

SOCIAL THEORIES OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Sociology 326

Spring 2009

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Office Hours: Mondays 1-2, Fridays 11:15-12:15, and by appointment

Readings

Noel Castree and Bruce Braun, *Social Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics*

Allan Schnaiberg and Kenneth Gould, *Environment and Society: Enduring Conflict*

Numerous additional readings will be e-mailed to you in PDF format.

Sociological Theory and the Environment

How do we make sense of contemporary society's relationship with nature? Scholars have produced a rich array of responses to this question, but many conflict with one another. Some assert that capitalism is the planet's worst nightmare, while others argue that the issue is under-regulated industrialism. Some insist that "nature" is "the most dangerous word in the English language," while still others posit that nature's meaning is a complex "hybrid."

Theorists are also concerned with how social thought can be used to guide solutions to environmental problems. What is needed, according to *ecological Marxists*, is a broader, stronger labor movement, one where the interests of working people and the environment are clearly connected. *Ecological modernists* insist that government intervention is the only way to ensure that economies and ecologies survive into the future. *Social anarchists* say that only through "de-industrialization" can we balance the needs of humanity and nature. Meanwhile, neo-*Malthusians* already have thrown in the towel, claiming that Western society has "overshot" its "carrying capacity" and that we are rapidly approaching "dieoff," a catastrophic human and ecological crash.

It should be clear from this overview that sociologists of the environment have yet to agree on one single theoretical perspective. Indeed, they disagree even about the proper terms of the debate: Is the core issue what society needs or what nature needs? Should we act on the threats to industrial nations or developing nations? Is the key variable human population growth or technology run amok? These divergent points of view may be frustrating to you if you're longing for unambiguous answers to environmental problems, but they will provide us with much to discuss and debate.

Overview and Course Goals

This course really has two purposes. One is to expose you to an area of advanced sociological theory. Every subfield within the discipline attracts rigorous theorizing of

the sort we will discuss, and some of the major perspectives represented in our readings—particularly Marxism, constructivism, and feminism—are among the dominant contemporary theories throughout sociology. Even if they are not specifically interested in environmental sociology as an area of concentration, students who are interested in post-graduate study can benefit from a thorough examination of the theories underlying an area of study like environmental sociology because courses like this one will comprise the bulk of their graduate school classwork.

The other primary purpose of this course is to intensively explore social thought concerning the environment. A strong argument can be made—and people like former Vice President Al Gore have been making it for years—that no single subject is of more importance to all of humanity than our proper relationship with the ecosphere. If Gore and others are correct, we need the sort of foundation provided by social theory to adequately understand and address environmental problems. This course will expose you to the foremost of those theories.

As for specific, learning-related goals for this course, they come in three different forms. First, through this course you will develop a better understanding of sociological theory, in particular its various perspectives (through the variety of theories you will read), power (through the theories' ability to help us understand, and create alternatives for, environmental problems), intellectual challenges (through reading and comprehending original works), and its uses (through an appreciation of the applicability of theory to a variety of environmental issues).

Second, this course will help you sharpen your critical thinking skills in at least two ways. First, you will come to better understand that the most persuasive critical perspectives are those that are grounded in accepted theoretical (or philosophical) works. Second, by exposing you to a variety of theoretical outlooks, this course will model the sort of challenging interchanges that are at the heart of critical thought.

Finally, this course will provide you with an opportunity to improve the quality of your writing and your oral presentation abilities. All assignments will be in the form of papers—no tests—and class participation is one of the foremost things I expect from you.

Course Requirements

Written Assignments

You will write three take-home papers for this class, totaling 75 percent of your final grade. From time to time I will also ask you to hand-in brief in-class assignments; these “minute papers” will not receive a letter grade, but they are required for the course. You must submit all of your assignments on time. Because in some cases this requirement will mean handing-in something you have written in class, your attendance is expected. You will find deadlines for your papers on the Course Readings and Paper Schedule, below.

Class Participation and Attendance

Class participation is vital to this course and will count for 25 percent of your final grade. Your class participation grade will be based on three factors: (1) your attendance, (2) your involvement in class discussions and small group analyses and assignments, and, most important, (3) the quality of what you have to say and of your interactions with your peers in class and in small groups. Full credit for class participation will go to those who enliven class discussion by grounding their comments in the class material but who, by the same token, allow others to speak and who respect others' views.

Class Decorum

As a courtesy to me and to your fellow students, please arrive to class on time; if you are chronically late, I will deduct points from your class participation score. Do not begin preparing to leave until the class is concluded. I expect you to respect the views of others in the class, which means that you are free to disagree with them, but abusive language or actions will not be tolerated and may be reported to the Dean of Academic Student Affairs.

Plagiarism

Skidmore's Honor Code is quite clear regarding the severe consequences that result from any act of cheating. In this course I will encourage you to cooperate with other students on many things, but unless I tell you otherwise, you may not work with others on your papers. The form of cheating most likely to emerge in our class is plagiarism. Should I find evidence that you have plagiarized, you will fail the course. To help you avoid plagiarism, review the "Writing Tips" web page (available through the course website noted above) and follow the guidelines there and those discussed in class.

Summary of Course Requirements

Take-home papers (3 @ 25 percent each)	75 percent of your final grade
Class Participation	25 percent of your final grade
Occasional ungraded papers	Required

Course Reading and Paper Schedule

I will e-mail you PDF files of readings not in the books.

Wednesday, January 21 Course Introduction

Reconfiguring the Sociology-Environment Relationship

Friday, January 23 Catton and Dunlap (PDF); Buttel (PDF)

Wednesday, January 28 Molotch (PDF); von Werlhof (PDF)

Friday, January 30 York, Rosa, and Dietz (PDF)

Neo-Malthusianism

Wednesday, February 4 Catton (PDF); Hoffmann (PDF)

Reconsidering the Tragedy of the Commons

Friday, February 6..... Hardin (PDF)
Wednesday, February 11..... Neves-Graca (PDF)

Risk and the Environment

Friday, February 13..... Rosa (PDF); Beck (PDF)
Wednesday, February 18..... **First Papers Due**

Neo- and Contemporary-Marxist Formulations—Ecological Marxism’s Several Faces

Friday, February 20..... Foster (PDF); O’Connor (PDF)
Wednesday, February 25..... Schnaiberg and Gould, Prefaces and Chapters 1-2
Friday, February 27..... Schnaiberg and Gould, Chapters 3-6
Wednesday, March 4..... Schnaiberg and Gould, Chapters 7-10
Friday, March 6..... Gould, Pellow, Schnaiberg (PDF)

March 7-15 Spring Break

Ecological Anarchism

Wednesday, March 18..... Best (PDF)
Friday, March 20..... Tokar (PDF); Shantz (PDF)

Socially Constructing Nature

Wednesday, March 25..... Braun and Castree, Chapters 1 and 2
Friday, March 27..... Braun and Castree, Chapters 4 and 6
Wednesday, April 1..... Braun and Castree, Chapters 8 and 9
Friday, April 3..... Braun and Castree, Chapter 11
Wednesday, April 8..... Braun and Castree, Chapter 12
Friday, April 10..... Haraway (PDF); Soper (PDF)

Wednesday, April 15..... **Second Papers Due**

Ecological Modernization

Friday, April 17..... Spaargaren and Mol (PDF); Mol (PDF)
Wednesday, April 22..... Schnaiberg (PDF)
Friday, April 24..... York and Rosa (PDF)

Futures for Environmental Sociology

Wednesday, April 29..... Buttell (PDF); Grambling and Freudenburg (PDF);
..... Goldman and Schurman (PDF)

FINAL(THIRD) PAPERS WILL BE DUE BY WEDNESDAY, MAY 6 AT NOON.