

Environment, Energy, and Society: A New Synthesis

By Craig R. Humphrey, Tammy L. Lewis, and Frederick H. Buttel
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Reviewed by James Rice
Department of Sociology
Washington State University

Over the past three decades environmental sociology has developed a considerable breadth of approaches examining the factors underlying environmental degradation and, more recently, social organizational arrangements promoting environmental improvement. In *Environment, Energy, and Society: A New Synthesis*, Craig R. Humphrey, Tammy L. Lewis, and Frederick H. Buttel survey this history and highlight the contemporary concerns of environmental sociology. Their goal is to pull together the various strands of structuralist-oriented work in the field to provide an overview and reasoned critique of accomplishments to date.

The most innovative aspect of the book is their adoption of the three classical sociological paradigms rooted in the work of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. The conservative (Durkheim), managerial (Weber), and radical (Marx) conceptual models serve as analytical frameworks from which the authors orient the work of contemporary environmental social scientists relative to one another and in reference to current society-environmental issues.

After an informative introductory chapter in which the authors define a number of key terms and provide a brief history of the intellectual origins of environmental sociology, chapter two is devoted to the elaboration of each theoretical paradigm. The conservative perspective posits cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes as the key social forces in human societies. In contrast, the managerial perspective focuses upon political power and domination, and the radical approach highlights conflict and social class dynamics.

Chapter two is not simply a metatheoretical exercise for its own sake. In subsequent chapters the authors apply each paradigm to substantive environmental-societal issues, illustrating how each contributes to the conceptualization of different aspects or even different stages of the same social-ecological concern. In addition, they note the policy-oriented implications of contemporary research efforts rooted in each perspective.

In discussing tropical deforestation, for example, they note conservative paradigmatic arguments that stress population growth in less developed countries (LDCs) and the consequent competition for forest resources as an underlying factor. In contrast, the managerial perspective highlights the role

of the state in many LDCs and international lending organizations as lead institutions promoting road-building and other infrastructure projects enhancing access to forest land and contributing to deforestation in return for state revenue, often oriented towards debt repayment obligations. The radical perspective, in turn, focuses upon capitalist international trade and the pressure upon LDCs to allow access to forest lands for export-oriented capital accumulation. Such processes are driven by national and international capital interacting with the overabundance of low-wage labor in LDCs. The result is deforestation in response to capital accumulation efforts and international expansion of market dynamics.

This theoretical framework appears heavily indebted to Robert R. Alford and Roger Friedland and their metatheoretical examination of the leading theories of the state (1985). In *Powers of Theory* Alford and Friedland categorize the arguments of other scholars by discussing their underlying assumptions and highlighting the commonalities and differences regarding the specified primary forces shaping societies. The overarching concern leveled at Alford and Friedland's work, therefore, also applies to Humphrey et al.: the potential for artificially reducing the complexity and nuances of leading work in the field in order to squeeze it into ideal-type categories.

Humphrey et al. appear cognizant of such potential problems. Throughout the text they are careful to note not only the conflict but also the overlap between the three paradigms in relation to a social-ecological issue, even including the body of work of a particular researcher. In combination with extensive case study examples, their use of this analytical framework significantly contributes to the thoughtful presentation of scholarly work within environmental sociology and enhances the pedagogical utility of the text.

Subsequent chapters include comprehensive examinations of population and the environment, world food production and distributional inequalities and the social and ecological implications, energy production and dependence and the environment; an overview of the environmental movement; discussion of sustainable development; and a concluding chapter summarizing the prospects for an environmental sociology more oriented towards facilitating environmental improvement. The chapter on sustainable development, in particular, is an excellent overview. Going beyond simply noting the challenges in defining sustainable development, the authors recount the numerous ways the concept is employed by various interest groups and the policy implications of these alternative visions of the concept.

It is worth noting the opportunity costs of adopting an explicitly structuralist overview of environmental sociology, as Humphrey et al. have done. Sociologists interested in society-environmental interactions have long been burdened

with the task of not only examining the materialist and social structural underpinnings of such processes but the idealist or social constructionist as well. Indeed, Hannigan's (1995) overview of the social constructionist side of environmental sociology suggests that what we define, or fail to define, as environmental problems and the manner in which they are conceptualized is strongly influenced by social forces, including power relations. There is, as Bell (1998) notes, a tension in environmental sociology between realist-constructivist explanations.

Humphrey et al. never substantively engage with this realist-constructivist dialogue. The result is inattention to the dynamics of groups within society identifying, defining, and asserting particular interpretations of environmental problems, as well as the countermovements that often arise in response. This, consequently, leads to a failure to examine the role of science, the media, government bureaucracies, and non-governmental organizations in shaping the claims-making failures and successes inherent in the social construction of society-environmental issues. Readers interested in the social constructionist side of environmental sociology, therefore, will be disappointed.

Another weakness of the text, although it can be more appropriately attributed to environmental sociology in general, is the failure to substantively engage in a discussion of the role of technology in society-environmental interactions. In addition, there is little attention devoted to issues of risk and the environment.

Despite these reservations, what the text sets out to accomplish it does very well. It provides an eclectic and theoretically informed overview of many of the major issues underlying societal-environmental interactions. In addition, it does so with sensitivity to global environmental issues and processes, confronting not only developed industrial countries but LDCs as well. The text would be a valuable contribution to both undergraduate and graduate courses in sociology that incorporate a concern with society-environmental issues, as well as other social science disciplines.

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Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism in the Red Power Era

By James Treat

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003

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Reviewed by Robert J. Brulle

Department of Culture and Communications

Drexel University

With over a five hundred year history of extreme social, cultural, and political oppression, the notion of a cultural revitalization among the native peoples of North America would seem to be a utopian dream. Nevertheless, as James Treat shows in this important book, this cultural reawakening is not an idle and meaningless idea, but an active idea that is revitalizing this community. Born out of Native American activism of the late 1960s, there has been an ongoing effort by the Native Americans in North America to reconstruct their spiritual and religious life. One of the core cultural activities of this revitalization and cultural redefinition were the Indian Ecumenical Conferences that ran from 1970 to 1992. Treat portrays the development of this movement in a way that is "relational, dialogical, and reflexive, that situates the movement in space and time, that illuminates the intersections of religion, culture and politics in a diverse and conflicted world" (6). Eschewing linear logic and argumentative discourse, Treat tells the story of this conference in a way that is authentic to both the events of this cultural reawakening and the narrative tradition of Native Americans.

His narrative starts with a historical summary of Native American activism up to 1970. Here he documents the important but little known actions of numerous Native American tribes to overcome their religious competition and to coalesce around a unified religious and spiritual viewpoint. He proceeds to describe the processes by which different native tribes met together and came to the realization of their mutual spiritual needs. From this mutual recognition came the impetus to hold a religious and spiritual conference.

To conduct this conference, there was a need for both financial support and institutional backing. The Anglican Church in Canada provided much of the funding for these conferences. We learn that this church contributed up to three quarters of the total funding for the Indian Ecumenical Conferences. Treat explains this by providing a historical assessment of the role the Anglican Church played in the treatment of Native Americans, and how their early attempts in this area led them to undertake this sponsorship role. To elaborate on how they gained institutional support, Treat transplants us into the turbulent world of the Institute for Indian Studies, formed at Rochdale College in Toronto in 1969. Rochdale

College, founded in 1967, was perhaps the first alternative university in North America. It was only there, in an experimental and marginal institution, that the Native Americans found an institutional backer to help set up the conference. Thus the coupling of the Anglican Church and Rochdale College provided the core institutional resources to carry out the first Ecumenical Conference.

The first Ecumenical Conference was held in Crow Agency, Montana in August of 1970. This was, for many of the participants, the beginning of a new cultural life. Treat describes this perspective through the voices of the participants. In one place, he quotes one of the conference organizers saying: "When the pail is empty, the way that the Indians are going to come back up again, the way that the pail is going to fill again, is if just little bunches of Indians sit down together and think of things to do and start helping one another. That way the pail is going to start to fill" (137). At this conference, a number of resolutions were passed, defending the rights of Native Peoples to self determination and cultural freedom.

On and off for the next 22 years, the Indian Ecumenical Conference met throughout North America. These meetings created a strong network of Indian activists. They also defined a worldview that celebrated Native American cultures, and the dignity of this community. Treat's narrative of this process is both moving and detailed. These conferences were a vital part of the redefinition of Native Americans and the creation of "modern traditionalism." As noted by Treat "The Conference helped define modern traditionalism by seeking to transform old ways of behaving into standards of action with definable limits set by the conception of Indian identity itself. Indians therefore find themselves at a unique point in their history" (296). Thus Treat accurately portrays these efforts of "tribal regrouping" as "comparable to the Hebrew exodus from Egypt after four centuries of oppression" (6).

This is a unique and powerful book. Treat creates his narrative of the cultural awakening of Native Americans with the biographical sketches of many of the conference leaders. These biographies weave the development of self and history together to illustrate both agency and structural constraints in the formation of action. This unconventional approach to social analysis works well. In his writing, Treat emerges as a tribal storyteller, providing us with a unique vantage point on cultural change. He provides us with an alternative way of doing social science and history, one that is dialogic and narrative, rigorous and authentic. In his conclusion, Treat notes that "Indian country (in 1992) was a different place than it had been in 1969. A good share of the credit for this remarkable transformation could be assigned to the ecumenical movement" (296). After reading this book, I am convinced of the truth of that statement. I am also convinced that this form of cultural innovation continues on in the work of scholars such as Treat.

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed

By Jared Diamond
New York: Viking, 2005
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Reviewed by Ralph Doty
Department of Classics
University of Oklahoma

Jared Diamond's latest book is subtitled *How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, which sums up his theme succinctly: there is no such thing as ecological determinism, and whatever societies do, they do by choice. He has touched on this theme before in *The Third Chimpanzee and Guns, Germs, and Steel*, but now he devotes an entire book to exploring the question in all its complexity. The result is both scholarly and readily accessible to the layperson, but it is also compelling. If you have ever read a mystery noir in which you knew from the beginning who committed the crime and how, yet you could not put down the book until you had followed the criminal to his destruction, prepare to experience that repelled fascination again.

"[O]f course it's not true," Diamond reassures us, "that all societies are doomed to collapse because of environmental damage: in the past some societies did while others didn't; the real question is why only some societies proved fragile, and what distinguished those that collapsed from those that didn't (10)." Collapse is actually two books in one: the first half traces the histories of several past societies that collapsed, together with an attempt to reconstruct the social decisions that led to the collapse; the second half of the book examines some contemporary societies that are facing environmental pressures and are either failing or succeeding to adapt. Diamond offers a five-point framework of factors that contribute to collapse:

(1) environmental damage (including overpopulation), (2) climate change, (3) hostile neighbors, (4) absence of friendly trade partners, and (5) the society's response to environmental problems. These five factors are synergistic, so that each reinforces and aggravates any others that are present.

Diamond arranges his stories of collapse in the ascending order of complexity of his five contributing factors. The first society he considers is that of Easter Island, perhaps the most isolated place in the world. Because of its remoteness, the only factors involved in Easter's economic and social collapse are (1) and (5). He then reviews, in order, the histories of Pitcairn Island, the Anasazi, and the Maya, ending with the failure, after 400 years, of the Norse colonies on Greenland, in which all five factors were involved. The collapse of the Greenland colonies struck me as both poignant and especial-

ly illustrative of the role of social conditioning, for the Norse Greenlanders finally starved to death on the shores of an ocean teeming with fish they refused to eat.

Alongside these tales of disaster there are success stories of societies that learned to reduce their demands on the environment to a sustainable load. The farmers of the central valley of New Guinea have managed to combine agriculture and arboriculture in a manner that furnishes them a living while restoring to the soil the nutrients their crops take from it. This is what Diamond calls a “bottom-up” solution to environmental problems. A “top-down” solution is provided by the example of the governments of Japan and the Dominican Republic in establishing and protecting extensive natural areas within their respective islands.

Among modern societies driven to collapse by environmental pressures, Diamond first looks at the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Although the news media presented the story as one of long-standing racial hatred between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes, statistics reveal an underlying economic pressure of disastrous proportions. If you divide the available agricultural area of Rwanda’s Kanama commune—an area populated almost entirely by Hutus—into its 1993 population, you discover that each person in Kanama was living off one-seventh of an acre at that time; the average household got only about three-quarters of its calorie needs from its farm, and any additional food had to be bought with income earned off the farm at a job. But only about two-thirds of all house-

holds had such jobs. Although elsewhere in Rwanda, Hutus massacred Tutsis, there was only one Tutsi living in Kanama when the killings began. In Kanama, Hutus killed each other as the desperate struggle between the barely-haves and the have-nots led to tragedy.

After chapters on the environmental problems of Haiti, China, and Australia, as well as the ecological roles played by various industries, Diamond concludes on a note of qualified optimism: he believes that we still have a good chance of staving off the collapse of Western civilization if we begin to reduce our demands on the environment now. He seems to overlook, however, the fact that although nations may make the political decisions necessary to maintain a sustainable lifestyle, they cannot enforce them on the multinational corporations which run the world’s economy: if a multinational dislikes the environmental regulations in country A, it merely shifts its operations to country B. It is true that there are multinationals that have seen the wisdom of preserving the environment, at least in certain situations, but there are also plenty of corporations willing to sacrifice everything else to profit, and little that can be done about them.

Nevertheless, Jared Diamond has provided a fascinating look into social decision-making as it applies to the environment, and he has raised questions about our own society and its future that any thoughtful person will find worthy of consideration. This is a book to stimulate thought by its scholarship and to provoke action by its immediacy.