

10-1-2000

A Book Review of An Invitation to Environmental Sociology

George Dillmann
University at Buffalo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/belj>



Part of the [Environmental Law Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

George Dillmann, *A Book Review of An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*, 8 Buff. Envtl. L.J. 159 (2000).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/belj/vol8/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Buffalo Environmental Law Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

**A Book Review of
AN INVITATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY***

George Dillmann **

Table of Contents

Introduction	160
Environmental Sociology vs. Traditional Sociology	160
AN INVITATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY	165
Conclusion	170

* MICHAEL MAYERFELD BELL, AN INVITATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY (1998).

** Ph.D. candidate, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Buffalo, Amherst, N.Y. 14260. George Dillmann specializes in environmental sociology and social movements; he holds a master of arts in political science from the University of Missouri and a master of science in sociology from Iowa State University.

INTRODUCTION

The number of works in the rapidly expanding sociological subdiscipline environmental sociology (ES) has now reached several thousand, and introductory course texts in this subdiscipline are numerous as well, such as those by Cable & Cable, Harper, Schnaiberg & Gould, and Humphrey & Buttel.¹ Consequently, it is difficult for any one book to stand out. This recent book by Michael Mayerfeld Bell may be capable of standing out. Though certainly suitable as an introductory text for ES survey courses, it is also an outstanding addition to the general collection of works in this subfield. In a clear and bold style that is understandable to the non-expert as well as a contribution to the sophisticated scholarship of this growing sociological specialty, Bell explores issues that need exploration if one is to appreciate the breadth of ES today.

ES has much to say to the practice of environmental law and the development of public policy, thus readers of this journal may benefit from an introduction to the field of ES. In developing environmental policy, it is important to consider the social impacts of these policies—and ES scholarship is a useful source for analyses of such impacts. Bell's work is a fine addition to this field. As a means to situating his book within this field, what follows is a brief overview of the evolution of and current state of ES.

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY VS. TRADITIONAL SOCIOLOGY

Sociology as a well-accepted, distinct discipline has existed only slightly more than a century, while ES has developed only within

¹ SHERRY CABLE & CHARLES CABLE, ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS, GRASSROOTS SOLUTIONS: THE POLITICS OF GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT (1995); CHARLES L. HARPER, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY: HUMAN PERSPECTIVES ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES (1996); CRAIG R. HUMPHREY & FREDERICK H. BUTTEL, ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY, AND SOCIETY (1982); ALLAN SCHNAIBERG & KENNETH ALAN GOULD, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY: THE ENDURING CONFLICT (1994) [hereinafter SCHNAIBERG & GOULD, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY].

the last thirty years. Both have, as is typical with fields of scholarly research, struggled to distinguish themselves from previously established fields. Additionally, ES has struggled to distinguish itself to some degree from the rest of sociology. In general, ES explores the ways humans impact the non-human environment, and the concurrent impact of non-human nature on humans.

Traditional sociology is best characterized as falling within the Human Exemptionalist Paradigm, which argues in part that humans are unique among the planet's life forms, exempt from the laws of nature due to our abilities to develop culture, language, and technology.² In contrast, ES fits with Catton and Dunlap's "counter paradigm," which they call the New Ecological Paradigm. This worldview, which informs the underlying assumptions of ES, argues that humans are very much interdependent with the rest of nature, that physical environmental constraints influence human behavior just as much as does other human behavior, that we live within a finite biosphere and thus are subject to its constraints, and that ecological laws do exist and cannot be overcome via human ingenuity.³ Because traditional sociology focuses upon human response to the meanings people attribute to the phenomena they perceive (including environmental conditions), it argues that the ways people construct these meanings—not the potential independent reality of the phenomena—constitute the relevant data.⁴ In short, in their efforts to distinguish sociology from other sciences, "the classical [sociological] theorists . . . wound up exaggerating the autonomy of

² William R. Catton, Jr. & Riley E. Dunlap, *Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm*, 13 AM. SOCIOLOGIST 41, 42 (1978); Riley E. Dunlap & William R. Catton, Jr., *Struggling with Human Exemptionalism: The Rise, Decline, and Revitalization of Environmental Sociology*, 25 AM. SOCIOLOGIST 5, 15 (1994); Riley E. Dunlap & William R. Catton, Jr., *Environmental Sociology*, 5 ANN. REV. OF SOC. 243, 250 (1979) [hereinafter Dunlap & Catton, *Environmental Sociology*]; Frederick H. Buttel, *New Directions in Environmental Sociology*, 13 ANN. REV. OF SOC. 465, 469 (1987) [hereinafter Buttel, *New Directions*].

³ William R. Catton, Jr. & Riley E. Dunlap, *A New Ecological Paradigm for a Post Exuberant Sociology*, 24 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 15, 33 (1980).

⁴ Dunlap & Catton, *Environmental Sociology*, *supra* note 4, at 244-45.

social processes from the natural world.”⁵

Buttel has outlined five general thematic areas explored by ES. They are: *new human ecology; technological risk/risk assessment; environmental attitudes, values, and behaviors; political economy of the environment and environmental politics; and the environmental movement.*⁶ In more recent years, the environmental justice literature, the risk literature, and the political economy of sustainable development have received the bulk of scholarly attention within ES.⁷

New Human Ecology constitutes what Buttel calls ES’s “core.” It explores the ways in which human societies adapt their patterns of social organization to their unavoidable dependence on non-human nature for survival.⁸ More specifically, it explores the ways that modern societies have fallen further and further out of equilibrium with their surrounding environments, and this fall has produced environmental degradation and resource depletion.⁹ According to Buttel, Dunlap and Catton’s early theoretical work in ES, which produced the Human Exemptionalism—New Ecological Paradigm dichotomy, is the heart of this area.

The study of technological risk and risk assessment is one of the more rapidly growing areas of study within ES.¹⁰ This area within ES is particularly demand-driven, in that public recognition of

⁵ Frederick H. Buttel, *Environmental and Resource Sociology: Theoretical Issues and Opportunities for Synthesis*, 61 RURAL SOC. 56, 57 (1996).

⁶ Buttel, *New Directions*, *supra* note 4, at 465.

⁷ Electronic mail from Adam Weinberg, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Colgate University to George Dillmann, Ph.D candidate, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Buffalo (Jan. 10, 2000, 10:22 EST) (on file with author).

⁸ Buttel, *New Directions*, *supra* note 4, at 468.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Interview with Michael Mayerfeld Bell, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, Ames, IA (May 7, 1999). Electronic mail from Adam Weinberg, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology to George Dillmann, Ph.D candidate, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Buffalo (Jan. 10, 2000, 10:22 EST) (on file with author).

environmental risks has been growing steadily over the last few decades, and continues to do so. However, sociological attention to technological risk did not lag behind the public; rather, it followed rapidly on the heels of some notable technological disasters in the late 1970s and early 1980s, primarily those at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania; Love Canal, New York; Times Beach, Missouri; Chernobyl, USSR; and Bhopal, India. Works such as those by Levine on Love Canal and Perrow and Sills, Wolf, and Shelanski on Three Mile Island typify the quick response of sociologists to these disasters.¹¹ Theoretical work about the perception of risk is epitomized by Beck's concept of the "risk society."¹²

The examination of environmental attitudes, values, and behaviors has formed a large part of ES research, though this area very much has its roots in traditional sociology and the sociology of environmental issues.¹³ This area has included, among other things, empirical work on the level of commitment to the New Ecological Paradigm and another manifestation of its opposite, the Dominant Social Paradigm.¹⁴

A fourth major area is the political economy of the environment and environmental politics, exemplified within ES by the work of Schnaiberg and Schnaiberg & Gould on the treadmill of production.¹⁵ Much ES work of the last decade may be located here, including analysis of sustainable development, ecotourism, and ecological modernization; the latter is epitomized by the work of Mol and Spaargaren and Mol.¹⁶ Work in political economy constitutes

¹¹ ADELINE GORDON LEVINE, LOVE CANAL: SCIENCE, POLITICS, AND PEOPLE 2 (1982); CHARLES PERROW, NORMAL ACCIDENTS: LIVING WITH HIGH-RISK TECHNOLOGIES 306-24 (1984); DAVID L. SILLS, ET AL., ACCIDENT AT THREE MILE ISLAND: THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS 119 (1982).

¹² ULRICH BECK, THE RISK SOCIETY: TOWARD A NEW MODERNITY 2-3 (Mark Ritter, trans., Sage 1992) (1986).

¹³ Buttel, *New Directions*, *supra* note 4, at 472.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 469-71.

¹⁵ SCHNAIBERG & GOULD, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY, *supra* note 3, at 167-73; ALLAN SCHNAIBERG, THE ENVIRONMENT, FROM SURPLUS TO SCARCITY 227-29 (1980).

¹⁶ ARTHUR P.J. MOL, THE REFINEMENT OF PRODUCTION: ECOLOGICAL

ES's only foray into class analysis. In this general area of inquiry we might also include research into the development of Social Impact Assessment, an applied technique that has been a response to perceived "social costs" of environmental protection and restorative actions.

The fifth area suggested by Buttel is analysis of the environmental movement. This area of inquiry also grew out of classical sociological analysis of this particular form of social movement. Within it we see another of the fastest-growing issue areas, environmental justice; the study of this area has examined the extent to which the locations of heavily polluting and/or dangerous industrial and technological manufacturing processes is correlated with predominantly minority residential areas ("environmental racism").

A transitional area of inquiry within social science, which some scholars have dubbed the "sociology of environmental issues", has developed since the mid-twentieth century and in some respects walks the line between the two paradigms described above.¹⁷ This area explores a number of issues of human "use" of the physical environment, though it has done so in a traditional sociological manner by examining only the human activity in question—not the entity that is being used. The sociology of environmental issues has frequently been carried out in the context of traditional rural sociology. Examples include wildlands recreation, problems of resource management, resource-dependent communities, environmental movements, national and state parks, and neo-Durkheimian human ecology.¹⁸ Though it is not synonymous with ES, the sociology of environmental issues has identified some of the

MODERNIZATION THEORY AND THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY 27-59 (1995); Gert Spaargaren & Arthur P.J. Mol, *Sociology, Environment, and Modernity: Ecological Modernization as a Theory of Social Change*. 5 SOC'Y & NAT. RESOURCES 323, 334-39 (1992).

¹⁷ Dunlap & Catton, *Environmental Sociology*, *supra* note 4, at 266.

¹⁸ Buttel, *New Directions*, *supra* note 4, at 468, 475; Interview with Gordon Bultena, Professor, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University, Ames, IA. (Jan. 21, 1997).

empirical areas of research that ES is now exploring through its New Ecological Paradigm lens.

AN INVITATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

AN INVITATION TO ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY offers a brief survey of most of these areas, and Bell organizes it in a simple and user-friendly manner. In general, he believes that the human condition is grounded in the “ecological dialogue” that continually takes place. The dialogue is the interplay of what we “know, believe, and value” and the material circumstances around us¹⁹. Each is simultaneously a cause and the effect of the other. To help us understand this dialogue, Bell divides the book into major sections he calls “The Material,” “The Ideal,” and “The Practical.” The first focuses upon the material realities noted above and the ways that they shape the conundrum we find ourselves in. The second considers our thinking about and acting upon the environment as they are shaped by the values, ideologies, and cultures that we bring to the dialogue between the natural world and human society. The third section examines ways we might address environmental problems that take “both the material and ideal into account”—and this dialogic perspective is one of the most important contributions of this book.²⁰

The chapters covering “The Material” address some of the more typical topics of survey works in environmental sociology, such as consumption and materialism, economics and technology, and population and development, and the impacts of these factors on human-environment interaction. In these chapters Bell reviews some well-known areas of environmental study such as the “treadmill of production,” the impact of expanding use of such technologies as private automobiles, and the Malthusian thesis on population growth and its impacts, including a clear critique of this thesis.²¹ He also

¹⁹ BELL, *supra* note 1, at 37.

²⁰ *Id.* at 3.

²¹ SCHNAIBERG & GOULD, ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY, *supra* note 3, at 77-79, 167-73; WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE, STATE OF THE WORLD: A WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE REPORT ON PROGRESS TOWARD A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY (1984 - 2000)

addresses a couple of not-so-common topics. One of these is Winner's notion of "technological somnambulism;" which refers to the unconscious, uncritical acceptance of new technologies—being so unreflective about the potential impact of our inventions that it is as if we were sleepwalking through life. Another less common topic is the "hau"—the sentimental sense attached to certain material objects, especially gifts, by the Maori of New Zealand. By introducing this latter concept, Bell is trying to show that motivations for and degree of human attachment to material objects varies greatly, and that it is thus possible to value objects for reasons other than purely utilitarian ones. Such discussion gives this book an odd flavor at first, but the blending of typical with non-typical environmental sociology topics—going beyond the bounds of what is normally done in this field—makes Bell's book particularly interesting, and helps to connect it to the broader field of sociology.

In the first chapter of the section labeled "The Ideal," Bell explores the role of ideology in the domination of the environment by humans; in particular, he examines the roles played by Christianity, individualism, and patriarchy. He looks at Lynn White's famous 1967 essay that argued for the primacy of Christian dogma in the growth of Western science and technology. This primacy has, according to White, produced attitudes of human superiority over the environment. Though seeing some virtue in White's argument, Bell argues that it glosses over instances in which Christianity has opposed scientific "advances." With regard to the role of individualism, Bell investigates the work of the somewhat obscure social theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, who pointed out that "[i]ndividualism encourages us to see our bodies as sealed off from others and the natural world . . .", and Bell discusses the clear implications of this standpoint.²² In the case of patriarchy, he introduces the reader to ecofeminism, a form of praxis that explores the links between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and which offers a powerful argument that patriarchy has damaged nature as greatly as it has

(select articles discuss the impact of expanding use of private automobiles).

²² BELL, *supra* note 1, at 157.

damaged women.

To his credit, Bell does not argue that any one of these ideological frameworks is solely to blame for human treatment of the environment (nor is he in any way particularly anti-religious). Rather, as he makes clear, this treatment is produced by a multitude of dialogic forces that is more complex than we often admit. The way our society is arranged is a “predicament” that cannot be the fault of any individual persons, he asserts, and we will never be able to develop a complete explanation of how the predicament has come about. Yet, this need not keep us from deciding upon the best courses of action. We cannot, in fact, let the predicament keep us from acting, or we are sure to do yet further environmental damage.

In Chapter Six, Bell considers the opposite role of ideology—the role it has played in environmental concern. He notes that some degree of opposition to the domination of the environment has always existed in human society, and he briefly presents examples of this opposition from Ancient Greece, Rome, and China (particularly Taoism). In recent centuries, the secular moral basis for environmental concern has grown, as for example in the nineteenth century Transcendentalist movement, exemplified by Thoreau and his stay at Walden Pond. Also, Bell suggests that there is a democratic basis for environmental concern, because democratic voices and institutions allow for open opposition to environmental harm.

Environmental concern also has material bases, as “perceived environmental decline” has produced much action for environmental restoration and protection. Part of this chapter is an exploration of the “risk society” theory developed by Beck that is currently receiving much scholarly attention. He argues that political conflicts today concern non-class-based struggles over the distribution of risks in societies, rather than class-based clashes over the distribution of resources. In partial critique, Bell points out that material resource maldistribution still exists, perhaps more severely than ever, and thus still deserves attention.

In the final chapter of this section, Bell addresses the question, What is Nature? It also addresses related queries concerning this classic philosophical issue. What is humans’ true place in nature?

Does nature have moral worth equal to ours, or are we superior to it? Are we part of it (moral holism), or are we separate from it (moral separatism)? Are natural things better than non-natural things? Should we “follow” nature? The implications of how we answer these questions are huge, as he indicates. In this chapter he also addresses the controversial social construction of nature versus realist school debate, and neither adds fuel to the fire nor avoids the issue when he says “[w]hatever else nature might be, it is *also* a social construction.”²³ The perspective that nature is both real *and* socially constructed is more common in ES now than in earlier years. Among additional issues, Bell discusses the implications of how we conceive of “wilderness” (not necessarily, in many people’s minds, the same thing as “nature”), and the pros and cons of tourism for local people, local non-human nature, and the tourists themselves. In sum, he points out that nature and wilderness cannot be taken for granted as universally understood physical phenomena. Rather, they are strongly contested in terms of both their physicality and their meaning.

The lone chapter in section three of the book (“The Practical”) is called *Organizing the Ecological Society*. Though a large proportion of environmental sociology texts contain this sort of optimistic conclusion, many of them focus strictly on national and international actions to remediate environmental problems; for example, the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) developed by Herman Daly, which activists hope will replace the pollution-rewarding (because it counts cleaning up pollution as positive economic activity) Gross National Product. Bell considers such large-scale activities, but he also presents some examples from the small town he lives in: a bicycle-powered delivery and recycling pick-up business, a Community Supported Agriculture program, and activists working on local “new urbanist” projects modeling new developments on traditional neighborhood designs “that cities routinely turn into historic districts.”²⁴

Bell’s primary theoretical contribution in this section is his

²³ *Id.* at 213 (emphasis added).

²⁴ *Id.* at 272.

notion of the “dialogue of solidarities.” In explaining how we have the potential to do a better job cooperating in our care for the environment, Bell argues that all humans have *sentiments* (affection for other people, and some common norms) as well as *interests*. Though he refers here to interests of a personal nature, such interests may be advanced by having relationships with others. Within this dialogue, the interests of two parties are best served through the parties’ relationship, yet both also recognize the existence of sentimental ties between them. These are both bases for social commitment, and they are interactive; thus, we may speak of a “dialogue of solidarities.” In contrast to the rational-actor model based “tragedy of the commons” problem (in which sentiments are thought not to exist at all), Bell’s model recognizes that there are actually many reasons why people act in ways that take others into account. If we are able to take others into account—and we all know that we do this regularly, even if it seems as if doing so is contrary to our personal interests—then we ought to be able to act in community. This too we know to occur—people act in community on a regular basis, and Bell asserts that we can do this even more often if we can improve our ability to communicate. That in turn will give us the opportunity to learn how we can all benefit from such cooperation. With such steps lie the potential to right the many environmental wrongs we have produced. He does not argue that it will all happen easily or quickly. Rather, he is trying to call our attention to this potential.

Here we see one of the strengths of this book—its stress upon the value of relationships. For Bell, this includes not only human relationships, but human-nature ones as well, and that is another strength of this work. Relatedly, it is positive that Bell repeatedly makes clear the linkages between environmental and social issues, and argues that ultimately they cannot be analyzed separately. Some may feel that delving into so-called “social issues” has no place in a work of environmental sociology. However, this field has always involved studying human society (in its interaction with non-human nature), and by definition, that makes it sociology.

This book is hopeful, unlike much of the work done in this

field in recent years. Refreshingly, Bell spends only a little time reviewing some of the most often-discussed environmental issues, including global warming, acid rain, environmental justice, and the inequality of wealth distribution; many texts fill the bulk of their pages with gloomy presentations of such information, yet do not give us any idea that human society can ever learn to implement solutions. Bell, in contrast, believes that people can change and learn to become environmental stewards, if we are willing to act as a collectivity and to not exclude anyone from the conversation (much simpler said than done, though he suggests how we might actually do these things).

The only significant problem with this book is not of Bell's doing. Specifically, the book was poorly edited by Pine Forge Press and contains an exceptionally high number of typographical errors. In addition, Pine Forge chose to employ a cumbersome endnote and reference list style.

Furthermore, a sense of balance pervades this book. While Bell takes firm stances on many issues in this book, he is not dogmatic, and this is evident with statements such as this one concerning overpopulation, one of the stickiest ethical issues of all: He states that the problem of population is one of both "too many people with too much *and* too many people with not enough."²⁵ Frequently, persons taking dogmatic positions speak of these as if they are two separate problems, but Bell knows better than to fall into such a trap.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this is a very interesting and refreshing book, and it is an important contribution to undergraduate education in environmental sociology. Bell is open about the degree to which he does, and does not, "walk his talk." He is up front about his values, but he is not value-neutral. He clearly wants to see humanity bring our ideological constructions (such as our values and beliefs) more in line with material realities (for example, the declining natural

²⁵ *Id.* at 141 (emphasis added).

resource base). He does not suggest that environmental degradation is a result of inherent human evil. To the contrary, he argues that we are all imperfect, and that imperfection—not an overt desire to destroy the wilds born from hatred of nature—is the source of many of our environmental problems. It is a pleasure to read a work that gives us a reason to keep trying to solve our environmental problems, and that leads us to believe we can succeed.

