**ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY**

1. **Introducing Environmental Sociology**
   1. **Definition, emergence, and focus of environmental sociology**

**Environmental sociology** is defined as the sociological study of relations between human societies and their physical environments or, more simply, “societal-environmental interactions”. Such interactions include the ways in which humans influence the environment as well as the ways in which environmental conditions (often modified by human action) influence human affairs. The relevance of these reciprocal interactions to sociology stems from the fact that human populations depend upon the biophysical environment for survival, environmental problems result from human action and they, in turn, affect human beings and other non-human species, and their solutions also requires societal effort. As a result, it has become apparent that sociologists can play an important role in shedding light on these problems and the steps that need to be taken to cope with them. It is, therefore, not surprising that sociologists have shown growing interest in environmental issues in recent decades and as a result environmental sociology has become a recognized field. Yet, sustained sociological investigation of societal-environmental relationships did not come easily, as we shall see in the sections to come.

* 1. **The Emergence of Environmental Sociology**

**Environmental sociology** as a relatively new sub-discipline of sociology was essentially founded in the immediate aftermath of the mobilization of the modern environmental movement. The environmental movements played the major role in placing environmental issues on the nation’s agenda of the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although there was scattered sociological attention to natural resource issues prior to the 1970s, environmental sociology developed in that decade as sociology’s own response to the emergence of environmental problems on the public agenda. Reflecting back on the early days of environmental sociology, Riley Dunlap, regarded as one of the founders of the field, identifies a two-step progression. At first, researchers were impressed with the great deal of attention that environmental issues were receiving (i.e. studying factors (mainly environmentalism) that contributed to societal awareness of environmental degradation), applied traditional sociological perspectives on public opinion, social movements and formal organizations to topics such as the characteristics of national environmental organizations and the social characteristics of people (environmental activists) who joined them, and the tactics and strategies employed by environmental groups especially their efforts to influence national policy making via lobbying and litigation and their successful use of direct mail advertising to recruit a large but only nominally involved membership base. Furthermore, they were concerned with documenting evolution of modern environmentalism out of traditional conservation concerns.

Gradually, however, interest shifted towards the establishment of an environmental sociology that might be distinctive enough to warrant having a field in its own right. The focus here was studying the underlying relationships between modern industrial societies and the physical environments they inhabit. In this regard, the recent emphases include considerable work on the social factors that cause environmental problems, the societal impacts of those problems and efforts to solve the problems. In addition, considerable attention is paid to the social processes by which certain environmental conditions become socially defined as problems.

The emergence of environmental sociology as a sub-discipline of sociology was full of challenges as it had to overcome strong disciplinary traditions of parent discipline that discouraged giving attention to non-social conditions such as environmental quality. In contrast to the larger society, mainstream sociology in the 1970s was almost oblivious to the significance of environmental problems. This blindness stemmed from a long period of neglect of environmental matters, stimulated by the societal context in which sociology developed as well as its unique disciplinary traditions. The Durkheimian emphasis on explaining social phenomena only in terms of other “social facts,” plus an aversion to earlier excesses of biological and geographical “determinisms,” had led sociologists to ignore the biophysical world. To legitimize sociology as a discipline, it was important to move away from explanations of, for example, racial and cultural differences in terms of biological and geographical factors, respectively. Yet in the process of developing distinctively social explanations for societal phenomena, our discipline replaced older determinisms with socio-cultural determinism (i.e. social and cultural factors as the only cause of other social and cultural conditions). With modern, industrialized societies appearing to be increasingly disembodied from the biophysical world, sociology came to assume that the exceptional features of *Homo sapiens*—language, technology, science, and culture more generally—made these societies “exempt” from the constraints of nature and thus reluctant to acknowledge the societal relevance of ecological limits. This lens ignored the concept of environmental determinism or the environmental factors that cause social phenomena.

Given sociology’s neglect of the biophysical environment—and tendency to equate “the environment” with the social context of the phenomenon being studied— it is not surprising that efforts to establish environmental sociology as an area of inquiry included a critique of the larger discipline’s blindness to environmental matters. Dunlap and Catton’s (1979a) effort to define and codify the field of environmental sociology was accompanied by an explication and critique of the “human exemptionalism paradigm” (HEP) on which contemporary sociology was premised. They challenged this anthropocentrism of classical sociology. In the late 1970s, they called for a new holistic, or systems perspective. While not denying that human beings are obviously an exceptional species, these analysts argued that humans’ special skills and capabilities nonetheless fail to exempt the human species from the constraints of the biophysical environment.

Consequently, they suggested that the HEP should be replaced by a more ecologically sound perspective, a “new ecological paradigm” (NEP). , that acknowledges the ecosystem dependence of human societies. The NEP recognizes the innovative capacity of humans, but says that humans are still ecologically interdependent as with other species. The NEP notes the power of social and cultural forces but does not profess social determinism. Instead, humans are impacted by the cause, effect, and feedback loops of ecosystems. The earth has a finite level of natural resources and waste repositories. Thus, the biophysical environment can impose constraints on human activity.

Since the 1970s, sociology has noticeably transformed to include environmental forces in social explanations. Environmental sociology emerged as a coherent subfield of inquiry after the environmental movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. It has now solidified as a respected, interdisciplinary subject in academia.

**1.3 Classical Sociological Theory and the Environment**

‘Earth Day 1970’ is often said to represent the debut of the modern environmental movement. Starting as a modest proposal for a national teach-in on the environment, it grew into a multi-faceted event with millions of participants. What most distinguished Earth Day, however, was its symbolic claim to be ‘Day 1’ of the new environmentalism, an interpretation which was widely embraced by the American mass media, thus affording the environmental issue instant and widespread recognition.

When Earth Day inaugurated the ‘Environmental Decade’ of the 1970s, sociologists found themselves without any prior body of theory or research to guide them towards a distinctive understanding of the relationship between society and the environment. While each of the three major classical sociological pioneers – Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber – arguably had something significant to say about nature and society, although this was often more implied than direct, this had never been brought to the fore, largely because their American translators and interpreters favored social structural explanations over physical or environmental ones. From time to time, isolated works pertaining to natural resources and the environment had appeared, mostly within the area of rural sociology, but these had never coalesced into a cumulative body of work. However, some commentators have been decidedly downbeat about the potential usefulness of the work of sociological pioneers by pointing the fact that they are not sufficient for adequate theorizing of complex interactions between societies and environments. Whereas, some commentators (e.g. William Catton, Raymond Murphy, John Bellamy Foster) deliberately adopt the strategy of extracting ‘ecological’ insights from the work of the classic thinkers that have been overlooked or misunderstood in the past. Let us briefly look at some pieces of the classical works of sociological pioneers on society and environment, if any.

* + 1. ***Émile Durkheim***

Of the three founding figures in sociology, Durkheim is probably the least likely to be recognized as an environmental commentator. In large part, this reflects his deliberate decision to elevate *social facts* over ‘facts of a lower order’ (that is, psychological, biological). For Durkheim, a social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting an external constraint over an individual. This constraint is normally manifested in the form of law, morality, beliefs, customs and even fashions. Social facts, Durkheim insists ‘are consequently the proper field of sociology’. While this vigorous defense of social facts and collective consciousness most certainly buttressed the theoretical independence of sociology, it also had the effect of warning off members of the new discipline from non-sociological approaches that were reductionist in nature (that is, they reduced explanation to biological or psychological factors).

In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), he describes the evolution of modern societies from a state of *mechanical solidarity*, wherein social solidarity is a product of shared cultural values, to one of *organic solidarity*, where the social bond is a function of interdependence, most notably that arising out of an increasingly complex division of labor. Catton (2002) proposes that Durkheim’s theory was very much an attempt to devise a solution to what is essentially an ecological crisis of rising population paired with scarce resources. As societies became larger and denser, it would have been disastrous if everyone had continued to engage in agriculture. Increasingly, occupational specialization meant that the competition over arable land was lessened, even as that land became more productive thanks to technological innovation.

* + 1. ***Max Weber***

A second sociological pioneer whose work is said to possess an ecologically relevant component is Max Weber. As Buttel (2002) has pointed out, this environmental connection has been located in Weber’s work by Raymond Murphy. Murphy’s more extensively drawn discussion of neo-Weberian environmental sociology is based primarily on Weber’s book *Economy and Society* (1978 [1922]). For Murphy, the key concept to be extracted here is *formal rationalization*. Rationalization is composed of several dynamic institutional components. Increased scientific and technical knowledge brings with it a fresh orientation in which nature exists only to be mastered and manipulated by humans. An expanding capitalist market economy leaves little room for anything beyond the calculating, self-interested pursuit of market domination. Industry and government are controlled by a bureaucratic apparatus, the purpose of which is to attain a high level of efficiency. The legal system operates like a technically rational machine. Together, these components promote a pervasive logic whereby efficiency reigns supreme, on occasion even superseding a sensible choice of goals or alternatives, what Weber called *substantive rationality*. Formal rationality thus dictates that the most efficient action is to clear-cut an old growth forest, even if this is in no way substantively rational from an ecological point of view (Murphy 1994: 29–30). Murphy (1994: 34) identifies two interrelated processes first highlighted by Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century that have become distinctive features of our time: the *intensification of rationality* and the *magnification of rationality*. The more we try to run things according to the principle of dispassionate calculation the more we open the door to a swarm of unwanted and negative effects. When applied to the case of nature, this is called *ecological* *irrationality*. It is manifested in a wide range of destructive consequences from sensational technological disasters such as nuclear accidents to routine pollution events such as industrial dumping into urban storm sewers.

* + 1. ***Karl Marx***

Of the three main sociological traditions, it is that associated with Karl Marx that has provoked the most extensive response from present-day environmental interpreters. Marx and his early collaborator Friedrich Engels were only marginally concerned with environmental degradation *per se* but their analysis of social structure and social change has become the starting point for several formidable contemporary theories of the environment.

Marx and Engels believed that social conflict between the two principal classes in society, that is capitalists and the proletariat (workers), not only alienates ordinary people from their jobs but also leads to their estrangement from nature itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in ‘capitalist agriculture’ which puts a quick profit from the land ahead of the welfare of both humans and the soil. As the industrial revolution proceeded through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rural workers were removed from the land and driven into crowded, polluted cities while the soil itself was drained of its vitality. In short, a single factor, capitalism, was held responsible for a wide range of social ills from overpopulation and resource depletion to the alienation of people from the natural world with which they were once united. Marx and Engels saw the solution as the overthrow of the dominant system of production, capitalism, and the establishment in its place of a ‘rational, humane, environmentally unalienated social order’.

Contemporary Marxist theory emphasizes not only the role of capitalists but also that of the state in fostering ecological destruction. Both elected politicians and bureaucratic administrators are depicted as being centrally committed to propping up the interests of capitalist investors and employers. While the incentive here is partly material (e.g. corporate campaign contributions, future job offers), public servants, politicians and capitalist producers are said to share an ‘ethic’ which accentuates capitalist accumulation and economic growth as the dual engines which drive progress. This, they argue, applies at all political levels from the global system to the local community.

One widely noted reading of Marx’s environmental views is John Bellamy Foster’s seminal article on Marx’s theory of *metabolic rift*. According to Foster, Marx has been wrongly accused of providing little insight into the ‘ecological crises’ of our times. Foster argues:

Marx provided a powerful analysis of the main ecological crisis of his day – the problem of soil fertility within capitalist agriculture – as well as commenting on the other major ecological crises of his time (the loss of forests, the pollution of the cities, and the Malthusian specter of overpopulation). In doing so, he raised fundamental issues about the antagonism of town and country, the necessity of ecological sustainability, and what he called the ‘metabolic’ relation between human beings and nature. (1999: 373)

It is this latter issue that Foster addresses most substantively in his article. Borrowing from the vocabulary of mid-nineteenth-century chemistry, Marx employed the concept of metabolism to describe the complex interaction between society and nature. Metabolism, he observed ‘constitutes the fundamental basis on which life is sustained and growth and reproduction become possible’. By the 1860s, this organic relationship was being seriously undercut by the practices of capitalist agriculture. Most notably, landowners were accused of callously robbing the soil of its key nutrients by declining to recycle them. This, of course, is exactly what is still occurring, especially where monocultures (a single variety of a single crop grown for commercial profit) prevail. Marx describes this as a ‘metabolic rift’– the estrangement of human beings from the natural world of the soil. This paralleled the estrangement of workers from their labor and was attributable to the same source – capitalism.

For Foster, the importance of Marx’s theory of metabolic rift lies not just in his repatriation of Karl Marx as an advocate of organic agriculture but also in his successful application of sociological thinking to the ecological realm. Foster (1999: 400) calls this ‘one of the great triumphs of classic sociological analysis’ and proof that ‘ecological analysis, devoid of sociological insight is incapable of dealing with the contemporary crisis of the earth’.