Environmental sociology is typically defined as the sociological study of societal-environmental interactions, although this definition immediately presents the perhaps insolvable problem of separating human cultures from the rest of the environment. Although the focus of the field is the relationship between society and environment in general, environmental sociologists typically place special emphasis on studying 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.

Although there was sometimes acrimonious debate between the constructivist and realist "camps" within environmental sociology in the 1990s, the two sides have found considerable common ground as both increasingly accept that while most environmental problems have a material reality they nonetheless become known only via human processes such as scientific knowledge, activists' efforts, and media attention. In other words, most environmental problems have a real ontological status despite our knowledge/awareness of them stemming from social processes, processes by which various conditions are constructed as problems by scientists, activists, media and other social actors. Correspondingly, environmental problems must all be understood via social processes, despite any material basis they may have external to humans. This interactiveness is now broadly accepted, but many aspects of the debate continue in contemporary research in the field.

Contents

// History

Modern thought surrounding human-environment relations is traced back to Charles Darwin. Darwin's concept of natural selection suggested that certain social characteristics played a key role in the survivability of groups in the natural environment. Although typically taken at the micro level, evolutionary principles, particularly adaptability, serve as a microcosm of human ecology. Work by Humphrey and Buttel (2002) traces the linkages between Darwin's work on natural selection, human ecological sociology, and environmental sociology.

Academic

Concepts

Existential dualism

The duality of the human condition rests with cultural uniqueness and evolutionary traits. From one perspective, humans are embedded in the ecosphere and coevolved alongside other species. Humans share the same basic ecological dependencies as other inhabitants of nature. From the other perspective, humans are distinguished from other species because of their innovative capacities, distinct cultures and varied institutions. Human creations have the power to independently manipulate, destroy, and transcend the limits of the natural environment (Buttel and Humphrey, 2002: p.47).

Support for each perspective varies among different communities. Biologists and ecologists typically put more weight on the first perspective. Social scientists, on the other hand, emphasize the second perspective. This division has shaped the foundation for the primary paradigms of environmental sociology.

Societal-environmental dialectic

In 1975, the highly influential work of Allan Schnaiberg transfigured environmental sociology, proposing a societal-environmental dialectic. This conflictual concept has overwhelming political salience. First, the economic synthesis states that the desire for economic expansion will prevail over ecological concerns. Policy will decide to maximize immediate economic growth at the expense of environmental disruption. Secondly, the managed scarcity synthesis concludes that governments will attempt to control only the most dire of environmental problems to prevent health and economic disasters. This will give the appearance that governments act more

environmentally conscious than they really do. Third, the ecological synthesis generates a hypothetical case where environmental degradation is so severe that political forces would respond with sustainable policies. The driving factor would be economic damage caused by environmental degradation. The economic engine would be based on renewable resources at this point. Production and consumption methods would adhere to sustainability regulations.

These conflict-based syntheses have several potential outcomes. One is that the most powerful economic and political forces will preserve the status quo and bolster their dominance. Historically, this is the most common occurrence. Another potential outcome is for contending powerful parties to fall into a stalemate. Lastly, tumultuous social events may result that redistribute economic and political resources.

Treadmill of production

In 1980, Schnaiberg developed a conflict theory on human-environment interaction. The theory is that capitalism is driven by higher profitability and thereby must continue to grow and attract investments to survive in a competitive market. This identifies the imperative for continued economic growth levels that, once achieved, accelerate the need for future growth. This growth in production requires a corresponding growth in consumption. The process contains a chief paradox; economic growth is socially desired but environmental degradation is a common consequence that in turn disrupts long-run economic expansion (Schnaiberg 1980).

Paradigms

Human Exemptionalism Paradigm (HEP)

The HEP theory claims that humans are such a uniquely superior species that they are exempt from environmental forces. Shaped by the leading Western worldview of the time, this was the popular societal paradigm from the industrial revolution until the second half of the 20th century. Human dominance was justified by the uniqueness of culture, which is far more adaptable than biological traits. Culture also has the capacity to accumulate and innovate, making it an unbounded resource capable of solving all natural problems. As humans are not governed by natural conditions, they have complete control of their own destiny. Any potential limitation posed by the natural world is surpassable using human ingenuity.

New Ecological Paradigm (NEP)

In the 1970s, scholars began recognizing the limits of what would be termed the Human Exemptionalism Paradigm. Catton and Dunlap suggested a new perspective that took environmental variables into full account. They coined a new theory, the New Ecological Paradigm, with assumptions contrary to the HEP. 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.

Events

Modern environmentalism

The 1960s built strong cultural momentum for environmental causes, giving birth to the modern environmental movement. Widespread green consciousness moved vertically within society, resulting in a series of federal policy changes in the 1970s. This period was known as the "Environmental Decade" with the creation of the United States Environmental Protection Agency and passing of the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, and amendments to the Clean Air Act. Earth Day of 1970, celebrated by millions of participants, represented the modern age of environmental thought. The environmental movement continued with incidences such as Love Canal.

Historical studies

While the current mode of thought expressed in environmental sociology was not prevalent until the age of modernity, its application is now used in analysis of ancient peoples. Societies including Easter Island, the Anaszi, and the Mayans ended abruptly, largely due to poor environmental management. The collapse of the Mayans sent a historic message that even advanced cultures are vulnerable to ecological suicide. At the same time, societal successes include New Guinea, Tikopia island, and Japan, whose inhabitants have lived sustainably for 46,000 years.

See also

- Ecological anthropology
- Agroecology
- Ecological modernization theory
- Environmental design
- Environmental design and planning

- Environmental Economics
- Environmental Policy
- Environmentalism
- Human ecology

- Important publications in environmental sociology
- Sociology of architecture
- United States Environmental Protection Agency

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- http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/Gallery/Neto/Envsoc1.html

External links

- ASA Section on Environment and Technology
- Environmental sociology - a (very dated) resource page.
- ISA Research Committee on Environment and Society (RC24)
- Ecology and Society book

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_sociology