

Environmental Sociology: The Ecology of Late Modernity

By Thomas J. Burns and Beth Schaefer Caniglia

Norman, OK: Mercury Academic, 252 pp., 2016

ISBN: 978-1-62667-017-4

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Burns and Caniglia's book is an excellent new addition to the growing catalog of resources for teaching environmental sociology and related disciplines to both undergraduate and graduate students. Developing from the authors' own experience teaching such classes, this book highlights how environmental sociology is uniquely positioned to improve our ability to understand and address our "wicked" (p. 15) environmental problems. By providing an accessible introduction to the origins of sociology and the sociological perspective, this book will be useful for students familiar with sociology and especially useful for those coming to the class with an interest in the environment but less familiarity with the sociological approach.

The book makes a connection between the historical origins of sociology, a discipline originally concerned with understanding the social upheaval caused by the transition to modernity, and the resulting environmental problems we now face in this time of late modernity. The authors identify these environmental problems as especially "wicked" because humans now have the technological capability and act on a scale that enables the creation of problems we are not able to readily solve. This aligns with Crutzen's (2002:23) identification of the Anthropocene era in which humankind's relationship with the environment has grown to become "human-dominated." Despite this focus on problems and acknowledgment of their scale and complexity, Burns and Caniglia still take a decidedly optimistic approach that will be appealing to students. The authors acknowledge that the problems are pressing, but argue "we can address them" (p. 20). They go on to give examples of progress that has been made in difficult times (p. 60), cover both individual and institutional approaches, and discuss such solutions in some depth.

Analyzing both institutions and culture, Burns and Caniglia trace how the two have evolved, and they employ concepts such as cultural lag (p. 56) to support the view that we have a mismatch between sustainability and our current institutions and culture, which developed under assumptions of a different time. The book develops the idea that because of the evolving historical processes of modernity, and specifically with

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the move away from agrarian society toward industrialization and an increasingly urban global population, many in society have lost a connection with the natural world; this has contributed to the creation of environmental problems (pp. 15, 59). In part, the authors describe how it has become a norm to degrade the environment via consumption and other processes because the effects are not felt immediately or locally and because there is an emphasis on expansion of both markets and scales of production. The authors also take a global approach, focusing on large-scale change, while at the same time not neglecting the local; current examples are provided at multiple levels. For example, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, is discussed, as is sociological research on the political economy of the globally uneven distribution of environmental problems. The book has excellent breadth of coverage of both theoretical perspectives and main concepts, from the human exemptionalism paradigm and new environmental paradigm transition (p. 137) as articulated by Dunlap and Catton (1979), to the Jevons paradox (p. 58), to the Netherlands fallacy (p. 162). One criticism could be that because of the great breadth of the work, some topics are mentioned only briefly and lack depth; however, as it is the book remains highly readable, engaging, and thought-provoking, and instructors may supplement such areas with additional materials.

The institutional focus helps to provide the book with its coherent structure. The first chapter presents the ecological dilemma of late modernity. This chapter highlights the urgency and scale of problems, the authors' optimistic approach, the book's global focus, and the authors' critical approach toward economics as the dominant paradigm of late modernity. Chapter 2 introduces the sociological perspective, environmental sociology, and their respective histories. While acknowledging that the classical theorists didn't completely neglect the natural environment (Foster, 1999), Burns and Caniglia note that during the time of the origins of sociology the natural environment was not the primary focus of the emerging discipline. Also covered here are the roots of some theoretical perspectives, including those from the critical tradition and from human ecology. Chapter 3 addresses culture; here the authors highlight the emphasis on the individual in late modernity and develop their focus on the mismatches between culture, evolution, technology, the scale of the economy, and sustainability and the natural ecology. A useful point here relates to the inadequacy of institutional fixes that do not accurately take into account and address culture and cultural mismatches.

The focus on specific institutions begins with Chapter 4, which tackles the question of whether science and technology are more accurately seen as problem or solution and the theoretical perspectives that address this debate. Science and technology can be seen as existing and evolving in tandem with the institutions of the economy and governance systems covered in the next two chapters. Chapter 5 highlights the origins of economics and covers concepts important to the environment such as economies of scale and externalities, employing a useful example from modern

industrial-scale agriculture. Throughout the book, but especially in this chapter, the authors engage with the “Tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), local to global inequality in the distribution of environmental problems, and the “treadmill of production” (Schnaiberg, 1980). Governance is covered in Chapter 6 and this chapter includes discussion of multiple theoretical perspectives. Following in the legacy of scholarship by Rachel Carson, Chapter 7 looks at links between an environment “out of balance” and human health and well-being (p. 130). Examples related to specific environmental toxins draw attention to issues of environmental justice, raise the issue of trade-offs, and highlight how benefits and harms of many products are experienced unevenly across more- and less-advantaged groups in society. Chapter 8 focuses on collective behavior and social movements targeted at environmental problems and explores the multiple groups and their various points of cohesion and conflict, assessments of their efficacy, and movements both local and global. Although the global focus is interwoven throughout the book, Chapter 9 extends this by focusing specifically on the global nature of environmental problems, trade, and the environmental situation in developing countries.

Three of the four final chapters emphasize working toward solutions. In addition to Chapter 8 on collective action, Chapters 10 and 11 address ways to create social change. Chapter 10 emphasizes the role of catalysts for change and details five specific approaches, two at the individual level and three at the institutional level that, working in conjunction, will lead to a growing environmental consciousness and structural change. The final chapter sums up the arguments of the book with an emphasis on the types of solutions that grow from the authors’ particular identification of the problems that have led us to our current environmental dilemmas.

The authors do not advocate a return to a time before late modernity; instead, they advocate for strategies that rebuild a connection with the natural environment at both the individual and the institutional level. Throughout the book many sections raise similar thought-provoking assertions that will make for lively discussion topics with students. Some additional features that will make the book appealing to students are the annotated table of contents, the end of chapter summaries, and the figures, which appear throughout the book and provide expanded information on key topics or examples.

To conclude, this book is an excellent resource and a thoughtful contribution. It will enable students to gain a theoretically informed and global perspective on the influences of modernity on our natural environment. The book is invaluable in the way it concisely provides background and draws connections between the origins of sociology and environmental sociology and large-scale societal changes, and it doesn’t neglect highlighting unequal contributions to and outcomes of environmental problems. Furthermore, the way we frame problems determines the solutions we can imagine. Burns and Caniglia provide a historically rooted and uniquely presented identification of the problems: a loss of connectedness with

nature and a mismatch between the institutions and culture of modernity and sustainability; they then follow this logic to specific examples, at various levels, of steps toward reconnecting with and preserving the planet.

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This text is taken from *Human Ecology Review*,
Volume 23, Number 1, 2017, published 2017 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.