

ENVIRONMENT, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER OF THE SECTION ON ENVIRONMENT AND TECHNOLOGY, AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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A PRELIMINARY FRAMEWORK FOR THE IDENTIFICATION,
PRIORITIZATION AND ANALYSIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE.

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Terms employed by sociologists to refer to a variety of environmental conditions and to help legitimize environmental sociology include *environmental crisis*, *environmental degradation*, *environmental problem*, *environmental hazard*, *environmental contamination*, *ecological degradation*, and *ecological catastrophe*. Traditionally, such terms appear to be most frequently used as dependent or intervening variables. More recently, many of these terms are being used by sociologists as independent variables. Even the most cursory view of the work of many environmental sociologists reveals that many of these terms are rarely defined. Frequently, authors imply that the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, ecology) have endowed these terms with a fairly precise meaning.

Despite the obvious advantages contained in this assumption, such an assumption may actually hinder theoretical and methodological developments in environmental sociology. There is a heavy price to pay if sociology allows external sources (primarily the natural sciences and environmental social movement) to define and monopolize the operationalization of central variables. First, we lose substantial understanding of the dynamic, often subtle nature, of environmental issues. Secondly, we run the risk of being led astray by flawed theoretical and methodological principles inherent in external disciplines.

For better or worse, consensus on working definitions for these terms does not appear to exist within the natural sciences. A survey of ecology texts and journals reveals no working definition for many of the pejorative environmental terms listed above. In fact social scientists exploring the literature generated by ecologists will likely be disappointed by the level of theoretical and methodological discourse found. When

classifications of pejorative environmental change by ecologists, biologists, and environmentalists are analysed, they rarely adhere to a consistent framework for classification.

The lowest common denominator among the "doom and gloom" terms appears to be that they all refer to change in ecosystems or the biosphere which is perceived as detrimental to the maintenance of the environmental status quo. Considering that change is a fundamental component of all ecosystems, such a common denominator provides only a weak base for the identification and classification of environmental problems. Sociologists need to refine frameworks for the classification and secondary identification of environmental problems. Clearly it would be arrogant for social scientists to pose definitive definitions for environmental problem. However, it would be equally arrogant for natural scientists and ecologists to offer definitions without adequate consideration of the social component of environmental change. For any framework to be adequate, it will require merging the social and natural sciences.

Numerous sociologists have offered extraordinarily-useful classification schemes for a wide variety of environmental issues. Pioneering work on the classification of environmental problems has come from sources such as Couch and Kroll-Smith (the chronic technical disaster). The work of researchers at the disaster research center at the University of Delaware has also offered insight into the wide variety of impacts of different types of environmental change on afflicted communities.

It is in this tradition that I would like to sketch a brief outline of a typology of environmental change which I have found useful in teaching environmental sociology to undergraduates. This typology facilitates

classification of environmental change at three levels, as well as dealing with four broad types of change within each level. Additionally, this typology also offers the potential to prioritize environmental issues in the applied realm.

Ecologists distinguish between individual-but-interconnected ecosystems, as well as the totality of all ecosystems, the biosphere. Based upon the distinctions between these two levels, three different levels of pejorative environmental change can be identified: Biosphere Crisis, Ecosystem Crisis, and Ecosystem Problem. Borrowing basic terms from ecology, the three levels of environmental problems can be defined as follows:

Biosphere Crisis: The integrity of systems which comprise the biosphere are disrupted to such an extent the biosphere becomes incapable of sustaining complex life forms. The range of tolerance for multiple species is exceeded and homeostatic processes fail.

Ecosystem Crisis: The integrity of the component parts of an ecosystem(s) are disrupted to such an extent that the ecosystem becomes incapable of perpetuating the existence of an entire species. The range of tolerance for a species is exceeded and its homeostatic processes fail.

Ecosystem Problem: The integrity of one or more of the component parts of an ecosystem are disrupted to such an extent that the ecosystem becomes incapable of perpetuating the life of individual members of a species. The range of tolerance of individual members of a species is disrupted and individual homeostatic processes fail.

In addition to distinguishing between these three levels, the nature of environmental problems can also be specified according to primary source and impact. Considering the nature of our discipline, it proves useful to distinguish between environmental problems

which stem from anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic (systemic) sources. Additionally, the primary impact of environmental problems can be viewed as either anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric. This classification yields the following tables:

BIOSPHERE CRISIS

Impact	Source	
	Anthropogenic	Systemic
Anthropocentric	ABC-A	SBC-A
Non-Anthropocentric	ABC-NA	SBC-NA

ECOSYSTEM CRISIS

Impact	Source	
	Anthropogenic	Systemic
Anthropocentric	AEC-A	SEC-A
Non-Anthropocentric	AEC-NA	SEC-NA

ECOSYSTEM PROBLEM

Impact	Source	
	Anthropogenic	Systemic
Anthropocentric	AEP-A	SEP-A
Non-Anthropocentric	AEP-NA	SEP-NA

While in need of greater specification, particularly with respect to the relationship between the various levels, this typology offers sociology the ability to distinguish among, prioritize and compare environmental issues along some systematic continua. Additionally, it allows uniform discussion of the historical context of human patterns of interaction with non-human ecosystems. Another potential advantage of a typology of this type is its utility in systematically

identifying the social location and impact of environmental issues. Perhaps the greatest utility of such a typology is the distinctiveness it offers from the agenda being set by the environmental social movement at any given moment in history. Comments on this framework are welcomed.

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1992 MEETING SESSIONS: A CALL FROM THE CHAIR

Allan Schnaiberg
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Because of the awkwardness of the timing of the recent section election, I have allowed my own name to stand for sending papers for the Pittsburgh meetings. I will be coordinating this with Penelope Canan, our incoming section Chair-Elect, on this program (had she been elected earlier, her name would have gone to *Footnotes* as section coordinatory).

My efforts in recent programs have been to introduce diverse and creative ways of expanding our agenda. To some extent, I feel pleased with the results. But I am quite frustrated with the range of theoretical and methodological innovations represented in the papers received for the meetings. I feel we as a section have allowed far too much of our own agenda to be dictated by narrow criteria imposed by non-sociologists. This include both social movement organizations (note the warning by Cylke above on this), and other "stakeholders" in particular environmental conflicts, such as government agencies.

I have become more concerned with this through my own research on the emergence of recycling as a major social response to environmental hazards. The work of my students and others critical of much current environmental policymaking has exacerbated my sensitivity to the need for sociological autonomy in overviewing problems. Historically, the fact that we have been immersed in a pro-growth administration in the Reagan-Bush period of 1981-91 certainly forces us to separate

ourselves from many public "environmental" policies (many of which are primarily *economic* policies, in my view).

This separation has tradeoffs, of course: our potential alienation from agencies will give us freedom at the price of giving up some grant support and cooperation from agency officials. The same is true for the social movement organizations we identify with: one cost of autonomy is to give up some of the easy friendships we have with movement activists. Only some members of the section will feel comfortable with this, and I trust that our meeting sessions will afford opportunities for presentations by a variety of sociologists. My only point at this point is that we seem to have an imbalance towards a more "agentic" perspective, and that is what I want to redress to a modest degree in 1992.

To facilitate this expanded perspective, I am calling for papers on the following two topics, to broaden our intellectual perspective. If I receive more papers than usual, Penelope Canan and I may reorganize the 1992 sessions to have **two** roundtable sessions, and have our business meeting at another time (I believe this is technically feasible, from discussions I have had).

Here are the two topics for the **section program** (in addition to other sessions, such as that directed by Barbara Farhar: see September's issue of *Footnotes* for the full list of sessions):

- I: The State and "Environmental" Policymaking: Conflicts and Accommodations**
- II: The "Environmental Coalition": Centrifugal vs. Centripetal Forces**

Session I will include papers with empirical approaches to understanding the tensions with government agencies (including those offering research grants for environmental research), as well as innovative theoretical approaches. I will especially welcome new ways of thinking

about the tensions between economic growth and environmental protection here.

Sesssion II is designed to attract papers on tensions within "the environmental movement". This can include dimensions of differentiation of ecological *goals*, and/or differentiaion of social *means*. The latter would particularly include issues of race, class, and gender that differentiate movement organizations. But a variety of other dimensions of differentiation/conflict would be welcomed.

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SECTION ELECTION RESULTS

Gary Williams has just forwarded me the results of the recent section election. The good news is that we have some exciting new recruits for our major positions:

Chair-elect: Penelope Canan,
University of Denver

Secretary-Treasurer: Kent D. Van Liere,
HBRS, Madison, WI

Council Members:
Shirley Laska,
University of New Orleans

Willhelm Van Vliet
University of Colorado

The bad news is that no more than one third of the section membership voted in this election. This is a low participation rate (approximating local elections in a non-presidential year, if we assume that membership in the section is equivalent to voter registration in public elections). I hope that this is a temporary phenomenon, and urge more members to get actively involved in both the **nomination** and election phases. Perhaps the lateness of the ballot this year is due to inattentiveness of the entire representational structure of the section.

I urge members who are frustrated with any aspect of this to write to this newsletter. This could also include Council members

themselves, whose tasks have generally been vague and diffuse (membership and nominations being the exceptions). Oligarchies and voter apathies are correlated: in this context, this is an avoidable risk!

NATIONAL INSTITUTES FOR THE ENVIRONMENT: SECTION ACTION

Marvin Olsen [Michigan State University] presented some proposals at the Cincinnati meetings regarding the proposed National Institutes for the Environment. Specifically, he called for the section to support the committees working towards the establishment of the NIE, and to developing a sociological presence in the research agenda of the proposed NIE.

Our resolution of support, passed unanimously, was:

The section on Environment and Technology of the American Sociological Association supports the goal of the Committee for the National Institutes for the Environment, to establish a National Institutes for the Environment as an agency of the federal government, that would provide leadership and coherence to national research efforts on environmental problems, and that would fully involve the social sciences in all aspects of environmental research.

In addition, an action resolution was also passed by the members present:

That the section on Environment and Technology of the ASA establish an ad hoc committee to maintain liaison with the Committee for the National Institutes for the Environment.

To carry out this mandate, I am nominating the following for this committee:

Loren Lutzenhiser, Washington State
University, **chair**
William R. Freudenburg, U. of
Wisconsin
Marvin E. Olsen, Michigan State
University

FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

The 8th World Congress for Rural Sociology will be held August 11-16, 1992 at Pennsylvania State University. It will immediately follow the 55th annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, also at Penn State, with the theme "Rurality and the global environment." Contact: Local Arrangements Office, World Congress/RSS Annual Meeting, 306 Agricultural Administration Bldg., Penn State University, University Park, PA 16802.

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The International Association for Impact Assessment will be holding its 12th annual meetings at the World Bank Headquarters, Washington, DC, on August 19-22. Included will be sessions on methodological, topical, policy/institutional, case studies, and teaching/training issues. For information or submissions, contact:

Robert Goodland, Room S-5035
Environmental Assessment
The World Bank
1750 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20433
202-473-3203, fax 202-477-0565

or

Gary Williams
Argonne National Laboratory
Suite 702
370 L'Enfance Promenade SW
Washington, DC 20024
202-488-2400, fax 202-488-2413

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The 4th North American Symposium on Society and Resource Management will be hosted on **May 17-20, 1992**, by the School of Natural Resources, College of Agricultural & Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin. Its theme will be *Integrated resource management*. Send two-page double-spaced abstracts by **December 1st, 1991** to:

Donald R. Field, Program Chair
School of Natural Resources
146 Agriculture Hall

University of Wisconsin
Madison, WI 53706

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SECTION MEMBERSHIP

Membership renewals, coupled with new memberships, especially from students, resulted in a steady increase in the number of section members, from 301 in 1989 to 380 as of September 1991.

If we achieve the "magic number" of 400, we will be allotted an additional session for a total of three. This would allow more flexibility in scheduling section activities, when coupled with the two-hour business meeting slot (which we have split into roundtables and business time).

Although we haven't quite yet reached this level as of September 1991, the cut-off for the 1992 meetings, we could well achieve this by next September, giving us more time for 1993. So please continue to renew your own membership, encourage interested colleagues to join, and especially students. Our present committee efforts have been headed by Carole Seyfrit since 1989; she will be sharing responsibilities with Kurt Cylke this year. For information, contact:

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-Carole Seyfrit & Kurt Cylke

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PUBLICATION OUTLETS

Carole Seyfrit is book review editor for the Journal of Developing Societies. Anyone interested in reviewing for the journal should contact her regarding topics and/or

geographic areas of their interest should contact her: PO Drawer C, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS 39762.

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The Library of Sociology series [Garland, NY] is planning to publish monographs and edited volumes on contemporary issues. Proposals should be sent to Dan A. Chekki, Series Editor, Dept. of Sociology, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, R3B 2E9, CANADA.

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Those interested in the ecological impacts of Kuwaiti oil fires, and the sociopolitical treatment of this issue, should contact *Kuwaiti Fire Watch, Inc.*, which publishes a journal, *Blazing Tattles*. Materials in this journal are also linked to a number of computer networks, as well the production in hard copy, through Dr. Claire Gilbert. Contact her at Kuwaiti Fire Watch, Inc., 110 N.E. 19th Avenue, Box 3, Deerfield Beach, FL 33441; 305-429-9469, fax 305-428-1148.

[e-mail: UUCP:uunet!pyramid!cdp!cgilbert]

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A new multidisciplinary and international journal aimed at "the rational basis and justification of environmental policy" is *Environmental Values*. It is aimed to provide a forum for academic and nonacademic readers, linking policy issues and underlying principles of action. Two copies of papers should be submitted to Andrew Johnson, The White Horse Press, 10 High Street, Knapwell, Cambridge, CB3 8NR, United Kingdom.

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MEMBERSHIP NEWS & NOTES

Jeffrey Broadbent [U. of Minnesota] is currently working on a book on the politics of economic growth vs. environmental protection in Japan, based on data from one prefecture from 1955-80, and tentatively entitled *Green Limits: The Politics of Progress and Pollution in Japan*. He helped found the Japan Environmental Sociology

Research Group, with a newsletter currently published in Japanese, which is available through him at U. of Minnesota [909 SST, Minneapolis, MN 55455].

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Edward B. Davis is currently living in and collecting data on newly-emerging environmental groups in South Korea. He is interested in correspondence with researchers in other Asian countries: Youngsan Education Center, APO AP 96205-0614.

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Barbara Lynch [Dept. of Natural Resources, Cornell U.], recommends a recent book: Angus Wright, *The Death of Ramon Gonzales: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma*. Austin: U. of Texas Press, 1990. He traces Mixtec survival techniques in the context of a hostile global economy, starting with a case of pesticide poisoning.

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Patrick C. West [School of Natural Resources, U. of Michigan] has recently edited, with Steven R. Brechin, *Resident Peoples and National Parks*, published by University of Arizona Press [1230 N. Park Ave., Tucson, AZ 85719]. The book links together issues of indigenous peoples and the problems of carving out parks, the conflicts involved, and an approach to "co-management" by administrators and native peoples.

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Carole Seyfrit [Mississippi State] and Lawrence Hamilton [U. of New Hampshire] were awarded a National Science Foundation grant [\$105,857 through January 1993] to study "rapid social change and attitudes, expectations and aspirations of Arctic youth." The project will contrast an area with a large zinc mine with one with little development, surveying high school students. These data will be compared with Seyfrit's findings from Scotland and Newfoundland, two sites of oil exploration, to examine natural resource development's effects on adolescents.

TO: Members of the Environment and Technology Section, ASA

FROM: Penelope Canan, Department of Sociology, University of Denver
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**PLEASE SEND THIS TEAR-OFF SHEET OR A COPY FOR INCLUSION IN
FORTHCOMING EDITIONS OF THE NEWSLETTER. MANY THANKS.**

Your current research interest[s] you'd like to share with others:

New literature you've published, or found especially helpful. Give full citations.

Forthcoming meetings and conferences. Calls for papers. Papers you've recently presented.

Activities of related social science environmental groups.

Name: _____

Address: _____