

94. Sociology and global environmental change

by
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Sociologists are moving beyond concern with green issues with a distinctive social aspect, and are posing transdisciplinary questions about ecological, social and technological systems. But they need to challenge existing power relations more deeply, and should be more involved in debates and decisions on climate change, as the International Sociological Association (ISA) reports.

Sociology has traditionally focused on environmental issues that allow distinctly social explanations. For example, how do economic and political processes cause environmental degradation? Who has the authority to diagnose and develop responses to environmental problems? What are people's attitudes towards environmental protection and policies? How do these attitudes differ across social and political boundaries? And what conditions enable the emergence and influence of social movements focused on the environment?

While these questions are critical for our understanding of global environmental change, it is conceptually flawed and practically limiting to treat environmental attitudes, knowledge, politics and movements as exclusively social phenomena (Dunlap, 2010). Instead, environmental sociologists have tried to "ecologise" sociology in at least two broad ways. First, they have involved themselves in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary fields such as sustainability science (Tàbara, 2013). Second, they have developed conceptual tools which retheorise the social as a domain in which technological systems and ecosystem processes enable and constrain human action, in much the same way that social structures, power relations and institutions enable and constrain it. For example:

- Multiple attempts have been made to theorise the ways in which environmental change drives macro-societal reorganisation (e.g. Beck, 2010; Mol, Spaargaren and Sonnenfeld, 2009; Urry, 2011).
- Concepts such as ecologically unequal exchange are being used to investigate the material connections between social inequality and exposure to environmental hazards (Jorgenson and Clark, 2011).

- More sophisticated theories of risk are being used to explore relationships between risk management institutions, scientific uncertainty, public risk perceptions and value conflicts (Renn and Klinke, 2012).
- Theories of social practice are being applied to understand the ways in which everyday routines and techno-social systems interact with sociological categories such as gender and class to shape consumption behaviours (Wilhite, 2013).
- Research on the social and institutional processes involved in the scientific modelling of environmental change is being turned around to ask how social scientific knowledge is itself drawn into “diagnosing, forecasting and planning” environmental futures (Yearley, 2009: 402).

Inevitably, gaps remain in the sociological enterprise as applied to global environmental change. The polarisation of climate debates – and in particular, the market-based approach to policy in the Kyoto Protocol – has discouraged it from dealing critically with climate policy (Grundmann and Stehr, 2010). Sociological insight is needed to understand the social and ecological consequences of dominant policy settings, and the implications these have for policy effectiveness. Similarly, sociological research into the underlying causes of vulnerability and resilience on various scales is needed if these concepts are to inform the development of climate adaptation strategies. The willingness of sociologists to consider global environmental change is not the issue. It is their willingness to question policy orthodoxies in public forums (Grundmann and Stehr, 2010; Lockie, 2013), along with a tendency within the wider discipline to see environmental change as a subdisciplinary concern for environmental sociologists rather than as an important dimension of current social transformation and inequality (Nagel, Dietz and Broadbent, 2010).

The International Sociological Association’s Research Committee on Environment and Society¹ is the peak disciplinary group for environmental sociologists. National and regional associations² for environmental sociology cover Australia, Brazil, Canada, Europe, France, Germany, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, Spain and the United States. Sociologists also make major contributions to interdisciplinary groups such as the International Association for Society and Natural Resources.³

There is a widespread perception within the discipline that sociologists are under-represented in key climate research and policy networks and in institutions such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Nagel et al., 2010). Attempts to redress this by articulating the importance of distinctly sociological contributions more clearly include the British Sociological Association’s Climate Change Study Group⁴ and the American Sociological Association’s Taskforce on Sociology and Global Climate Change.⁵ This taskforce will present a major report on sociological contributions to climate research and policy in 2014.

Notes

1. www.isa-sociology.org/rc24.htm.

2. www.esf.edu/es/sonnenfeld/envsoc_assoc.htm.

3. www.iasnr.org.

4. www.britisoc.co.uk/study-groups/climate-change.aspx.

5. www.asanet.org/about/taskforces/sociology_and_global_climate_change.cfm.

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