-Weberian sociologists - Patrick West and Raymond Murphy. (ibid) West described that Weber's empirical work on ancient society and his sociology of religion contains traces of human ecology. (ibid) The historical and comparative method of Weber was based on the point that environmental factors play casually relevant roles in certain phases of human history. (ibid) On the other hand according to Buttel, "Murphy has developed a Weberian environmental sociology based largely on a completely different literature – Weber's concept of rationalization and his ideal types of rationality and orientations to action drawn primarily from *Economy and Society*" (ibid). According to Murphy, the increase of

formal rationality has led to an ethic which deals with the mastery over nature and also ignorance regarding human threats to ecology. (ibid)

The Scope of Environmental Sociology

Environmental sociology achieved its legitimacy and credibility within the larger discipline through its emphasis on the fact that environmental problems are ultimately social problems. (Dunlap 2011:190) The scope of environmental sociology has been discussed elaborately by Dunlap. Environmental problems arise as a result of human action, such problems prove to be harmful for humans and the resolution of such problems requires collective human action. (ibid) These features of environmental sociology led to the development of four major areas of focus within contemporary environment sociology. These are: 1.) the analyses of social construction of environmental issues. 2.) the causes of such issues 3.) the impacts (potential and actual) of such issues. 4.) societal efforts towards the resolution of such issues. (ibid)

In analyzing the social construction of environmental issues, the environmental sociologists note that industrial wastes are ignored in one location while it is viewed as polluting in another location. Thus, environmental sociologists focus on how environmental issues can be constructed as problematic. (ibid) They analyze the roles of government officials, activists, the media and the scientists in defining situations as problematic; the methods used to legitimize such claims; and the challenges they face in obtaining acceptance of their claims. Such analyses point out that environmental issues do not simply develop from objective conditions but are defined as problematic through social construction. (ibid)

After the recognition of environmental problems, the causes of such problems can be analyzed. (ibid) Since environmental issues are

frequently generated by human action, environmental sociologists study the social forces behind such problems. (ibid) While some studies analyze the acts of particular government agencies and industries in generating such problem, others use cross-national data in order to figure out the relative effects of affluence, population and other features on indicators of the degradation of environment such as deforestation or CO2 emissions. (ibid) Contemporary cross-national analysis focuses on the relative significance of population growth and size, economic factors like trade patterns, consumption levels and affluence in creating environmental degradation. (ibid)

Environmental problems are seen to be problematic as they appear as threats to human beings. (ibid) A number of environmental sociologists study the multiple social impacts of such environmental problems. In the 1970s, when toxic waste was found at Love Canal in the Niagara Country, numerous studies were conducted on contaminated communities. (ibid) Moreover, researchers also started focusing on the social effects of a wide range of undesirable environmental conditions such as air pollution and leaking landfills. (ibid) A common feature found in the results of such research is that certain individuals such as those belonging in the lower socioeconomic strata and racial minorities are disproportionately vulnerable to hazardous environmental conditions as a result of which environmental justice has grown to be a dominant feature of environmental sociology. (ibid) Moreover, a number of studies also began to focus on how the wealthy and powerful nations exploit the poorer nations as pollution dumps and resource providers and thus highlight global environmental injustice. (ibid)

Environmental sociologists also focuses on the efforts provided in preventing or solving environmental problems through the examination of potential and existing environmental plans and policies. (ibid) They highlight how environmentally relevant actions are rooted in structural conditions. (ibid) Moreover, they point out

that promotion of pro-environmental action necessitates more than requests for voluntary transformation in lifestyle. (ibid) As described by Dunlap, “Developing effective mass transit systems and providing community-wide collection of recyclables, for example, are more effective than simply asking people to drive less and recycle more” (ibid). Moreover, environmental sociologists point out that promotion of energy-efficient standards for buildings are more effective than requesting for conservation of households. (ibid) While examining at the macro level, environmental sociologists focus on the features of nation-states and industries linked with environmental performance for determining the scope for improvements and also the roles of corporations, governments and non-governmental organizations in promotion of such improvements. (ibid 190; 191)

Conclusion

After its inception in the 1970s, environmental sociology quickly became a burgeoning sub-discipline within sociology. By focusing on the interrelationship between the biophysical environment and society and emphasizing on the point that environmental problems are socially constructed, environmental sociology acquired its legitimacy and credibility within the larger discipline. Though the emergence of environmental sociology took place in the 1970s, it has also been pointed out that there are ecological components in the ideas and writings of classical sociologists. Contemporary environmental sociology focuses on a number of areas such as causes of environmental degradation and the resolution of such issues.

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