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Nature, Society and Social Change

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Abstract

Environmental destruction has become an everyday reality in the contemporary world. Major concerns are being put forward regarding the dangers to the environment in general and to human societies in particular, with strong focus currently being put on climate change. Sociology has an important role to play in the analysis of environmental problems. The interaction between nature and society can be analysed through the concept of overdetermination. At the same time, the social construction on environmental problems is imperative for environmental issues to reach the agenda. An active environmental sociology which is as much concerned with analysis as it is with social change, should clearly highlight that claimsmaking and political strategy is imperative in the tackling of environmental issues within the public sphere.

Keywords

Environmental Sociology; Environmental Politics; Nature-Social Interaction; Social Construction

Environmental destruction has become an everyday reality in the contemporary world. Major concerns are being put forward regarding the dangers to the environment in general and to human societies in particular, with strong focus currently being put on climate change.

There is a lot of scientific backing in this regard, with scientists pointing out that increased temperatures could cause problems such as rising sea levels, melting of glaciers, intensification of storms and droughts, and human mass migration. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was set up in 1988 by the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Meteorological Organization to provide governments with scientific advice about climate change, unequivocally states that 'most of the observed increase in global average temperatures since the mid-

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20th century is *very likely* due to the observed increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations' (IPCC 2007:10).

Along the same lines, Jane Lubchenco, President of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, states that

'we are modifying physical, chemical and biological systems in new ways, at faster rates, and over larger spatial scales than ever recorded on Earth. Humans have unwittingly embarked upon a grand experiment with our planet. The outcome of this experiment is unknown, but has profound implications for all of life' (cited by Ellwood 2000:10).

The global environmental situation is already characterised by facts such as the extinction of a large number of species and ecosystems, chronic water shortages and a rise of temperatures. Consumption and human impact on the environment and natural resources vary on a global level from one social class to another (Dickens 2004:122-3). For example, by the turn of the century, annual emissions per person in North America averaged 19 tonnes, five times the world average and ten times the developing-world average (New Internationalist 2000).

In the meantime, environmental consciousness is increasing worldwide, as witnessed by the global UN summits on the environment such as the ones in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and in Johannesburg in 2002. Within the EU, environmental issues are at present being given much more importance than in the past. Surveys such as Eurobarometer show that most Europeans are of the opinion that the state of the environment is having a harmful effect on their life. Eurobarometer surveys have shown that many Europeans want policy-makers to give as much importance to the environment as to economic and social policies. After the 2004 enlargement of the EU, the first survey that examined attitudes towards the environment found out that the environmental issues that worry citizens the most are water pollution, man-made disasters, climate change, air pollution and the impact of chemicals. At the same time, significant differences

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in perceptions were found between citizens of the old and the new member states. For example, whilst climate change was ranked first within the old member states, it was only ranked seventh among the new member states (European Commission 2005). Besides, a rift between environmental consciousness and taking concrete action on an individual level was in place (Eurobarometer 2008).

In the meantime, criticism is made of industrialized countries which are largely to blame for various global environmental problems, such as rise in CO₂ emissions, for doing too little to resolve issues related to environmental justice and human rights. In the 2009 Conference of Parties in Copenhagen, such countries refused to make significant concessions regarding carbon targets or global climate funds, thus ignoring the plight of poorer countries for fair policies and action on climate change (Chivers 2010:134-5). This confirmed that environmental issues are at once political, something that has been evident at least since the Rio summit of 1992, when, according to Alain Lipietz

‘we again discovered that, since ecology has become political, it is up to politics – and its most elevated form, democracy – to become what it always was: ecological’ (Lipietz, 1995: 20).

In this respect, progressive environmental coalitions such Climate Justice Now! (CJN), call for ‘system change not climate change’ (Reitan and Gibson 2012), in the struggle for social, ecological and gender justice (Climate Justice Now n.d.). Such critique, which is also shared by green parties, is also echoed by eco-socialists who believe that the major cause of environmental problems is the unsustainability of capitalism, which, in turn has severe ecological and social impacts (Kovel 2007; O’Connor 1998; Bellamy Foster 2002).

From a human rights perspective, this is also reminiscent of an environmental justice tradition that amalgamates environmental and social justice concerns through an ‘environmentalism of everyday life’ (Pena 2005:153) and ‘climate justice’ (Di Chiro 2008:291).

If the environment has an impact on human life, then this should be of sociological concern. Increased consciousness of

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environmental crises and the development of sociology in general are resulting in an ‘ecological turn’ (Sutton 2004:174). This means that sociology is becoming more sensitive to the environment. This has resulted in an ‘environmental sociology’ or the ‘the study of interaction between the environment and society’ (Catton and Dunlap 1978:44)

Besides increased environmental awareness and sensitivity, there is ongoing sociological discussion concerning a ‘risk society’ – theorised in the first instance by Ulrich Beck. Here, ‘unknown and unintended consequences come to be a dominant force in history and society’ (Beck 1992:22). Ecological consequences stretch across time and space in an epoch in which the dark sides of progress increasingly come to dominate social debate. In turn, new counter-politics come about, whereby the political, economic, scientific and industrial hierarchy become subject to political conflict from the ‘courageous Davids’ who ‘get their chance against this Goliath’ (Beck 1992:110).

Thus, sociology has an important role to play in the analysis of environmental problems. Indeed, such problems are not merely ‘natural’ or ‘technical’, but they are also products of social change and subject to various forms of social construction (Hannigan 2005). Climate change is a problem not just because it really exists, and not only because human beings are major culprits in its creation and victims to its consequences, but also because it has captured the public imagination as an important issue which deserves attention. Thus, ‘environmental attitudes are not simply free-floating (as if waiting for the sociological researcher to come along and “collect” them) but are *discursively formed within particular social settings and contexts*’ (Irwin 2001:176).

Politics play a key role in this regard. Relations of power, both on a macro-basis as well as on a micro-basis, exist within any society, and different groups may have different demands and interests in a myriad of areas including the environment. It is through politics that these are articulated.

In this regard, a holistic analyses of social settings, whereby factors such as economic, political, ecological and ideological ones are inter-related, and whereby social relations result in reproduction and/or change, is called for. The social is dialectically related to the natural, because a change in one can result in a change in the other. Whilst

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natural settings impose limits, constraints and opportunities to human society, at the same time human societies have an impact on nature. Thus, the environment does not exist in a vacuum, but is deeply related to various overdetermining factors in the Althusserian sense (1977).

Uneven development characterizes social formations, through situations and circumstances related to ecological, economic, political, ideological and cultural factors, amongst others. Structures and agents are Every social formation has complex contradictions, and all processes are 'defined within a web of mutual overdeterminations' (Resnick and Wolff 1993:65), yet specific factors could have particular influence in specific contexts. For example, while the economy tends to play a dominant role in analysing power relations in capitalism, ecological limits such as resource depletion and political factors such as lobbying could also have leading influence in specific situations. The Althusserian concept of Structure in Dominance conceptualizes this complex interplay (Althusser 1977).

Interestingly, much before other social theorists, Marx and Engels recognised that social realities are formed in the process of working on nature's powers to produce commodities. This ultimately brings about social and environmental change, whereby man changes himself in the process (Marx 1973:1976). As Engels puts it,

'At every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature – but that we, with flesh, blood and brain belong to nature, and exist in its midst' (Engels 1972:13).

Within the capitalist mode of production, nature becomes a means to an end, valued for its commercial properties. Capitalism and private property result in the alienation of mankind from nature, whereby, in turn, both are exploited in the name of capitalist accumulation. The labour process is therefore inherently related to nature (Dickens 1996). In turn, the exploitation of workers and the environment results in a contradiction through which, in addition to social inequality and crisis, an ecological crisis emerges. Here, the conditions

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for the reproduction of capitalism itself are threatened, as is the case with global warming, of which capitalism is a major culprit (O'Connor 1998).

Over-production, over-consumption and the rendering of nature and society as commodities, perpetuate capitalism and its resultant unequal and destructive structures on a global level. This requires changes that go beyond technological reforms. Once again, the natural and the social are intertwined.

Yet it should be emphasized that the social construction of problems is imperative for environmental issues to reach the agenda. This is where political strategy comes in.

According to Hannigan, the successful construction of an environmental problem requires six factors, namely scientific authority; the existence of scientific popularisers; media attention; 'dramatisation of the problem in highly symbolic and visual terms'; 'economic incentives for taking positive action'; and 'the recruitment of an institutional sponsor who can ensure both legitimacy and continuity' (Hannigan 2005:77-78).

Laclau and Mouffe (1985), on the other hand, emphasize the importance of constructing hegemonic formations to bring about such change. In this context, chains of equivalence are formed by participants in a cause or alliance, and they are discursively united through the filling up of an empty signifier. In turn, a nodal point could be formed, and if successful, hegemony could result.

The separate conceptualizations of Hannigan and Laclau and Mouffe can be applied to show the need for an environmental sociology which is as much concerned with analysis as it is with social change. This should clearly highlight that claimsmaking and political strategy are imperative in the tackling of environmental issues within the public sphere. Environmental sociology becomes the analytical tool for politics which aims to unite social justice with environmental justice.

This can be of great value both to campaigners for human rights as well as to those who adopt an ecocentric approach which also incorporates animal rights, as is the case with ecologism (Dobson, 2007). An active environmental sociology can analyse both the social-nature interaction, as well as the way how environmental issues are socially constructed. On the one hand, and through a multidisciplinary

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approach, it can analyse the tangible social and environmental impacts of development, consumption, and other social processes. On the other hand, it can provide a theoretical backdrop for the successful articulation and construction of strategies for specific campaigns. In turn, this can result in a public sociology which encourages us to be active citizens, combining theory with action.

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