

# Sociology and the Environment: A Theoretical Overview with Special Reference to Eco-Marxism

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**Abstract**—Environmental sociology deals with social, cultural and ecological areas of human life. This area of research is very useful for the developments of environmental policies and the process of equitable development of a nation. It also helps to cultivate environmental awareness and a new sociological outlook to the learners and administrators. This study is an attempt to understand various epistemological views related to the interrelationships between sociology and environment but mainly focuses on the Eco-Marxism. As a new theoretical outlook Eco-Marxism explores the interaction between people and environment with the motive of maximization of profit and the intuition of exploitation of nature and natural resources. In modern times the effect of limitlessness in human motives and the crises of technological domination converts human in to more utilitarian towards nature. It reflects all sorts of environmental crises and ecological problems in the modern society. Eco-Marxism, as the central concern of this paper, highlights the inherent social division in the society on the basis of the possession of wealth and material, and how it leads to as the fundamental reason for ecological crisis and issues. Overexploitation of the nature and material resources for economic and developmental purposes results to the condition of the alienation of people from the harsh realities of life. This study also discusses the alienation of people within the framework of modern industrial and socio-cultural transactions.

**Key Words**—Social Darwinism - Evolution of human society from homogeneity to heterogeneity on biological developmental framework. Eco Marxism - Marxian interpretation of ecological process and outcomes. Ecological modernization - The process of transformation of ecology into more sophisticated line due to the involvement of socio-political factors. Resource mobilization - Gathering of resources for mass agitation for a desired goal. Relative deprivation- Persistent inequality based on social political and cultural parameters.

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental sociology deals with social, cultural and ecological areas of environmental science. This area of research is very useful for the development of environmental policies for the equitable distribution of resources of a nation. It also helps to cultivate environmental awareness and to solve environmental problems and to discuss the relationship between society and environment with sociological outlook. Environmental sociology expands our knowledge of our natural ecosystem and also warns us of the hidden and manifested forms of environmental crises. Environmental sociology is a sub-discipline within the field of sociology that studies the interactions between the physical environment, social organization, and social behaviour. An environmental sociologist typically places special emphasis on studying the social factors that cause environmental problems and provides efforts to solve the problems. Environmental sociology is a cross-disciplinary research area. It covers subjects from organic farming, nature management and transport through technological development. On a more general level, it deals with themes such as environmental policy, democracy, planning, and communication of the individual with nature in everyday life. It is a fast growing discipline broadly focusing on:

1. Peoples' role in environmental problems and how these can be dealt with.
2. Human understanding of and practice in relation to nature and environment.
3. Social changes and their underlying driving forces and its repercussions.
4. Structural conditions, barriers and opportunities in relation to environment and nature.

5. Different solution strategies, forms of organization and methods.

There is growing and mutually influencing interrelationships between the environment and social life from time immemorial. The outlook of human beings about the natural habitat was different from periods to periods; different civilizations have formed different perspectives and works about the degree and nature of interrelationships between society and environment. This article primarily assesses the various theoretical backgrounds related to the environment and society. The study also highlights the views of different theorists in the realm of society and environment from biological determinism to theories of modern period and especially the works of Marx and neo-Marxian thinkers.

*Biological determinism* is the interpretation of humans and human life from a biological point of view. This theory says that the development of human beings is directly or indirectly determined by the circumstances in which he lives. This sociological interpretation by Herbert Spencer stresses that the personality and biological features of human behaviour are the product of the social and cultural environment in which an individual lives.<sup>1</sup> The socio-cultural environment makes the existence and the vitality of human life. These theories suggest that biological makeup of man is directly or indirectly related to the environment in which an organism survive and strive for its existence. Sociologist and anthropologists opined that the change of biological factors may be the result of adaption and enculturation. Herbert Spencer, the main proponent of this theory, states that society is in the form of consensus equilibrium. Changes in the equilibrium of society are the primary reason for social change. When social equilibrium collapses it directly or indirectly influences the structure and functions of the society. In that way biological determinism can be defined as the persistent environmental crises due to

the disequilibrium of the society.

## **SOCIAL DARWINISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY**

Social Darwinism is an ideology of sociology that seeks to apply biological concepts of Darwinism or of evolutionary theory to social sciences, often with the assumption that conflict between groups in society leads to social progress as superior groups and inferior ones. The name Social Darwinism<sup>2</sup> is a modern name given to the various theories of society that emerged in England and the United States in the 1870s, which, it is alleged, sought to apply biological concepts to sociology and politics. The main discourse of social Darwinism to sociology was done by Herbert Spencer the distinguished biologist.<sup>3</sup> His concept of organic analogy is the best suitable example to define the interrelationships between the society and the organism. He equated the society with an organism and relates the ideology of social evolution with respect to biological evolution. For him change is a continuous process of simple complex stages; from homogeneity to heterogeneity. For them society is in the state of perpetual equilibrium striving for better and complex life.

From primitives to the savages and to the modern man, the sequential pattern of change and progress can be seen in human social life. Social Darwinism gained widespread currency when used in 1944 to oppose these earlier concepts. Social Darwinism is generally understood to be as the use of concepts of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest to justify social policies which make no distinction between those able to support themselves and those unable to support them. Many such views stress competition between individuals in laissez-faire capitalism but the ideology has also motivated ideas of eugenics and struggle between national or racial groups. Some even extended this philosophy into a micro-economic issue, claiming that social welfare programs that helped the poor and the disadvantaged were contrary to nature itself. In nature, the strong survive and those best suited to survival will out-live the weak. According to Social Darwinism, those with strength (economic, physical, technological) flourish and those without are destined for extinction. It is important to note that Darwin did not extend his theories to a social or economic level, nor are there any credible evolutionists subscribing to the theories of Social Darwinism. Herbert Spencer's philosophy is only loosely based on the premises of Darwin's work. According to evolutionary theory, nature is a "kill-or-be-killed" system.

## **RESOURCES MOBILIZATION AND RELATIVE DEPRIVATION IN ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENT**

Resources mobilization theory asserts that the main reason for environmental activities and movements are one or other forms of the resources attainments and its mobilization for the accomplishments of certain goals. This theory<sup>4</sup> says that in all environmental protection movement the human-resources based struggle are mobilized against the degradation and its depletion. The relative deprivation theory says that the inherent deprivation of some particular sections or the separation of some sections from the mainstream society are the main reason for the existing crisis in the interaction

between human beings and environment. The environmental problem and issues are collective, deliberate or spontaneous attempt of person or group of persons to resist or to promote change in any direction and to bring about anticipated changes in the society. Every environmental exploitative action has been influencing the natural balance or the perpetual source of equilibrium in the society. It may have economical, social or political intervention, but the ultimate goal of any environmental movement is to maintain the balance of natural equilibrium and also the protection of life.

The environmental movement is an international movement, represented by a range of organizations and stakeholders, from the top to grass-root levels, and varies from one country to another. Due to its large membership, varied, but strong beliefs, and speculative nature, the environmental movement is not always united in its goals. At its broadest, the movement includes private citizens, professionals, religious devotees, politicians, scientists, non-profit organizations and individual advocates. Environmental and ecological movements are the best examples of the collective action of several social groups and the protection and recognition of constitutional and democratic rights. These movements are primarily focused towards the upliftment of the most disadvantaged sections of the society like tribes and ecologically alienated people to mobilize their natural resources for livelihood and to attain the process of equitable distribution of resources. These movements are also an agitation for the right of indigenous people to preserve their culture. Protection of environment and maintenance of ecological balance, too, are significant concerns of these movements, as they affect the human life to a great extent. Economic justice sought by these movements does not mean mere distribution of resources but encompasses a larger vision like enhancement of the quality of life through recognition of people's right over their natural resources, their right to live with dignity, and their participation in the decision and development of the state. These movements focus not only on basic survival issues but also on larger ecological concerns.<sup>5</sup> These are different from earlier social movements and there is a need to understand them in terms of their nature and strategies. It may be mentioned here that scholars have tried to understand and analyze these movements in diverse ways. In general these movements are grouped under tribal and peasant movements, as well as under New Social movements.

## **ECO-MARXISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

Eco-Marxism can be defined as the interpretation of ecological parameters with economic basis of the society. This modern concept assess that the present problems and crises in environment are primarily due to the overexploitation of natural resources for human development. Ecology is one of the pivotal factors of economic development, and by the usage or over usage of the natural ecosystem, Capitalism and corresponding developments in the society led to the optimum utilization of resources for maximizing capital with the help of minimum resources. The nature and its supporting components become the resources for capitalism. Such a utilitarian usage of nature resulted in the over exploitation of

the motherland. According to Marx, this led to mankind being increasingly isolated from the lands that they had known so well, and this also was a contributing factor to a lesser understanding of the earth, its natural systems, and what is required to sustain them. Marx believed that, above all else, labour is what set human beings apart from the rest of the animal kingdom, and defined us as a species. Labour is the unique identification of human beings from the rest of the species. With the creation of tools and machines, it became possible for the ruling class to live off the labour of others, "but in the process, the producers lost control of their labour, and of the products they produced". In all cases, "it meant the complete alienation of humans from nature". The ruling class was technologically competent to control the will and wishes of the ruled. They tried to impose intellectual as well as material domination over the disadvantaged sections of the society. The alienation of the working class and peasants by the bourgeoisie can be described as the essential element of private property that had existed in feudal landed property, and this was the root of private property and the possession of private land for agriculture. In such a circumstance the concept of public property emerged in the world. In feudal landownership, we already find the domination of the earth as an alien power over man. Already the land appears as the inorganic body of its lord, who is its master and who uses it to dominate the peasantry. But it is bourgeois society which brings this domination of the earth (and through the domination of the earth, domination of humanity) to perfection.

Such class of people was remarkable for the differentiation of power and the domination in social, economic and political scenario of the society, Furthermore, in the first volume of the *Capital*,<sup>6</sup> Marx identifies the loss of soil fertility as being directly related to the capitalist system. All progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long lasting sources of that fertility. Capitalist production therefore only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker. "The isolation/alienation of humans from the rest of nature is one of the primary causes of the earth's environmental woes, leading to increased exploitation and abuse of the land."<sup>7</sup> Eco-Marxists assert that in modern society the internal and external balances of the nature is disturbed by the involvement of utilitarianism and profit motives of human beings. Or, all the crises of the modern society has deep relationships with the one or the other forms of capitalism and profit motives, the capitalist are using their power for their personal purposes and development. For eco-Marxists, there is also the failure to recognize the earth as an environment which can be seriously and irreparably harmed by human actions. This is one of the primary criticisms of modern agricultural methods.

According to many eco-Marxists another fundamental flaw of the capitalist system is the process of "under-production", which means that capitalists treat nature as if it were a free commodity. There is a tendency inherent to capitalism to "undervalue, and thus, under-produce the conditions of

production".<sup>8</sup> Or the separation of people from the process of production and also signifies that capitalist is constantly separating people from tier natural habitats and ecosystem. Jean Baudrillard pointed out that capitalism is separating people from the harsh realities of the life and converting the natural conditions of the people into synthetic or artificial ecosystems.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, according to some economists, "under a capitalist system men change their own nature as they progressively deprive nature of its externality, as they mediate nature through themselves, and as they make Nature itself work for them and their own purposes". Basically, this means that the capitalist system does not take into account the true costs of environmental degradation, resource depletion etc. into the costs associated with the product, and views nature as a commodity that is here for humans to exploit. This can lead to many environmental catastrophes, such as clear-cutting the rainforest, and the over-exploitation of the ocean's marine life.

Eco-Marxism is an anthropocentric view which sharply criticizes Western Capitalism; eco-Marxists claim that a capitalist system negatively influences the relation of humans and nature, and that "democratic and capitalist economies are mutually exclusive from the protection of nature". In the mind of Marx, the only way to solve the problem of environmental degradation, and the dreadful conditions of the worker, was through liberation from the capitalist system. Marx's notion of human emancipation was linked to his vision of overcoming humanity's isolation from nature through the development of a socialist society: "For humanity to progress beyond alienation, it is necessary 'to govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, a goal only obtainable with the elimination of capitalism'.<sup>10</sup> Eco-Marxists expounded that the western capitalism is completely depending nature and natural resources for the optimization of their capital and popularizing the view that they are the true proponents if the envoi mental protection and safeguards. The neo-Marxist Althusser said that the conditions alienation defined by the Karl Marx has been redefined today because the capitalists are making new policies and agendas to impose the principles of capitalism on the masses; they are creating the conditions of alienation by making a technocratic consciousness that human beings are equal in all spheres of social life. In the modern capitalism, it is blocking the cognitive capacity of human beings and their natural ability of cognitive power and inducing artificial intelligence and thinking power.<sup>11</sup>

## MODERN TRENDS IN ENVIRONMENTAL-SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Core notions of environmental sociology came in the late 1970s and early 1980s and were strongly influenced by trends in environmental mobilization and ecological movements. The first major influence was the explosion of attention to global warming and global environmental change from 1988 onward. Dunlap and Catton (1994) have demonstrated that public attention to global change facilitated growth in environmental sociology. Another dissemination of scientific information about global change served to shore up the confidence and resolve of many environmental sociologists that their theories can and should give priority to the material-ecological



substratum of social structure and social life.<sup>12</sup>

Cultural, structural and materialistic interpretation of environmental sociology emerged recently in the world. Marxism and socialism have contributed to the decreased persuasiveness of some of the more materialist components of sociology such as neo-Marxism and political economy. At the same time, the contribution generated by cultural studies, constructivism, feminism, postmodernism, semiotics, and so on in academia at large has spilled over into sociology. This has led to rapid growth of cultural sociology, growing influence of micro sociological perspectives, and a reduced stature of structural theories.

Notable sociologists such as Giddens (1994) and Beck (1992, 1995) are increasingly placing very strong emphasis on environmental postures and beliefs, and cultural-environmental sociologists have made major inroads into environmental sociology in recent years. Dickens (1992), Greider and Gafkovich (1994), McNaughten and Urry (1995), Brule (1995), and Yearley (1991) are examples of the "cultural invasion" of environmental sociology during the early 1990s. Environmental sociology is now frequently undertaken through discourses in which notions such as modernity, post modernity, risk society, and ecological modernization figure prominently (e.g., Mol and Spaargaren 1993; Spaargaren and Mol 1992). Equally significant has been the drift of sociologists of science, and their notions of the social construction of scientific knowledge, into the environmental sociology arena as interest has grown in researching the environmental sciences and the connections of environmental knowledge production to environmental politics and the environmental movement (Taylor and Buttel 1992; Wynne 1994; Yearley 1991).<sup>13</sup> They argued that environmental crises and problems are associated with the creation of a risk society. Ecological modernization, characterized by mechanization and modern technology, resulted in new researches and understandings in the area of environmental sociology. In modern era the new epistemological quest resulted in new areas of studies to identify the interrelationships between society and environment. It is very evident that recent postulates of environmental sociology have essentially defined the core of environmental sociology in the form of neo-materialism, structuralism, and realism in the background of environment and human interaction. Dunlap and Catton (1994) and Murphy (1994), explained the cultural-constructivist invasion of environmental in the industries nation Each has argued that cultural-environmental sociology is essentially incompatible with a sociology that is able to recognize the material and biophysical substructure of nation-states and global society.

For these reasons environmental sociology over the past half decade or so has become more specialized and, to some degree, Balkanized. Also, because some of the most influential theories are essentially metatheories, and do not readily lend themselves to test and falsification; there has been some trend to embracing more middle range theories (e.g., Freudenburg and Gramling 1994a, 1994b). Other scholars, particularly those whose interests lie in resource extraction processes such as agriculture, mining, and timber, have found themselves more at home with theoretical views that come without presuppositions as to the singularity of environmental quality

and degradation (see e.g., Bunker 1992; Freudenburg et al. 1995).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, environmental sociology in the 1990s has a dual character. On one hand, it remains strongly influenced by several strands of realist-materialist scholarship (many of which have some direct or indirect roots in rural sociology) that place major emphasis on revealing the material-ecological substructures of modern societies. At the same time, environmental sociology is now a less consensual and more contested area of scholarship than it was a decade ago. In large part this has been due to the cultural turn of environmental sociology and the challenge that cultural-environmental sociology has presented to the materialist core of the sub-discipline.

Environmental sociology faces a major challenge owing to strife over the roles that social constructionist and cultural sociology and other fields. I would argue that over the long term the current period will prove to have been a creative and productive one. In my view, the field is now characterized by several major dualisms and debates, a number of which will be briefly discussed below. In each case, however, there are promising avenues for synthesis that can be seized and exploited. The intense debates that now crop up in the literature and, more commonly, take place in annual meeting hallways and classrooms are providing the raw material for advances in the field.

## CONCLUSION

Environmental sociology as a systematic interpretation of environmental principles has made remarkable contributions in the study of environments and human interactions. As a fast growing branch of sociology it has gained the attention of national and international and nation environmentalists, academicians and scholars. As a discourses and discipline it systematically explain the causes or factor that influences the ecological balance of the society. There are different theoretical formulations explaining the interrelationships between human beings and nature. The traditional perspective like the biological determinism explains that society and organism have a number of similar characteristics and in both, the developmental patterns are from simple to complex, ranging from homogeneity to heterogeneity or instability to stability. The Social Darwinism cites that the existence of society is for the maintenance of societal equilibrium by loose and gain process. Existential dualism as a branch of sociology explains that society and environments are two sides of the same coin. The views, that Marxism is intrinsically "exemptionalist" and uneconomical are among the major focal points of debate. These debates, as currently undertaken in which there is less focus on the specific issues at stake than on the ostensible superiority or inferiority of one or another theoretical systems or "paradigms", are not likely to be fruitful. Typically, there is little to choose between the core arguments of each. Eco-Marxism, as the central concern of this paper, highlights that the inherent social division in the society on the basis of the possession of wealth and material are the fundamental reason of environmental crisis and issues. Overexploitation of the nature and material resources for economic and

developmental purposes resulted in the alienation of people from the harsh realities of life. For Marx, the only solution to the problem of environmental crises is the liberation of capitalism and formation of a classless, egalitarian society.

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