Sociology's Rediscovery of the Environment: Setting the Stage

William R. Freudenburg, ***University of California***

The editors of *Sociological Inquiry* have been kind enough to ask me to provide a few words of background to provide a context for reading the associated words of my long-time friend and colleague, Bill Catton. I am honored to do so. Although this may come as a surprise to some of my colleagues who know me well, I will attempt to do so in relatively few words, freeing readers to concentrate on Catton's thoughts, rather than my own. I will start by saying something about the context of the time in which Catton's work first came to exert such a powerful influence on the field of environmental sociology—for a more extensive assessment that looks at Catton's influence in conjunction with that of our mutual friend, Riley Dunlap, see Freudenburg (2008). Next, I will say just a bit about Catton's influence—and after that, I will try to exit the stage as quietly and gracefully as I know how, leaving the spotlight to Dr. Catton himself.

The Backdrop

To realize the nature of the influence he has had, it helps to start with the realization that the world was a different place back in 1969—or even 1979. One of the key people who have made it a smarter place in the intervening years is Bill Catton.

Histories of the era, or at least those that pay little attention to sociology, are likely to report that humans' relationships with the broader ecosystem went through a radical change in 1969–1970. That was the era of the Santa Barbara oil spill, the passing of the National Environmental Policy Act, the first "Earth Day," and more. In sociology, however, the Earth Day era seemed to disappear without leaving even a ripple of change.

Important new fields did emerge in the other social sciences—in the forms of environmental psychology, for example, along with ecological anthropology, and environmental economics and political science. In sociology, however, "environment" continued to mean something like "other people out there," as in, the "family environment" or the "organizational

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environment." When sociologists thought about what the rest of the world was already calling "the" environment—air, soil, water, food, plants, animals, or even humans' own biophysical characteristics and consequences—the usual assumption was that such concerns were in the territory controlled by the sociological "human ecologists" of the day.

Robert Park and some of his colleagues who first worked to establish the field of human ecology at the University of Chicago during the 1920s were scholars who were reasonably familiar with the kinds of "ecological" work being done by biological and physical scientists of the time (see, for example, Park 1936). Unfortunately, by about 1950, "what sociologists and geographers called 'human ecology' came to mean the quantitative analysis of spatially aggregated data—forget the (individual) humans, and forget the ecology" (Freudenburg 2008: 452). What sociologists called "human ecology," to be blunt about it, was neither "ecological" nor in some senses all that worried about humans. By 1950, for example, what sociologists called "the" ecological fallacy had to do with drawing inferences about individuals on the basis of aggregated ("ecological") data (see Robinson 1950). The work that effectively defined the field, though, was the synthesis by Amos Hawley (1950).

To be fair, Hawley did know a fair amount about the (biophysical) ecology of the time, and the sheer extent of his influence provides testimony to the fact that many of the leading sociologists of his time found a great deal in his work that was helpful and insightful. At its core, however, Hawley's "human ecology" focused on explaining societal growth, advancement, and improvement—nearly the polar opposite of what leading "ecology" books of the 1970s, such as Meadows et al. (1972), were calling *The Limits to Growth*. Hawley and his backers were interested in theorizing the removal of any such limits. So extensive was Hawley's influence within sociology at the time that, in the earliest of his papers that I can find in my files, namely a presentation to the American Sociological Association meeting in 1976, Bill Catton and his long-time colleague and collaborator, Riley Dunlap, used the title of "Environmental Sociology: Why not Human Ecology?" (Dunlap and Catton 1976).

The Impact

Given this background, for Catton's (1980) *Overshoot* to have had the impact it had, back when it was first published in 1980, it had to be a remarkable work of scholarship, science, and synthesis. For it to *continue* to have had the impact it continues to have, roughly 30 years later, it had to be a classic. It is all of that, and more.

Sociologists who are familiar with the "Ecological Footprint" work of Mathis Wackernagel and his colleagues (see <http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/>), or who have read with appreciation some of the

sociological work that makes use of the footprint measure (see, e.g., the *American Sociological Review* article by York, Rosa, and Dietz 2003) may or may not know that, as Wackernagel himself once told me, he was first inspired to work on the "footprint" concept after having read Catton's (1980) *Overshoot*. He said he was moved to action by the power of Catton's logic and argument, as well as being motivated by the power of Catton's example to do something positive—not just to notice problems and comment on them, but to help his fellow humans to cope with the challenges and move toward healthier relationships with the biophysical systems on which all life depends.

Catton's influence, however, has continued all the way to the present, and as will be clear to anyone who reads his essay in this volume, his powerful thinking will continue to exert an influence on the course of thought over the decades that still lie ahead.

As someone who has read any number of letters and reviews over the years, and who has written a number of them myself, I have always found that I am more convinced by concrete examples than by eloquent generalities. As the old saying goes, actions really do speak louder than words. In what I hope will be a suitably concrete way to bring these comments to a close, accordingly, I want to offer a straightforward illustration from my own actions.

After decades of being part of sociology departments, although I often taught a course or two in "environmental studies" or some such interdisciplinary program on the side, I am now employed full-time in one of the nation's oldest and largest environmental studies programs—and teaching an occasional sociology class on the side. During my whole career, I have said consistently that "intro" courses should be taught by some of the most senior people in any given field, because only decades of experience would give the breadth of perspective and depth of insight that would allow them to teach such a class really well. Note my use of the word "them." For decades, I was just about the youngest person in any of my departments, so an implicit message was that "Intro should be taught by somebody senior, and not by somebody younger like me." At some point, though—I think it may have been a Thursday—I looked around and realized that I had suddenly become one of the most senior members of my department.

At least in this case, my actions have matched my words. I now teach the giant intro class in my program, "Environmental Studies 1." One of the first things I did after agreeing to teach the class was to look for an introductory textbook. What I discovered was that, although there are a number of very good textbooks that focus on Environmental Sciences, none of the ones that aimed to focus on Environmental Studies even came close to meeting the needs of my students. All of them said something about human beings; none of them, to my way of thinking, really did so all that well. After spending

almost a year in looking over the textbooks and thinking about my options, I decided to assign Catton's (1980) *Overshoot* as the key required reading for that intro class. Even though it is now almost twice as old as the average freshman in my class, I hear remarkably few complaints about how "ancient" it is. Instead, the end-of-the-class evaluations often mention it positively, thanking me for introducing the book to them—and the last time I figured out how to look myself up on <ratemyprofessors.com>, I found that one of the students had added my picture to the site, complete with a single comment: "Ca-a-a-atton!"

I'm honored to be in such fine company.

ENDNOTE

Please direct correspondence to William R. Freudenburg, Environmental Studies Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-4160, USA; e-mail: freudenburg@es.ucsb.edu.

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