

The Birth, Disciplinary Context, and Early Development of Environmental Sociology

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Historical Background

- Environmental sociology has been defined narrowly as the study of the relationships between modern industrial societies and their biophysical environments (or the “study of societal-environmental interactions”) and more broadly as the sociological investigation of environmental issues.
- It was born in a disciplinary context that was not receptive to sociological analyses of biophysical phenomena, as we will see.

- In the early to mid-1970s a small number of sociologists became interested in environmental issues, largely stimulated by the growing prominence of such issues on the public agenda.
- The bulk of this early work focused on environmentalism, public concern for the environment, governmental actions, etc.- phenomena approached from traditional specialties such as social movements, social psychology, political sociology, etc.
- A key concern was documenting how environmental quality was “socially constructed” as a social problem.

- Such early work constituted a “sociology of environmental issues.”
- But the 1973-74 energy crisis and growing evidence of serious environmental problems led to increasing concern with how societies were affecting their environments, and in turn were being affected by environmental conditions—i.e. “societal-environmental interactions.” The modest amount of work along these lines reflected the emergence of a distinct “environmental sociology.”
- There was also some work on “solutions” to environmental problems, often taking a micro-level approach to changing individual behaviors. A concern with solutions, often at a more macro-level, has grown in importance over the years.

Organizational Developments

- These intellectual developments were paralleled by organizational developments:
- In 1973 an “Environmental Problems Division” was established within the Society for the Study of Social Problems (an organization with a somewhat activist orientation).
- In 1976 a “Section on Environmental Sociology” was established within the American Sociological Association (the leading disciplinary organization).
- These two joined the “Natural Resources Research Group” within the Rural Sociological Society which had been formed in the mid-1960s, but had a somewhat narrower focus on resource issues and consisted mainly of rural sociologists working in land-grant institutions.

Environmental Sociology and the Discipline

- In this context William Catton and I defined environmental sociology as “the study of societal-environmental interactions.” But sociological interest in the environment lagged behind Environmental Studies and other fields, and we suggested this was due to two, interrelated factors:
- First, sociology was born well into the industrial era when progress and growth seemed to be the natural state of affairs, increasingly allowing modern societies to overcome ecological constraints and humans to “master nature”—a core belief in the “Dominant Western Worldview” (DWW).
- Second, traditions unique to sociology (especially disciplinary founder Emile Durkheim’s “anti-reductionism dictum”—to be explained shortly) reinforced the neglect of ecological conditions.

Paradigmatic Implications

- We argued that as a result sociology, like society at large, had come to view modern societies as “exempt” from ecological constraints, reflecting a “human exemptionalist” worldview (compatible with the DWW).
- Stimulated by the work of ecologists such as Carson, Commoner, and Ehrlich we discerned an ecological worldview or paradigm developing in intellectual circles and--via environmentalism--within the larger society, and argued that sociology should replace its implicit “Human Exemptionalism Paradigm” (HEP) with a “New Ecological Paradigm” or “NEP.”

Comparing the DWW, HEP and NEP

- We then compared the Dominant Western Worldview, Human Exemptionalism Paradigm (sociology's disciplinary version of the DWW) and the New Ecological Paradigm in terms of:
 - 1. Assumptions about the nature of human beings.
 - 2. Assumptions about social causation.
 - 3. Assumptions about the context of human society.
 - 4. Assumptions about constraints on human society.

I will present 2 and 3 only in the interest of time.

Assumptions About Social Causation

- DWW
 - People are masters of their destiny; they can choose their goals and learn to do whatever is necessary to achieve them.
- HEP
 - Social and cultural factors (including technology) are the major determinants of human affairs.
- NEP
 - Human affairs are influenced not only by social and cultural factors, but also by intricate linkages of cause, effect, and feedback in the web of nature; thus purposive human actions have many unintended consequences.

Assumptions About the Context of Human Society

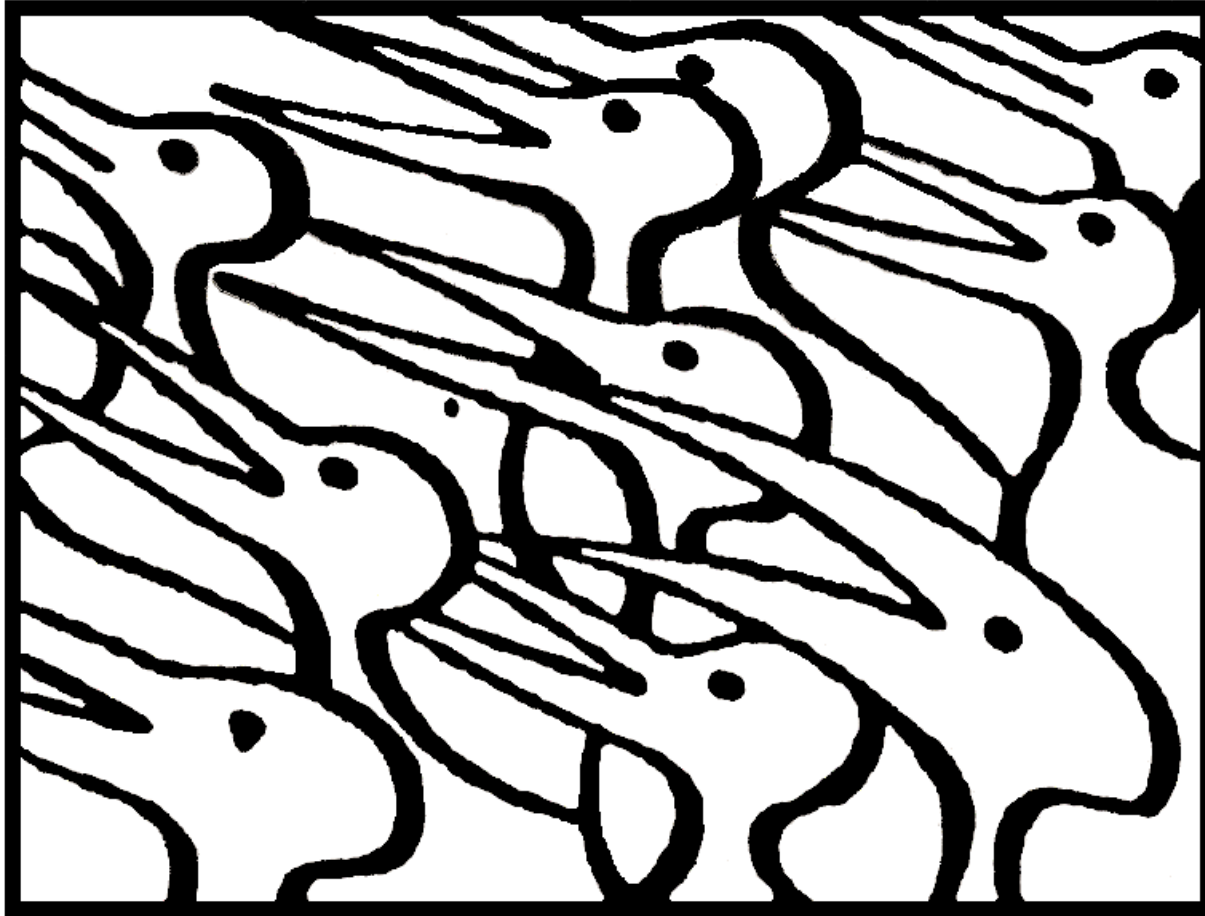
- DWW
 - The world is vast, and thus provides unlimited opportunities for humans.
- HEP
 - Social and cultural environments are the crucial context for human affairs, and the biophysical environment is largely irrelevant.
- NEP
 - Humans live in and are dependent upon a finite biophysical environment which imposes potent physical and biological restraints on human affairs.

Exemptionalist vs. Ecological Paradigms

The human exemptionalism and ecological paradigms “entail competing views both of our species and of the global ecosystem: adherents to the human exemptionalism paradigm tend to see the world as infinite and humans as essentially omnipotent, while adherents to the ecological paradigm tend to see the world as finite and humans as constrained by that finiteness.”

Dunlap, Comment on Ehrlich-Simon Debate, *Social Science Quarterly*, March 1983

Simon's vs. Ehrlich's Paradigms



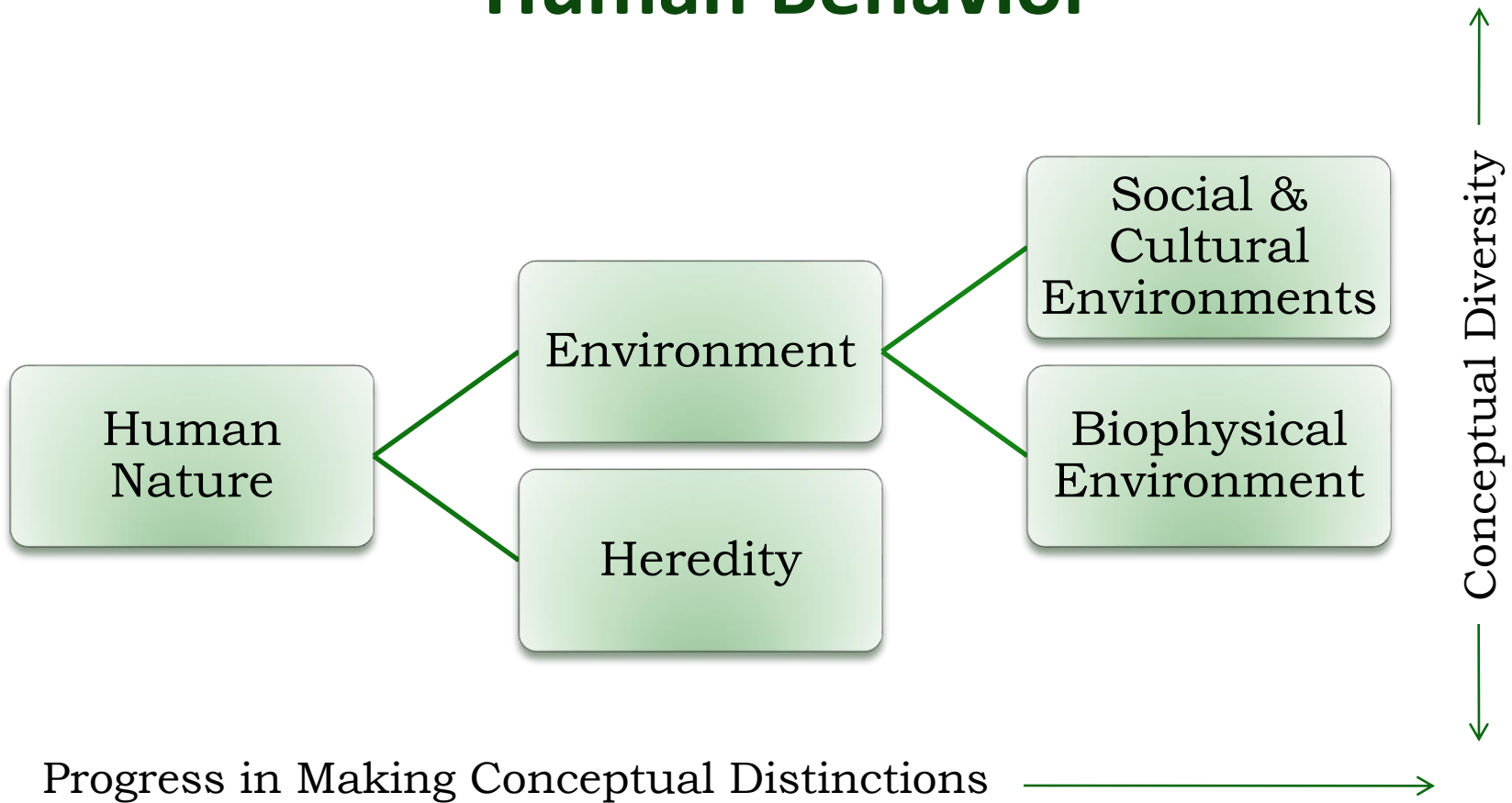
Paradigms are not Theories

- Our original (1978) paradigm argument was short and somewhat ambiguous, leading some to see it as a call to *replace* existing sociological theories with ecological ones.
- However, we saw “paradigms” as fundamental assumptions that underlie more specific theories, or as lenses through which one views the world.
- It is therefore possible to develop ecologically sound (non-exemptionalist) theories based on Marxian, Weberian, Durkheimian and other theoretical perspectives.
- Over time there has been a gradual “greening” of sociological theories by environmental sociologists, with variants of World Systems Theory being a prominent example.
- Climate change has stimulated calls for additional “post-exemptionalist” theorizing.

A Durkheimian Legacy

- Besides shedding the “blindness” of the HEP, environmental sociologists had to overcome another barrier, a strong tradition of avoiding the biophysical environment.
- As noted earlier, disciplinary traditions served to inhibit attention to environmental issues. To justify the unique subject matter of sociology, and thus its legitimacy as a new discipline, founder Emile Durkheim argued that “social facts” (the province of sociology) should be explained by other *social* facts—as opposed to biological, geographical and psychological factors.

Differentiation of Variables That Influence Human Behavior



- As each of the foregoing conceptual distinctions was made, sociologists (and most social scientists) tended to limit their attention to the higher-level factor—first the environment over heredity and then the socio-cultural over the biophysical environment—due to fears of “biological determinism” and “environmental (e.g., geographical) determinism.” As a result, sociologists had become “socio-cultural determinists” by the mid-twentieth century.
- This was understandable, given past uses of geographical determinism to explain the superiority of nations in “temperate” zones and biological determinism to justify alleged racial inferiorities or gender differences.
- But the (ecological) baby was throw out with the bath water.

Socio-Cultural Determinism

- This societal shift was reflected in sociology (and other social sciences):
- “... the main accomplishment and direction of the social sciences to date [is] the progressive substitution of sociocultural explanations for those stressing the determinative influence of physical nature.”
- M. Stanley, *American Sociological Review*, 1968

- In reality, Durkheim and many other sociologists—especially in the early 20th century—violated his dictum and considered environmental factors in their work, although they were seldom primary foci.
- This continued among rural sociologists who often focused on agriculture, forestry and mining throughout the century, but their work was rather marginal to the larger discipline.
- Nonetheless, by the 1970s post-World War II technological advances and growing affluence created a sense that continued progress and prosperity were guaranteed, and that modern societies had escaped ecological constraints (and even the boundaries of the Earth with space exploration).

Mainstream Sociology's Exemptionalism in 1970s

- "... the newly found environmental dangers are vastly exaggerated...." Amatai Etzioni, 1970
- Basic needs "...are satiable, and the possibility of abundance is real." Daniel Bell, 1973
- "... there are no known limits to the improvement of technology." Amos Hawley, 1975
- Our major problem is declining "faith in progress." Robert Nisbet, 1979.

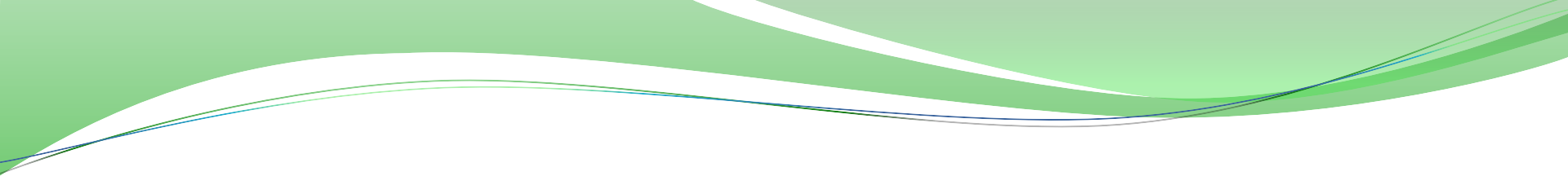
GEC Undermines Exemptionalism

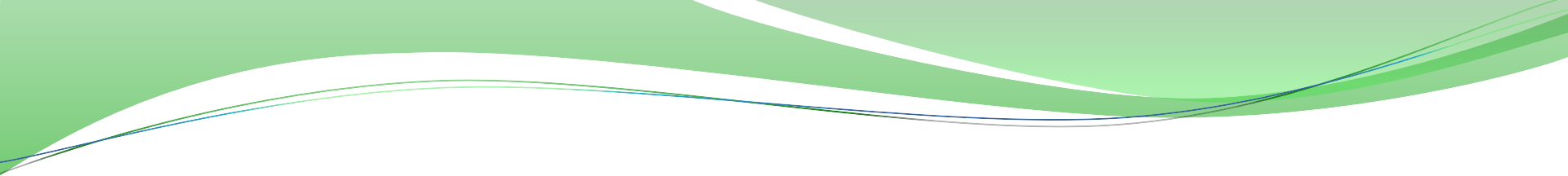
Growing recognition of global environmental change (GEC) in the 1980s helped undermine the HEP.

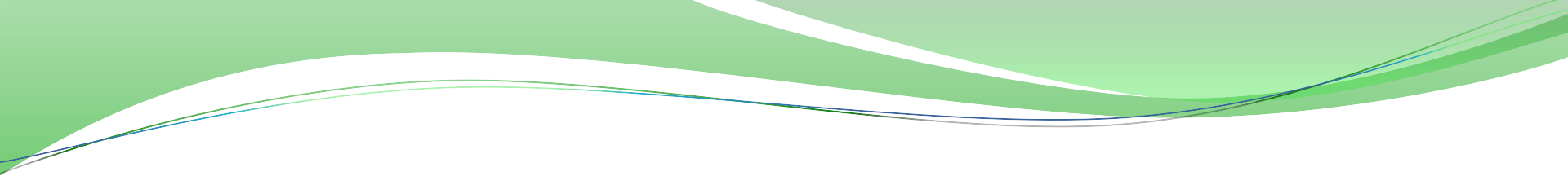
Over the past three decades growing recognition of the reality of human-induced global environmental change has made an ecological paradigm “mainstream” in scientific and academic circles:

“...it is abundantly clear that human activities... now match or even surpass natural processes as agents of change in the planetary environment.”

U.S. National Academy of Sciences, 1990.

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- The growing awareness of GEC and consequent credibility of an ecological paradigm (most recently exemplified by suggestions we have entered the “Anthropocene”) has helped provide legitimacy to environmental sociology, and encouraged sociologists to focus attention on environmental problems and not worry about violating Durkheim’s anti-reductionism dictum against examining “non-social” factors/variables in sociological analyses.

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- In fact, in the 1980s analyses of societal-environmental interactions were already being more common.
 - Typically these involved looking at societal impacts on environmental conditions.
 - However, the impacts of toxic wastes and other hazards *on* local communities became a popular topic (especially after Love Canal gained visibility and sociological attention).

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- The 1990s saw an explosion of cross-national studies due to increased data availability on environmental conditions.
 - Perhaps as a legacy of anti-environmental determinism (and Durkheim's dictum to employ social facts in explanations) such studies were more likely to examine the impact of societal phenomena on environmental conditions.
 - Cross-national analyses examining country characteristics associated with CO₂ emissions, deforestation, energy consumption, and ecological footprints became common.
 - However, recently considerable attention is being given to the impacts of climate change *on* human populations.

- In 2003 York, et al. published an analysis of national-level ecological footprints in the *American Sociological Review* that included *latitude* (a proxy for climate) as a predictor variable, and not surprisingly it had a significant impact on footprints. Their ability to do this without provoking charges of “environmental determinism” signaled that Durkheim’s anti-reductionism taboo was fading away.
- At this point in time, it is common to see sociological analyses including environmental conditions as “variables”--both as causes and consequences of human actions (and control variables)--as it is no longer necessary to justify doing so, especially given the credibility of GEC and climate change in particular.

Continuing Ambivalence

- Nonetheless, a few sociologists continue to issue warnings of “climate determinism.”
- And I sense a continuing hesitance to grant causative powers to changing weather patterns (possibly due to climate change).
- For example, studies of the impact of heat waves on urban mortalities emphasize the latter’s inequitable distribution by class and race, sometimes implying that these factors “cause” the deaths rather than serve as mediators between dangerous heat levels and mortality.
- Yet, combining these social factors with climatological ones makes for strong sociological analyses.

Progress

- In general environmental sociology and the larger discipline have made great strides in overcoming both exemptionalism and disciplinary traditions over the past four decades.
- It's rare to see expressions of exemptionalism in mainstream sociology along the lines of those I noted in the 1970s, so environmental sociologists don't see the need to disavow—or even discuss—it. However, a few provide analyses designed explicitly to advance an ecological paradigm.
- Of course, there has been a *resurgence of exemptionalism* in the larger society, as reflected in one of our two major political parties' staunch denial of climate change and commitment to “making America great again” and BTI's *Ecomodernist Manifesto* touting human control in the *Anthropocene* era.

Environmental Sociology is Thriving

- At present environmental sociology is flourishing and taking root around the world.
- The ASA Section has approximately 500 members.
- In the early 1990s the International Sociological Association established an Research Committee on Environment and Society that is one of the largest and most active RCs in ISA.
- Many nations have national organizations, with the Japanese Association for Environmental Sociology being especially large and successful.
- Within the USA more and more Sociology Departments are adding courses in environmental sociology, and several PhD programs offer specializations in it.
- And best of all, especially for young scholars, there are more academic positions for environmental sociologists than ever.

Complementary Interdisciplinary Trends-CHANS

- Interdisciplinary research programs on “coupled human and natural systems,” sponsored by the National Science Foundation in the USA, provide a strong multidisciplinary complement to environmental sociology.

Studies of coupled human and natural systems “...explicitly address complex interactions and feedback between human and natural systems.”

J. Liu, et al., “Complexity of Coupled Human and Natural Systems,” *Science* 317 (14 September, 2007), p. 1513.

Complementary Trends-Sustainability Science

- Similarly, the rapidly growing field of “sustainability studies” inherently entails investigation of societal-environmental interactions or relations.
- “A new field of sustainability science is emerging that seeks to understand the fundamental character of interaction between nature and society.”
- R. W. Kates, et al., “Sustainability Science,” *Science* 292 (27 April, 2001), p. 641.

Environmental Sociology & Interdisciplinarity

- It is therefore not surprising that environmental sociologists tend on average to have strong interdisciplinary orientations and often work on multidisciplinary projects.
- “Environmental sociology is now four decades old and has come a long way from a fledgling subfield to a growing, *interdisciplinary* area of study....”
- Pellow and Brehm, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2013, p. 230.

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