



Environmental Sociology and the Sociology of Natural Resources: Institutional Histories and Intellectual Legacies

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While environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources nominally focus on the same subject matters, in practice the literatures in the two subdisciplines have tended to be quite separate intellectual enterprises. Environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources have different origins, their practitioners tend to have distinctive institutional locations, their problematics are different, and their theoretical tendencies differ considerably. I provide an overview of the divergent courses that have been taken within these two areas of inquiry, with stress on their institutional histories and intellectual legacies.

Keywords environmental sociology, forests, natural resources, parks, rural, rural sociology, sociology of agriculture, theory

It remains relatively uncommon within contemporary sociological circles to devote serious consideration to the natural world and the social relations that shape and are shaped by the natural world (Murphy 1994; Dickens 1992; Benton 1989; Dunlap 1997). It is thus surprising that the minority of sociologists interested in societal-environmental relationships would be divided into two separate—and largely harmoniously coexisting—subdisciplines: environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources.

While the notion that there is a systematic divide between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources has been apparent to me for a number of years, my inclination has always been to ignore this gulf and to see it as not particularly fundamental or consequential. Two personal experiences, however, have changed my mind about the significance of the environmental sociology/sociology of natural resources (ES/SNR) divide. First, shortly after my publishing a paper on theoretical issues and trends in “environmental and resource sociology” in 1996 (Buttel 1996), my colleague Don Field pointed out to me in a

Received 20 September 2000; accepted 5 July 2001.

Presented at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, June 2000. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management, Brisbane, Australia, July 1999.

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convincing way that the underlying analysis and major recommendations were really only germane to environmental sociology and did not have much to say about the sociology of natural resources, which in his mind was a distinct field of scholarship. Second, in my capacity as coeditor of *Society & Natural Resources*, which is regarded by a good many scholars as the international flagship of the sociology of natural resources community, I am able to see more clearly from the pattern of submissions that there is a substantially different style of scholarship in this field than there is in the environmental sociology field with which I have been most closely associated.

In this article I document the historical and contemporary nature of the ES/SNR divide. While acknowledging that the ES/SNR divide is not a serious problem and that there is a worthwhile complementarity between the two, I suggest that the existence of the divide suggests some unresolved issues of theory and method for the two communities of scholars interested in societal-environmental relationships.

Environmental Sociology and the Sociology of Natural Resources

The divide between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources has been a long-standing one, reflecting the relatively distinct origins of the two subfields. The major contours of this divide are summarized in Table 1.

While practitioners of both the sociology of natural resources and environmental sociology have made a good many claims that their fields have long and distinguished histories—dating back even to the 19th and early 20th century classical sociologists—it is most accurate to say that the sociology of natural resources is the more long-standing of the two subdisciplines, at least as a recognized subdiscipline and as an organizational entity in the United States. The sociology of natural resources was a relatively well established area of work by the mid-1960s. The sociology of natural resources field at this time consisted of three very closely related groups of scholars. First, there was the growing cadre of social scientists (among whom sociologists were well represented) who were increasingly being employed by natural resource management agencies such as the U.S. Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Corps of Engineers, and so on. Second, there was a sizable community of scholars interested in outdoor recreation, many of whom would become active in editing and publishing in the *Journal of Leisure Research* and *Leisure Sciences*. Third, there was a significant group of rural sociologists interested in the sociology of resource-oriented rural communities and in rural natural resource issues; these rural sociologists, along with many resource agency social scientists and social scientists interested in outdoor recreation, joined groups such as the Natural Resources Research Group of the Rural Sociological Society.¹ The NRRG was quite active by 1965. Both intellectually and in practical or personal terms, these sociologists of natural resources were interested in matters pertaining to effective resource management, in more rational and socially responsive policymaking by resource agencies, in enhancing the cause of resource conservation, and, in the mid-1970s and after, in social impact assessment of natural resource development projects. Later, these sociologists of natural resources would expand their institutional networks to include the International Association for Impact Assessment and the International Symposia on Society and Resource Management in addition to the NRRG and the *Journal of Leisure Research* and *Leisure Sciences*. In addition, professional societies of resource biologists (e.g., the Society of American Foresters) would establish networks of “social dimensions” social scientists in which sociologists of natural resources would play very significant roles. *Society & Natural Resources* would shortly become the

TABLE 1 Tendencies Within Environmental Sociology and the Sociology of Natural Resources

Dimension	Environmental sociology	Sociology of natural resources
Origins	Grew out of the environmental movement	Long-standing emphasis among rural sociologists, leisure/outdoor recreation researchers, and social scientists in resource agencies
Definition of environment	“Singular,” encompassing, cumulative disruption	Local ecosystem or landscape
Main features of the environment stressed	Pollution, resource scarcity, global environment, ecological footprints	Conservation, (local) carrying capacity
Definition of sustainability	Reduction of aggregate levels of pollution and raw materials usage	Long-term sustained yields of natural resources, social equity in allocation and use of resources, reduction of social conflict over natural resources
Predominant cadre of practitioners	Liberal arts sociologists	Natural resource agency staff; college of agriculture/natural resources staff; rural sociologists
Scale/unit of analysis	Nation-state Metropolitan focus	Community or region Nonmetropolitan focus
Overarching problematic	Explaining environmental degradation	Improving public policy, minimizing environmental impacts and conflicts, improving resource management
Theoretical commitments	Highly theoretical, often metatheoretical	Deemphasis on social theory

flagship journal of the sociology of natural resources, though many sociologists of natural resources would publish the bulk of their work as agency bulletins or in the journals of the natural resource scientists. Most sociologists of natural resources today either are employed in a public or private resource management agency or, if they are employed as academics, are most likely to be found in resource departments (forestry, wildlife, range management, fisheries, environmental studies) or related departments or programs (e.g., development studies or international agriculture programs) in colleges of natural resources, or in colleges of agriculture.

Environmental sociology had quite different origins and institutional characteristics. Vocationally, most environmental sociologists have tended to be in conventional liberal arts sociology departments and to be scholars who were personally and professionally challenged by the rise of the environmental movement in

the late 1960s and early 1970s. There have been three particularly important routes of recruitment into environmental sociology. A few of the scholars who would become well known in environmental sociology (e.g., William Burch, William Catton, Richard Gale) were active in the field of the sociology of natural resources earlier in the 1960s, and extended their inquiry to include issues that were important within the emerging field of environmental sociology. Most environmental sociologists, however, were relatively new converts to the field, either as young or middle-career professionals (e.g., Denton Morrison, Allan Schnaiberg), and especially as graduate students (e.g., Riley Dunlap); this new cohort of environmental sociologists was especially likely to have strong commitments to environmentalism, and to have elected to orient its scholarship to be relevant to environmentalism. Third, there were some environmental sociologists who had preexisting theoretical interests (e.g., William Catton in Durkheimian theory) who were stimulated to think differently about social theory as a result of the ferment of Earth Day and the mobilizations that followed. Environmental sociology largely emerged from whole cloth in the first half of the 1970s (the significant contributions of Fred Cottrell and Walter Firey notwithstanding). In the very early days of environmental sociology the core issue was the nature and dynamics of environmentalism and the structure of the environmental movement. It is significant and striking that in the 1970s virtually all of the sociological attention paid to the environmental movement was by environmental sociologists,² rather than by sociologists of collective behavior and social movements, since the former saw this movement as being fundamental while the latter did not accord it this level of significance. Nonetheless, by the end of the 1970s the field of environmental sociology would change very rapidly, and matters of theory—if not metatheory—would become particularly critical.

The historical and institutional divergences between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources have led to some long-standing differences between the scholarship in the two fields. These differences are also summarized in Table 1. The sociology of natural resources tends to stress rural/nonmetropolitan topics, in large part as a reflection of the work its practitioners do for natural resource agencies and of the strong representation of rural sociologists and related rural social scientists (e.g., Machlis and Field 2000). Accordingly, the predominant conception of the environment from the vantage point of the sociology of natural resources is that of consumptive, preservationist, recreational, and related uses of primary resources (forests, fisheries, mining, coastal zones, riparian zones, etc.). The sociology of natural resources retains a strong emphasis on management and policy, and thus tends to be relatively applied and empirical in orientation. The characteristic unit of analysis in the sociology of natural resources is that of the individual resource manager/user or the resource group or locality (particularly the nonmetropolitan community; see, for example, Lee et al. 1990). The sociology of natural resources literature also tends to be more eclectic in its pattern of citation, and often more multidisciplinary in its orientation.

Environmental sociology, by contrast, tends to be more metropolitan in its stresses, in several respects. Environmental sociology is most preoccupied with manufacturing industry and with metropolitan-centered consumption and metropolitan social groups. While primary resources are given some attention, this is basically a reflection of metropolitan-driven demands by way of production and consumption institutions. The treatment of primary resources is also a highly aggregate one, with very little local detail, reflecting the industrial- and metropolitan-oriented focus. Environmental sociology's conception of the environment is basically

twofold: (1) pollution and (2) resource scarcity induced by metropolitan-driven and industrially driven tendencies in production and consumption. Environmental sociology has tended not to develop a great deal of locally specific empirical detail about the processes by which pollution and resource scarcity occur. Much environmental sociology, in fact, is not only largely theoretical, but even metatheoretical, in that it is rooted in debate about very broad—and often relatively difficult to test—propositions. Environmental sociology has largely tended to have a national-societal unit of analysis, but increasingly environmental sociology has taken on a global or international level of analysis (Redclift and Benton 1994; Redclift 1996; Gould et al. 1996; Roberts and Grimes 1997).

While the summary of the argument thus far as presented in Table 1 shows that the sociology of natural resources and environmental sociology exhibit a great many differences, perhaps the three most significant differences lie in the definition of environment, the scale of research or unit of analysis, and the overarching problematic. As I have argued elsewhere (Buttel 2001), strategies for synthesis and cross-fertilization will need to revolve around these three key dimensions of difference.

Discussion

In this article I have aimed to document the historical origins and current nature of the gulf between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources. It cannot be stressed too vigorously, though, that while there are clear differences in the origins of environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources and these continue to exhibit important intellectual legacies, the differences ought not to be exaggerated or to be thought of as intrinsic or desirable. It should also be noted that the divide is probably most evident in the United States, and is arguably not as pronounced elsewhere (e.g., in the United Kingdom). While U.S. exceptionalism in this regard should be reassuring in the sense that there is nothing intrinsic to the ES/SNR divide, it also suggests that there ought to be some readily available bases for synthesis and cross-fertilization.

Second, there is a significant cadre of sociologists whose work has creatively straddled the divide between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources. Some names of this group of boundary spanners that come to mind are William Burch, William Freudenburg, Stephen Bunker, and Thomas Rudel. The prominence of this group suggests not only that synthesis and cross-fertilization are possible, but also that it can yield creative insights. Thus, while it will appear to some readers that I am exaggerating the differences that exist between the two sub-disciplines, the fact remains that they reflect significant enduring divergences in styles of scholarship that have led the two subdisciplines to have less synthetic potential than could possibly be the case.

In closing, it is also worth mentioning that there are two literatures that deserve special note in relation to the arguments made in this article. First, the sociology of agriculture literature—which, incidentally, is seldom treated within the sociology of natural resources—deserves notice on account of its advances in the areas of treating globalization phenomena, the biophysical character of resources and materials, commodity chains, and the role of environmental mobilization (see, for example, Bonanno and Constance 1997; Bonanno et al. 1994; McMichael 1994; 1996; Goodman et al. 1987). The sociology of agriculture literature has made particular gains in understanding the role of international organizations and regimes during the era of globalization at the end of the century (see Goodman and Watts 1997).

Second, as suggested by Wilson (1999), the sociology of fisheries has been the area of the sociology of natural resources that has been most comprehensive in grappling with the biophysical specificities of the resource, the economic sociology of production, and the role of the science, the state, environmental movements, and globalization processes. The sociology of agriculture and sociology of fisheries show that a number of the suggestions and recommendations in this article are realistic and have practical value.

Finally, it is worth returning to a matter mentioned just in passing at the outset of the paper, concerning whether the ES/SNR gulf is itself a problem. A reasonable case can be made that there is a division of labor, and at least potentially a complementary relationship, between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources. There is little overt rivalry between the two approaches, and the weaknesses of one field of scholarship are often areas of strength on the part of the other. While the complementarity interpretation is no doubt true to a degree, one might look at the matter in two other ways. Though I cannot make any precise empirical observations on the point, my guess would be that the rate of cross-citation between environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources is very low, so that what complementarity does potentially exist is not being very fully manifest in practice. The second point is that the two literatures not only have shortcomings, but they are shortcomings that take the form of mirror imaging. Thus, for example, environmental sociology has tended to err by having an overly general image of the state—that states tend to be relatively centralized and to have definite “functions” that affect environmental quality—while the sociology of natural resources has tended to eschew theorizing the roles of states. Thus, the two literatures tend to err in ways that would become highly apparent if their practitioners were working more in concert and were grappling with differences in their assumptions and approach. My hope is that this article may suggest some points of departure for a more sustained dialogue than has been the case in the first several decades of the surprisingly isolated coexistence of environmental sociology and the sociology of natural resources. This closer dialogue will help scholars from both fields come to grips with their differences and learn through looking at these differences self-reflectively.

Notes

1. The role of rural sociologists in the sociology of natural resources is extensively discussed in Field and Burch (1988), which is one of the most comprehensive book-length pieces in this field.

2. Note, however, that over the past decade or so there has been a growing fascination with “new social movements,” among which environmental/ecology movements are prototypical within mainstream sociological circles (e.g., Beck 1992; Giddens 1994).

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