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**AN ANALYSIS UPON ENVIRONMENTAL AND  
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES: A REVIEW**

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# An Analysis upon Environmental and Sociological Theories: A Review

Manish Kumar Gupta\*

Ph.D. (Sociology)

**Abstract – While the environment has been a perennial theme in human thought, the environment and how humans value, use and think about it has become an increasingly central and important aspect of recent social theory. It has become clear that the present generation is faced with a series of unique environmental dilemmas, largely unprecedented in human history.**

**Environment and Social Theory outlines the complex interlinking of the environment, nature and social theory from ancient and pre-modern thinking to contemporary social theorising. It explores the essentially contested character of the environment and nature within social theory, and draws attention to the need for critical analysis whenever the term 'nature' and 'environment' are used in debate and argument.**

**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.**

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that 'contemporary forms of environmental degradation present one of the most, if not the most, complex and catastrophic dilemmas of modernity'. There is a general agreement that the economic expansion of a century and half has had alarming consequences for the global environment. Depletion of the Ozone layer, air pollution, loss of forests and bio-diversity, extinction of plant and animal species, loss of marine life, soil and water pollution have occurred at an alarming rate. Especially in post-war years, release of toxic matters into the environment, world-wide expansion of nuclear energy, acid rains, new chemical pesticides, non-biodegradable plastics and other harmful chemicals have come to pose a threat to life itself. In the recent decades, however, we have witnessed the growth of environmental movements/conflicts, of environmental politics, which may play an important role in checking the deterioration of our environment at the local and global levels.

The seriousness of the situation has led scholars to predict that the 21st century will be characterized by a massively endangered natural environment if the present trends of ecological devastation continue.

Further, it is predicted that this aspect will become increasingly dominant in all fields—politics, foreign

affairs, development policy, education, technology and research. In what Weizsacker calls the Century of the Environment, the ecological imperative will determine law and administration, city planning and agriculture, arts and religion, technology and economy. Intervention for a radical transformation in the contemporary situation, which he terms Earth Politics, alone, can salvage the future.

In this context, two important issues emerge: the causes and consequences of environmental degradation in modern societies, and the role environmental politics can play to curb environmental degradation. Scholars have pointed to the limitations of the theoretical legacy of classical social theory of Marx, Weber and Durkheim for examining the issues mentioned above.

Weber's work shows the least engagement with the natural world. Even Marx and Durkheim, Goldblatt argues, who saw the relation between human societies and the natural world as central to historical change, did not pay much attention to the impact of economic and demographic processes on ecosystems. In fact, classical social theory was concerned more with how pre-modern societies had been constrained by their natural environments than with how industry in modern society led to environmental degradation. Nor could it see at the

time that capitalism would prove to be environmentally problematic in a fundamental sense.

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.

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, my colleague Don Field pointed out to me in a 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.

The newness of environmental concerns is more apparent than real in that thinking about the environment, its meaning, significance and value is as old as human society itself. However, it is clear that the present human generation is faced with a series of unique environmental dilemmas, largely unprecedented in human history. The present human generation is the first one, for example, to have the capacity to destroy the planet many times over, while at the same time it is also the first generation for whom the natural environment cannot be taken for granted. So while the environment has been a perennial theme in human thought, the environment and how humans value, use and think about it has become an increasingly central and important aspect of recent social theory and political practice.

The problem (which can also be an advantage) with the concept 'environment', like many other concepts such as 'democracy', 'justice' or 'equality', is that it can take a number of different meanings, refer to a variety

of things, entities and processes, and thus cover a range of issues and be used to justify particular positions and arguments. While of course the environment cannot refer to anything (that is, it refers to some identifiable and determinant set of 'things'), it is an extremely elastic term in that there are many things – the room you are sitting in, the study itself, the chair, the desk, other people, the fly on the window, and the unseen micro-organisms and the air around you – all of which could be considered to constitute your present and immediate 'environment'. Like many things, the environment can mean different things depending on how you define and understand it, or who defines it.

In many respects thinking about and theorising the environment is one of the most enduring aspects of human thought. For example, the question of the proper place of human society within the natural order has occupied a central place in philosophy since its beginnings. Hence, why, how and in what ways the environment, and related concepts such as 'nature' and the 'natural', are used in social theory is not only extremely interesting but absolutely crucial, given the different meanings and power of these terms when used in argument and justification. For example, calling something 'natural' implies that it is beyond change, immutable, fixed and given. Hence the power of using this term to justify a particular argument, and the need to be aware of how and why the environment and related concepts are employed in social theorizing.

The importance of analyzing the environment and social theory can also be seen when one considers that the majority of the world's environmental problems are largely the result of human social action or behaviour. Global warming, for example, is accepted by the vast majority of the world's scientists to be the result of increased carbon emissions by humans, principally through energy production and consumption (the burning of fossil fuels, such as coal, gas and petroleum to create electricity) and forms of transport which rely on such fossil fuels. Hence social theory, defined below as the systematic study of how society is and ought to be, has an important role to play in explaining, understanding and providing possible solutions to the 'environmental crisis'.

## SOCIAL THEORY

'Social theory' as a field of study is particularly difficult to accurately determine or define. As understood here, social theory is the systematic study of human society, including the processes of social change and transformation, involving the formulation of theoretical (and empirical) hypotheses, explanations, justifications and prescriptions. In disciplinary terms 'social theory' is often associated with sociological theory, and modern social theory has its origins in the sociological tradition. This study however, takes a broad rather than a narrow understanding of social theory, in that it

encompasses sociological theory but goes beyond it to include other disciplines and intellectual traditions and approaches. As may be seen from the range of authors and disciplinary approaches surveyed in this study, social theory includes the 'social-scientific' approach to the study of society (in terms of the disciplines one finds in the social-scientific approach to studying society and social phenomenon – sociology and anthropology, politics, international relations, economics, legal studies, women's studies, cultural studies).

However, social theory may also include the disciplinary approaches of history, philosophy and moral theory and cultural geography. Thus 'social theory' acts as an umbrella under which are gathered a range of approaches to thinking about society, explaining social phenomena, and offering justifications for advocating or resisting social transformation.

The main disciplinary approaches of this study are: sociological theory (including cultural theory), political theory, economics and political economy, but it also includes the history of social thought. In broad terms what may be called an interdisciplinary conception of social theory is used throughout the study.

The historical origins of social theory may be found in **the Enlightenment**, though aspects of modern social theory may also be found in pre-Enlightenment thinkers and schools of thought. And it is in reaction to the Enlightenment, and the emergence of 'modern society', that a large part of past and contemporary social theory finds its subject. It is in the spirit of the early emergence of social theory that a broad understanding of it is adopted here. In its origins, social theory covered the broad field of the systematic or disciplined study of society in all its various aspects: political, economic, cultural, social, legal, philosophical, moral, religious and scientific. Social theory as the systematic or scientific study of society included looking at such social phenomena as the relationship between the individual and society, the origins and character of cultural practices, and the relationships within and between everyday life and social institutions, such as the family, the nation, the state and the economy.

As May points out, in the nineteenth century the main trends in social theory were 'First, an interest in the nature or social development and social origins. Second the merging of history and philosophy into a "science of society". Third, the attempt to discover rational-empirical causes for social phenomena in place of metaphysical ones' (May, 1996: 13). In a similar fashion, this study attempts to offer an equally broad and inclusive view of social theory, though of course many issues, writers and ideas are necessarily left out, or only briefly mentioned. At the same time, we can use the Enlightenment as a way to demarcate

modern social theory by noting that the 'subject' of modern social theory is 'the analysis of modernity and its impact on the world' (Giddens et al., 1994: 1). In particular, modern social theory analyses the impact of the industrial, liberal-capitalist socioeconomic system which has come to shape the modern global and globalizing world.

Social theory typically has two dimensions, one descriptive the other prescriptive. In its descriptive aspect, social theory describes society and advances particular explanations for social phenomena, events, problems and changes within society. For example, a social theory may involve explaining the emergence of contemporary far-right politics across Europe by reference to a rise in unemployment, the negative economic effects of globalization and a consequent appeal of populist nationalist politics in response to the erosion of 'national sovereignty' or 'national pride'.

The prescriptive dimensions of social theory are the ways in which social theory not only tells a story of the way society is, but also tells how society ought to be. Here social theory advances particular normative or value-based arguments, justifications and principles to support its claims about how society ought to be ordered, changed or whatever. This prescriptive aspect of social theory can broadly take two forms. On the one hand, it can seek to justify the present social order, that is, suggest that the way society is is how it ought to be. This may be described as a 'mainstream' or 'conservative' position in which the aim of social theory is to legitimate, defend and justify the current way society is organized, its principles, institutions and ways of life.

## **SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL THEORIES**

In academic debate, one often attempts to explain the emergence of a research topic. The same is true for the so-called environmental question and its growing prominence since the mid-20th century. It beckons us, therefore, to recall the reasons this matter became mandatory in the discussions of politicians, businesspeople, researchers and certain sectors of the social movements.

Closely tied to our condition of being in the world, the environmental issue is fundamental to human existence, for the simple reason that the material basis for the reproduction of life – of the various forms of life – derives from the environment. In other words, it is from the environment that we extract resources to produce shelter, food, technical artifacts and clothing, among the many other things necessary to maintain life, whatever form of social organization humans established over thousands years of their presence on the planet.



History records many major changes on our human journey on Earth, from gatherers to producers of objects, foodstuffs and environments where we all engage in different forms of social interaction regardless of the social structure established by the group.

The importance of the environmental issue to human existence, with its implicit territorial dimension, cannot be overstressed. Resources are scattered across the surface of the globe, as a result of million-year natural processes, and are appropriated by social groups according to their ability to generate technical instruments, which becomes in itself a focus of power, dispute and conflicts. The reproduction of life requires actions such as eating, obtaining shelter from the elements and building places to produce objects (e.g., today's factories), practice contemplation, find recreation and organize social, religious and mythical events, among the many other significations an edifice may lend itself to. These activities have been transformed over the course of our human adventure on Earth and have become hugely complex in our day.

For instance, food in the past was obtained by collecting what was at hand's reach, whether on ground or not. Later, the use of rock and bone fragments allowed people to slaughter animals and light fires. Today, our food results from sophisticated technologies such as tractors, harvesters, irrigation systems and chemical inputs that replenish the soil's physical characteristics and aggregate substances to increase productivity – but also accumulate over years of use and end up degrading the water and even the soil. It is also important to mention various forms of preserving food, from nuclear irradiation to freezing or even the addition of chemicals, signaling a great transformation compared to immersion in animal fat or the addition of salt, as was done in the past.

With regard to the production of environments, the situation is no different. The gamut of materials available for construction is much greater than in the past. Again, we have the admixture of chemicals resulting in materials that are lighter, more durable and resistant to rain, cold, heat and even to extreme short-lived events, such as medium-intensity earthquakes. The standardization of construction processes allows a 20-story building to be erected and completed in about two years. The same can be said of road building, whether streets, overpasses or, in particular, suspension bridges, all of which have added symbolism to the movement of vehicles and people, and given rise to a new dispute: in the recent past, any Brazilian city that wished to show "progress" needed have such a bridge. The aestheticization of the contemporary production of urban objects requires suspension bridges as new landmarks, whatever their cost. The population is forced to somehow find ways to enjoy these engineering works and their symbolic reference to our technical prowess in overcoming obstacles. After all, in the end it is the common folk

who must foot the bill of those who chose this type of technical solution over other more affordable means.

Among the challenges that socio-environmental theories seek to address is how to conciliate inclusive development and environmental conservation. The environmental justice movement, for example, sought to establish social inequality as the centerpiece of its demands, which is something quite different from merely adopting an environmental discourse, as Henri Acsehrad nicely demonstrates in his contribution to the dossier. Reading his text allows us to distinguish what various segments have to say about the environment.

## SOCIAL THEORISING AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In common usage, the environment usually refers to the physical world which environs or surrounds something. Most commonly of all, in modern parlance, the environment is often thought of as synonymous with the 'natural world' or 'nature'. That is, the environment is often thought of as something that is objective rather than subjective. This is another way of understanding the fact/value distinction in that to say the environment is objective means it is a factual reality independent of our subjective value judgements. As objective reality, the environment just is. Closing one's eyes or mind to one's surroundings does not mean that they disappear. This is something most of us learn as we grow older; young children often believe that simply closing one's eyes is sufficient to make their environment (and all it contains, such as angry adults!) go away. Now while I do not wish to suggest that the environment does not or cannot refer to 'nature' (meaning the nonhuman world and its processes and entities), a less restrictive understanding of the environment is a more fruitful approach to take when relating the environment to social theory. That is, thinking about the environment as something that can and does mean more than the 'natural world' can both help us in thinking about the natural world as well as revealing the complexity of social theorizing about the environment.

One of the problems in social theorizing about the environment has been that the latter has been viewed by the former as essentially something that is both nonhuman and also beyond human society and culture. So, for example, the environment has been understood as the 'natural world' or nonhuman nature, something which surrounds us and is also beyond human culture. This is the view of the environment which one gets from popular nature programmes on television, such as the excellent natural history programmes produced by the BBC (e.g. David Attenborough's 'Life on Earth' or 'Planet Earth' series). The point is not to reject these understandings but to widen how we think about the environment so as to incorporate these and other possible meanings. Using the term 'environment' as simply another way of speaking about 'nature' or the 'natural world' within

social theory is understandable, but one needs to be aware of the danger of missing something important about the environment if we define (and thus confine) it so narrowly.

Particularly in modern everyday language and in modern social theory (Soper, 1995), there is a marked tendency simply to equate the environment with the 'natural'. Often one finds the two terms used interchangeably. An example is O'Brien and Cahn's statement that 'the study of nature, and the relationship between human civilization and the environment, have always held a prominent position in social and political inquiry. Humans have long been interested in discovering our place in the hierarchy of nature' (1996: 5). The point is not that we should never equate the two concepts – indeed it is very difficult to consistently distinguish 'nature' from 'environment' – but rather we should be aware that distinguishing between them is required in critically analysing the concept of environment within social theory. As in many forms of human inquiry (particularly in the humanities and social sciences) part of the process of theorising about something involves making distinctions between different concepts, terms, relations and processes.

One important distinction which may be drawn is between 'nature' as conveying an abstract, almost neutral sense of the nonhuman world, and 'environment' as associated with a more local or determinate sense of a nonhuman (or human) milieu or surrounding. That is, 'nature' is often understood as referring to the conditions of life (for both human and nonhuman species) and all that exists on this planet as a whole, while 'environment' is often associated with a particular subset of these conditions, a subset defined in relation to a particular organism or entity. Thus we can speak of 'nature' without referring to any particular organism or entity, but 'environment' implies the environment of some particular organism, species or set of these. As Ingold puts it, nature is the 'reality of the physical world of neutral objects apparent only to the detached, indifferent observer' while the environment is the 'reality for the world constituted in relation to the organism or person whose environment it is' (1992: 44). Or as Cooper expresses it, 'an environment [is] a field of significance' (1992: 170), that is, significant for someone or something. Even when both nature and environment are used in reference to the nonhuman world, 'nature' is often associated with an abstract, universal sense of the nonhuman world, referring to the totality of the latter. In contrast, 'environment' refers to a particular, less abstract and more local and determinate part of the natural world.

Conceptions of the environment differ, sometimes dramatically. In some cultures, or within particular worldviews (ways of thinking), the environment can include the dead, one's ancestors and/or other entities

from the 'supernatural' realm, such as gods, goddesses, spirits, angels, ghosts and so on. Thus the environment, as that which environs, depends not only on something to environ, but what constitutes the surrounding environment. Hence the environment does not necessarily refer to the physical environment (whether natural or human-made).

## **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 sub fields. 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 longstanding of the two sub disciplines, at least as a recognized sub discipline 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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.

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

**Table 1. Tendencies within Environmental Sociology and the Sociology of Natural Resources**

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL THEORY

The question of causes and consequences of the present ecological crisis, a more recent concern, is significant to modern social theory. The modern society is seen to be characterized by large-scale environmental degradation. Through an extensive discussion on risk, for example, several scholars, including Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992), highlight the catastrophic character of the society. The hitherto neglected area of the relation between human beings and nature and the deleterious effect of human action upon the latter, especially in the last century and a half, has emerged as a major issues. Another important issue in contemporary theory is the growth of environmental politics/movements which offer a

challenge to the modern industrial/capitalist mode of production and consumption which are essentially environmentally destructive. What follows is an elaboration of some of these issues.

All these social theorists emphasize the need for democratization of state power and civil society. Giddens suggests that not just the impact, but the very logic of unchecked scientific and technological development would have to be confronted if further harm is to be avoided. He adds that since (he most consequential ecological issues are global, forms of intervention would necessarily have a global basis (1990: 170). New forms of local, national and international democracy may emerge and form an essential component of any politics that seeks to transcend the risks and threats of modernity. Habermas, while recognizing the limitations of modern state power, argues for the creation and defence of a public sphere in which a rational democratic discourse can occur. Beck argues for an ecological democracy as the central political response to the dangers of the risk society. Previously depoliticized areas of decision-making that profoundly affect the environment must be made available for public scrutiny and debate. Research agendas, development plans and introduction of new technologies must be made open for discussion and at the same time legal and institutional controls on them must be made more effective. All the above cited scholars point to the limitations of the predominantly representative rather than participatory character of liberal democracy being an essential pre-condition for creating environmental sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

Or a more general level, it is amply clear that the most crucial contradiction of our times is the one between industrial/capitalist mode of production and consumption on the one hand, and ecology on the other. There are external constraints to growth which are rapidly being violated, causing loss of physical and mental well-being. Not just one class but all sections of society suffer or may suffer from the ecological and socio-ecological consequences of this mode. An awareness of the threat to survival has given rise to a new kind of politics and political action which questions and challenges the agenda of development, and puts forward ideas of alternative development, life style, values, in other words, a more 'sustainable human development'<sup>3</sup>. Given the fundamental nature of these issues, it is only right that they should form the basis for sociological enquiry.

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#### **Corresponding Author**

**Manish Kumar Gupta\***

Ph.D. (Sociology)

E-Mail – [kbsinstitute9@gmail.com](mailto:kbsinstitute9@gmail.com)