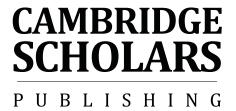# Society in Focus—
Change, Challenge and Resistance

Society in Focus—
Change, Challenge and Resistance:
Reflections from South Africa and Beyond

Edited by

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Chapter One

An Overview of Society in Focus

Lindy Heinecken and Heidi Prozesky

Introduction

This book is based on a selection of papers delivered at the South African Sociological Association's 2008 Congress, hosted by Stellenbosch University according to the theme *Society, Power and the Environment: Challenges for the 21st Century*. In terms of number of delegates, this was the largest annual congress in the recent history of the organisation. The large number of papers presented in general and on the sociological study of environmental issues in particular, together with strong plenary presentations linked to the environmental theme, created the opportunity to produce this collection of eighteen of the papers delivered at the conference. Revised papers were solicited from all delegates. After an initial screening and review process, the manuscripts underwent a stringent process of independent peer review. In response to referees' comments, the manuscripts were again revised and edited for inclusion in the book. We believe this collection showcases current South African and African sociological research on a variety of contemporary topics, as undertaken by both established and budding social scientists.

The first section of the book focuses on the theme of the congress, which is a topic of growing concern and importance for sociologists, namely the link between *society, power and the environment* and how competing interests—whether these be corporate, legal, socio-ecological or the natural environment—relate to each other. The second theme addresses some perpetual concerns plaguing developing and even developed societies, namely issues of *development, democracy and service delivery*. In this regard, development failures in Africa, discourse around basic needs such as housing, government's responsibility to meet citizens' needs and participation in decision-making are central foci. From these broader themes, the emphasis shifts to *workplace resistance and employee*

well-being. The chapters in this section indicate that despite changes in employment legislation aimed at improving working conditions, work relations remain tenuous in agriculture, manufacturing, mining and the service sector. The fourth and last theme, *race, gender and power* considers the interplay among race, class, gender and power within the context of specific themes—HIV/AIDS education, historical identity of a South African higher education institution, and Chinese immigrants in post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter profile

In the following section, we provide a cryptic overview of the various chapters, which have been grouped according to the different themes mentioned above. Commencing the first part of the book are two chapters, primarily theoretical in nature that consider the potential contributions of sociology in analyses of the link between society, power and the environment. The first of these, authored by *Kira Erwin*, addresses the limited success of the field of environmental sociology in broadening the scope of sociology to include nature and the environment as specifically sociological concerns. By examining the historical formation of environmental sociology as a sub-field, as well as some of the theoretical and epistemological debates within environmental sociology, her paper offers an explanation of why the appropriation of environmental issues as valid and necessary variables for sociological analysis has not been a smooth or easy process. She then proceeds by argueing that, in order to productively expand the ontological scope of sociology as a discipline, environmental sociologists should work towards providing an overall conceptual theme or framework in which there is flexibility to use a variety of epistemological perspectives. In particular, her chapter advocates a reworking of Marx's concept of Metabolics as such a conceptual theme. Here Metabolics is freed from its original economic definition to focus on the interdependence of nature and society. Drawing strategic insights from shifts within feminist theory, she argues for a move towards organising research around this conceptual theme, rather than within a restrictive organisational category, such as environmental sociology. Doing so enriches and broadens the scope of sociological analysis on the various dialectical relationships between humans and the environment and offers exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration and research.

The next theoretical piece, authored by *Ralph Hamann*, focuses on the potential role of sociology in debates on corporate responsibility and the role of business in sustainable development. It sets out by highlighting two streams of sociological contributions. The first has its roots in Max Weber's work and is manifested in organisational sociology, in particular in "new institutionalism". The second is focused more on a radical approach, often with roots in Marxist writings, criticising the role of business and the corporate responsibility discourse with a particular emphasis on the role of power. Hamann suggests that there are methodological and ethical problems related to linking power and putative interests—which is a common approach in the critical study of corporate responsibility—and that more nuanced conceptions of power need to be explored, some of which may create important linkages between institutional and critical sociological analyses. The chapter then draws on key elements of the Frankfurt school, in particular immanent critique and communicative action to suggest areas of sociological inquiry that are critical of corporate domination, but wary of dogmatism. The conclusion warns against reifying the role of the private sector or of affected communities and it emphasises the need for methodological rigour in substantiating truth claims.

Taking these issues of corporate social responsibility and affected communities further empirically, the next chapter by *Jacklyn Cock* argues that the crisis in nature, whereby we have reached the limits of nature as a source of raw materials and a sink for our waste products, is linked to the crisis of justice which is expressed in deepening poverty and inequality around the world. Both are related to the growing power of multinational corporations, which is not restrained by unaccountable state power. Her argument is grounded in a case study of the pollution of the air and groundwater of a South African community by the largest steel producer in the world, Arcelor Mittal.

State power, and especially its link to the natural environment and society, is the main theme of the fourth chapter in this first part of the book. It provides a sociological reading, rather than the more common legal or political interpretation, of the 2008 Kenyan post-election violence. Through a review of relevant literature, *Willice Abuya* argues that specific socio-political and ecological dynamics embedded in Kenya's colonial past, the character of governance in much of the country's post-colonial history, as well as indigenous notions of, and attachment to land, contain important analytical ingredients for making sense of the 2008 election-related violence. The author applies the construct of social capital in his analysis of the violence, by maintaining that against the backdrop of the

land-related claims, the breakdown of law and order in 2008 was due to the failure of successive Kenyan governments to inculcate better relations with and among its citizens.

The next chapter sets out to critically examine the ecotourism sector within the context of a free market or capitalist economy. It reports on a study focused on two World Heritage sites in KwaZulu-Natal—uKhahlamba Drakensberg Park and the iSimangaliso Wetlands Park—and on a range of stakeholders, such as the communities residing alongside these World Heritage Sites, ecotourists, the accommodation sector, the ecotour operator sector, non-governmental organisations and government. On the basis of their research, the authors *Noel Chellan* and *Urmilla Bob* argue that impacts and challenges experienced in the ecotourism sector must be understood within the context of the wider political and economic structures that govern natural landscapes. Such an approach implies the unpacking of factors that may be influencing the growing demand for natural landscapes and its subsequent negative effect on the livelihoods of local communities and the natural environment. Their survey identifies a schism between the intended and actualised benefits of ecotourism and hence highlights the contradiction between ecotourism principles and ecotourism practices in a capitalist society.

The concern with ecotourism continues in *Jenni Kauppila*'s case study of an elephant hunting dispute. Her research focuses on the issue of co-management of the Makuleke Region of the Kruger National Park, which is often presented as an example of a successful case of nature conservation benefiting the community. As there is a need to find ways to alleviate the legitimacy problems that many conservation areas face in the global South, it is very appealing to try to replicate the "model" of such successful cases. However, *Kauppila* illustrates that the key factor contributing to success in the Makuleke case was community empowerment, which was rooted in various deliberative learning processes, including a dispute over elephant hunting. The study also shows the complexity of community conservation: there are no easy solutions, nor can decisions on nature conservation rely solely on the natural sciences. The chapter points out that national and international political support and long-term assistance is needed for community conservation to succeed. Moreover, it is of utmost importance to understand the political nature of nature conservation, in order to develop workable and lasting solutions.

In the second part of the book, with its focus on development, democracy and service delivery, the first chapter by *Lanre Olutayo* addresses the importance of rural communities as central to development

in Africa. Olutayo argues strongly that development models, past and present, continue to favour an urban bias, which may be counterproductive. The assumption is that progress is measured by rural-urban migration and wage labour as a means to alleviate poverty. This supposition, heargues, obviates even the historical experience of European countries where this model originates. This explains why so many developing countries continue to experience development setbacks. Starting with a brief background of the European experience, he highlights the importance of linkages between rural and urban areas within any economy. He then locates the "under"-development process of Africa in this disjuncture, by showing how changes in skills and educational requirements abroad persistently shift the "goal posts" for development in Africa, particularly in rural areas. He concludes by stating that there is a need to realize the enormity of resource potential—human and material—in rural areas around which urban development should be built and be utilised. Such localised development may help societies cope better in the globalized work of today.

From the broad philosophical development challenges of Africa, the book now shifts to one of the most demanding service delivery challenges facing developing nations, that of housing. Here *Anita Venter* in her chapter on housing policy discourse focuses on some of the theoretical and methodological considerations that underpin debates on this topic internationally. The first section examines the various theories and theoretical debates on housing in general. The place of historical analysis and its relevance for policy research is then elaborated upon, before explaining the different welfare state theories used in housing policy debates. The main argument advanced in this study is that theoretical discussions on housing policy in the South African context, in particular, are disappointing when compared to international discourse. Accordingly, she concludes that the incorporation of international theoretical and methodological frameworks can be a useful tool to enrich and encourage scholarship and policy initiatives in countries such as South Africa.

Many countries, including South Africa, proclaim their support for human rights, but few manage to turn rights into social and economic resources. For this to occur, *Monty Roodt* argues, a number of basic requirements need to be met. The first of these is an adequate legislative framework. Formal institutions tasked with the enforcement and delivery of rights often maintain the status quo. Beyond this, is the limitation imposed by the lack of capacity of certain institutions that advise, deliver and support those attempting to gain access to their rights. Another requirement for the effective delivery of socio-economic rights is an

efficient state administration at national, regional and local level. Roodt argues that this is the weakest link in the Second and Third generation rights delivery chain in South Africa. In situations where state administrations act in an arbitrary manner, are inefficient and corrupt, and deficient in terms of leadership, experience and management, the ability to transform rights into delivery is improbable. As a result, many civil society institutions are now challenging the government through a variety of strategies. These range from attempts at collaboration, strikes, protest marches, court action and open acts of defiance.

Picking up on some of the issues raised by Roodt, *Sultan Khan* and *Jayanathan Govender* point out that central to democracy is the right of citizens to be heard at local government level. Here people have the ability to influence decisions on issues such as the local budget, planning and development processes and service delivery matters. The authors argue that the legislative framework and the principles of participation in local government appear to be well designed to regulate and promote the democratic praxis. However, they posit that participation is not that easily achieved, due to two main problems. The first relates to disproportionate policy provision, which ultimately limits consultation. The second pertains to the lack of understanding of the link between between civil society and citizens in the policy framework, which is necessary for structuring governance relationships. The authors take the view that direct politics opens a combination of challenges and complexity in the interface between civil society and local government. In so doing, it explores new spaces for participation where the structure of governance relationships can promote more effective participation.

From issues of development and service delivery, the book then shifts to the theme of workplace resistance and employee well-being. The section beginswith the study of *Gilton Klerck* and *Lalitha Naidoo* on the effect the enforcement of minimum wage rates have on prevailing employment and work relations in different agricultural sectors. Following a brief overview of the literature on minimum wages and the provisions of sectoral determination, the authors debate the impact that statutory minimum wages have on labour relations and wage levels. The research highlights the need to explore the significance informal labour relations in the agricultural sector have for minimum wages, and the implications regulatory change has for the different categories of farm workers. The argument is advanced that unless policies expand collective bargaining, strengthen unions and eliminate discrimination, the enforcement of a minimum wage will do little to alleviate poverty in rural farming communities. The conclusion is reached that if sectoral determination is to

succeed in addressing the vulnerability of farm workers and improving their living conditions, it needs to be linked to a broader agrarian transformation policy.

From agriculture, the focus then shifts to the manufacturing sector. *Sithembigo Bhengu* investigates how working class consciousness is mobilised and plays out in the everyday lives and experiences of African workers at the Dunlop Tyre factory in Durban. He begins by examining the politics of production and worker struggles with specific reference to the work of Burawoy. On this basis, he makes three assertions. Firstly, that the factory regime at Dunlop precipitates adversarial production politics and militant worker consciousness on the shopfloor. These are related to the past racial order, history of militant trade unionism and a masculine hegemony, which is endemic in work relations in this factory. Secondly, he argues that the workers wield a considerable amount of power through collective action and trade unions, which are still viewed as the *bona fide* voice of workers in post-apartheid South Africa. This is reinforced through the narratives of workers and the seemingly unchanging workplace dynamics at Dunlop. Despite the fact that trade unions are still seen as the ultimate vehicle to bring about change, Bhengu argues that, similar to many other trade unions, NUMSA is increasingly characterised by internal and systemic contradictions, as well as contestations of power. This, he claims, is symptomatic of the broader political dynamics of post-apartheid South Africa, where leadership is no longer seen to represent the interests of the working class.

Whereas previously worker struggles and resistance were mostly associated with blue-collar work, the following two studies on the service sector show just how tenuous white-collar work has become. In the first of the two chapters, on workers employed in call centres, *Margareet Visser* examines the quality of working life of these service workers in the insurance sector, mobile and broadband services, banking and IT support. Using the theoretical framework of Bell and Castells, Visser demonstrates that call centre employees are a vulnerable group who are not only subject to the scrutiny of employers through surveillance, but also of customers. This causes employees to feel vulnerable and void of job security, which is exacerbated by the high level of causualisation and low level of unionisation in this sector. Permanent employees are weary of joining trade unions for fear of jeopardising their already tenuous job security. The conclusion is reached that employment in this sector falls far short of what can be considered decent work, as associated with standard employment.

The study by *Bablawa Mogoqwana* on the nature of work and well-being of call centre employees in the public service concur with the above findings. Influenced by New Public Management, the South African government introduced *Batho Pele* (People First), which changed the identity of the citizen into a "customer". Accompanying these reforms, local government introduced neo-Taylorist customer-centred workplace call centres to deal with customer queries on account balances, electrical disconnections and other related services. The author makes a strong case that service delivery by public servants is hampered by "stressors" in their work environment, such as surveillance, the stress of dealing with difficult (often racist customers), the lack of training of operators, and internal conflicts within the call centres themselves. The author argues that if good service is to be provided to customers, then the difficulties workers face within their work environment must be addressed. Failure to do so will undermine the new public ideology of customer care, as advanced by *Batho Pele*.

In the final chapter in the workplace resistance and well-being section of this book, *Freek Cronje* and *Johan van Wyk* examine the neglect of mental health concerns in the South African mining sector and ask the question whether there is a "corporate social responsibility" to address this. They argue that for decades mining activities have affected the health and safety of mining communities as a whole. While considerable attention has been paid to reducing health and safety risks for workers on the mines, little attention has been paid to the mental health issues and long-term harm inflicted by the mining industry on these communities. By means of both quantitative and qualitative data, the authors determine the current state of mental health in certain mining communities in the North West and Limpopo provinces. They assess whether mental health care is part of South African mining companies' corporate responsible strategies. The results show that there is a vast difference in terms of how management and community/civil society view the state of mental health within these mining communities. The supposition is that mental health care is an integral part of mining companies' "corporate social responsibility".

The final section of the book comprises three chapters that each consider from a vantage point of its specific theme, the interplay between race, class, gender and power. *Rob Pattman* explores how young men in Zimbabwe and South Africa present themselves and construct as well as "perform" gender and sexuality in different social sites and contexts, including a braai they attended, interviews in which they participated and diaries which they were asked to keep. Rather than taking interviews and

diaries as research tools or instruments, Pattman addresses these as particular social events and occasions, such as the braai, in which (gendered and sexual) identities are negotiated and relations forged. The methods then become the focus of his research, as Pattman examines the (power) dynamics of the research encounters or events, the interactions between the participants (researched and researchers) and how they represent the encounters and themselves to each other. Of particular interest are the different and sometimes contradictory ways in which the same young men present themselves and construct gender and sexuality in these different contexts. Taken in conjunction with each other, these presentations provide rich insights relating to the young mens' lives and identities. Drawing on this data, Pattman identifies key concerns, which need to inform appropriate ways for engaging with young men (as well as young women) in the context of HIV/AIDS.

In the second chapter of the last section, *Safiyya Goga* aims to develop an understanding of a parallel existence of opposing views of Rhodes history (those of "Old Rhodians" and Rhodian academics from the "critical tradition") and the relationship between these. She highlights the fact that these opposing histories have not created or produced equal and consequently asks: What enables the production of some historical representations as more legitimate and authentic than others? Who has the authoritative power to construct a particular history as the authentic history of Rhodes, and what enables this defining power? How is the emergence of a defining history significant—what does it work to produce? In her investigation of the broader question of how inheritance of the past is produced, she considers some illustrations that present Rhodes University as symbolic of the "racial" order within which it was born and flourished. In particular, she tells the "story of NUSAS" in Rhodes history, a story of the silencing of the student group, in order to reveal how the Rhodes historical identity is constructed as unified and whole and unburdened by a "race"-ridden past.

The book concludes with *Yoon Park* and *Anna Chen's* investigation of the intersections of race, class and power, as illustrated by Chinese in post-apartheid Free State. Starting with a brief summary of Chinese migration to South Africa, the chapter describes some of the Chinese migrants who have settled in small towns around the Free State province since the new millennium. The authors distinguish between sojourners—the newcomers from Fujian province who have arrived in the past 3-5 years with little social capital—and the settlers—those who have been in South Africa for longer periods, who have higher levels of education and greater linkages with social networks in China and Taiwan. They conclude that these new

Chinese migrants, like third- and fourth-generation Chinese South Africans, are positioned between black and white; however, China's growing economic and political influence has a significant impact on how these Chinese migrants are received in South Africa.

To sum up, the value of this accumulation of essays lies in the insights they provide, not only in empirical terms, but theoretically and methodologically as well. Although the focus is directed predominantly on Africa and on South Africa in particular, the issues raised are of great comparative value. The chapters broaden the potential scope of sociological analysis, by enriching the study of the environment, development, democracy, service delivery, workplace resistance, employee well-being, race and gender from a uniquely sociological perspective. True to its sociological nature, the collection of work presented here maintains a critical stance towards reification of roles, highlights contradictions between principles and practices in society and underscores the complexity of societal issues, such as sustainable development, community conservation, environmental justice, ecotourism, racialized histories HIV/AIDS, and migration.

PART I

SOCIETY, POWER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

CHAPTER TWO

METABOLICS:
MOVING TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL THEME IN ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

KIRA ERWIN

Introduction

Whilst initially forming in opposition to mainstream sociology, the epistemological definition and scope of environmental sociology parallels the theoretical development of sociology as a broader discipline. The sub-field is relatively new, gaining recognition in the 1970s. Appropriating environmental issues as valid and necessary variables for sociological analysis has not been a smooth or easy process: it has come up against the discipline's traditional focus on human society and activity and the resulting exclusion of nature and the environment as specifically *sociological* concerns. This essay offers a brief outline of this intellectual history in the Western context and of its ramifications for the formation of environmental sociology; it also discusses some of the contemporary debates that have attempted to expand the scope of sociology to include an analysis of society's biophysical environment. While there has certainly been an increased interest in the environment by contemporary sociologists, nevertheless, after 30 years as a sub-field, its impact in terms of broadening the scope of mainstream sociology towards an ecological perspective has been marginal (Foster, 1999:369). Compared to the drive towards a refocusing of sociology in terms of gender and "race", also pushed for during the 1970s, this lack of success requires an explanation.

This essay suggests that, whilst obviously vital to creating a rich theoretical base, an emphasis on ontological and epistemological questions within environmental sociology has hindered its integration into the main body of sociology. In order to rectify this, sociologists working in the field need to be more proactive in building an overall conceptual theme in

which a multitude of theoretical and epistemological stances can fit. This essay proposes the conceptual theme of Metabolics as providing such a framework. Its adoption, it is argued, would allow for an increased dialectical perspective of society and nature as well as encouraging cross-discipline collaboration. This may prove to be a more successful strategy for broadening the scope of what is currently perceived as the domain of the social, as well as opening up a number of exciting prospects for moving beyond the restrictive borders of contemporary sociology as a whole.

Why is it important to address this issue now? *Carpe diem*

Re-examining the role of environmental sociology and its impact on mainstream sociology is particularly relevant at this point in history. The present social, political and natural climate presents an opportune moment to move environmental sociology into the core of the discipline.

In addition to a growing global awareness of climate change (Lever-Tracey, 2008:445), spates of natural disasters, which have received extensive media coverage, have brought the interdependence of nature and society into rather tragic focus. In addition, recognition, whether scientifically proven or not, that these disasters may be closely linked with human activity brings the feedback system of nature and society into the public eye. Natural phenomena such as the Tsunamis in Asia in late 2004, Hurricane Katrina and the Earthquakes in Pakistan in 2005, and the devastating earthquake in Sichuan China in 2008 also draw attention to global and local power relations in society. In Katrina, the poorer African American population bore the brunt of the hurricanes destruction due to unequal socio-economic structures (Atkins and Moy, 2005). The Tsunami death toll may well have been avoided if the Asian countries worst effected had the funds to install costly warning technology, such as that used in America and Japan. These disasters highlight how social inequalities are causal variables in people's interactions with their biophysical environment. At a point when such disasters are still fresh in the global consciousness, it is imperative that sociologists start to focus on how social relations not only interact with their natural surroundings, but also make use of them as a means to maintain power hierarchies in society.

More specifically, in the field of sociology itself a reflexive debate around the role of sociologists in society has been reopened, yet this debate appears to say little on environmental issues or the role of environmental sociology. For example, in his 2004 Presidential Address on Public Sociology at the American Sociology Association (ASA),

Michael Burawoy makes special mention of how the civil rights and feminist movements transformed the scope of study and "gave new direction to so many spheres of sociology" (2005:275). In his speech on the importance of sociologists in engaging with multiple publics and being more proactive in defending civil society he does not once mention the role of environmental sociology or environmental social movements. This is at the same time surprising and not at all. It is surprising since, like the feminist and civil rights movements, environmental movements are also part of a strong public push to enact change in societies. Similarly, environmental sociologists tend to lean towards critical analysis in the hope of providing motives for recognition of environmental issues and moving towards a more just relationship with our surroundings (Buttel, 2002:47). Yet, even with these obvious crossovers and the role of environmental sociologists in engaging with public movements, Burawoy—typically—fails to mention the field. This silence reflects the broader practices of marginalisation of environmental issues in mainstream sociology (Lever-Tracey, 2008:451).

A historical blind spot

The question as to why the environment, and here I mean either a concern with how society impacts on nature and/or how nature in turn impacts on society, historically lacks a strong presence within sociology is an important one. It is a question that pierces the heart of what constitutes the scope of study within the discipline. The reason for this under-representation is in part due to the historical construction of sociology as an academic field (Murdoch, 2001:113; Dunlap, 2002:18).

The relationship between sociology and the natural sciences is fraught with tensions. On the one hand, the positivist methodologies and empiricism of the natural sciences was an attractive ideology for early sociology as it brought with it rigorous structure and the legitimacy of being considered a science. On the other hand, it needed to distinguish itself from the natural sciences by outlining a unique area of study. Sociology really came into being by defining what it was not. Since the physical environment was the subject matter for the natural sciences, sociology would provide an analysis of society or the social. Weber, considered one of the classical theorists of sociology, continued to argue for this distinction in 1910 (Irwin, 2001:6). However, environmental sociologists often cite the legacy of Durkheim as a deciding factor in the exclusion of environmental factors (Buttel, Dickens, Dunlap and Gijswijt, 2002:10). Durkheim's belief that social facts could only be explained

through other social facts placed not only the tools for understanding, but also the topic of research itself, firmly in the realm of humanity. Sociologists who continued to link social phenomena to biophysical explanations were strongly criticised for being biological reductionisms (Dunlap, 2002:17).

Nevertheless, biophysical explanations of social practices continued into the 1900s and were fed into scientific (mis)claims, reaching a pinnacle in the theories of Social Darwinism. These theories were used to legitimate social inequalities, and very often atrocities, against women and other non-western cultures; building a scientific body of work that "validated" both racism and sexism. At the end of the Second World War, appalled by the atrocities of the Nazi regime, the scientific community vigorously started to dismantle the notion of "race" as a biological fact (Stepan, 2003:334). Likewise, feminist scholars fought hard to debunk the biological determinism that existed in thinking about women, and men, in society (Irwin, 2001:9). Certainly in Britain, the reaction against Social Darwinism was a driving factor in the creation of sociology as a separate discipline (Oakley, 1998:720). The continued knee-jerk reaction of many social scientists to any form of biophysical explanation is an understandable response to how problematic certain theoretical linking of the social and the natural can become—something contemporary sociologists should be vigilant about.

However, the process of narrowing the scope of sociology was more complex than this. Not only did young sociology define itself in relation to the natural sciences, in doing so fighting hard to claim scientific status, but a competitive academic environment within the social sciences also served to shape what constituted the social. Different schools of thought, such as psychology and economics, were jostling for epistemological recognition (Foster, 1999:368; Murdoch, 2001:113). The physical environment featured as a subject matter in economics, where nature was classed as a resource to be mined[1]. It also entered into the field of psychology, where the internal make-up of the body was still considered a causal variable for psychological explanation. This process of competitive differentiation served to re-enforce human society alone as the subject matter for sociological analysis.

The wedge between the social and the natural sciences is also a reflection of wider Western cultural dichotomies. The notion of thinking about society as an entity separate from nature is one that has a long history in Western thought. The process of disentangling society from

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[1] Although it is important to note that contemporary areas of economics such as Environmental Economics do expand this thinking.

nature was written into scientific and economic discourses during the
Enlightenment and the Industrial revolution (Buttel, 2002:42; Dickens,
2004:2). The perceived ability of capitalist Western societies to master
rather than depend on nature was seen to distinguish it from other, less
"advanced" societies that were still subject to nature's will. As late as the
twentieth century, Goldenweiser (1916:629) stated in the *American
Journal of Sociology* the still common proposition of his time that,

> as we pass from primitive to more civilized conditions, the dependence of
> the material culture of a group on its physical environment becomes less
> and less conspicuous.

He concludes with a sentence that captures the ontological outlook of most
of sociology's history, that, in relation to the environment, "culture must
be regarded as a closed and to a large extent self-sustaining system".

These historical and cultural processes leave us with a discipline that
until 30 years ago paid little analytic attention to the nexus between
society and its biophysical environment; a legacy that has created rigid
boundaries delimiting what can and should be studied in the academic
discipline. Yet, as we have seen with political movements around gender,
sexuality and "race", these boundaries are in reality dynamic and can be
expanded (or contracted) to include a more holistic understanding of what
constitutes the social.

Environmental sociology, stoking the fires

What kinds of theories have been put forward to try and bring
environmental issues into the fold of sociological analysis? In many
respects, the theoretical debates within environmental sociology have been
driven by the theoretical shifts within the broader discipline. In the 1970s,
sociologists interested in environmental issues started to formulate the sub-
field of environmental sociology (Dunlap, 2002:11). It is no coincidence that
there was also a simultaneous shift in the cultural ideologies surrounding
the environment in Western societies during this era. Social movements
that focused on the environment and/or animal rights brought
environmental issues to the fore of public and political discourses (Dunlap
and Catton, 1979:249). In 1976, Dunlap and Catton gave a pioneering
presentation at the ASA, in which they pushed for the creation of a new
paradigm in sociology, a paradigm that expanded its focus beyond
humanity and extended it to include the natural environment (Dunlap and
Catton, 1979:250). They argued that all existing theoretical perspectives
were unified in their acceptance of a Human Exemptionalist Paradigm

(HEP), which served to exclude any non-human natural elements from social analysis. They advocated a shift to a New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) that included the interaction between the natural environment and human societies—in other words an ecocentric approach as opposed to an anthrocentric one. Whilst Dunlap and Catton's suggestion would appear to challenge mainstream sociology into expanding what constitutes the social, the impact of their argument has been somewhat ambiguous and, to some extent, has set the stage for the ontological and epistemological dichotomies (nature/society and realism/constructivism, respectively) that have dominated the debate within environmental sociology.

Besides advocating a new paradigm that challenged the existing anthrocentric view, Dunlap and Catton (1979) also called for recognition that environmental sociology was of a different ilk to that of the sociology of environmental issues. They argued that the sociology of environmental issues, which studied the formation and activities of new collective social movements, was an approach that centred only on human activity and meaning. Environmental sociology, on the other hand, was rooted in more empirical research that utilised external environmental factors as causal variables. This emphasis on the epistemological focus of realism (or materialism) in early environmental sociology had important consequences for the successes of incorporating an ecological perspective into mainstream sociology.

During the mid 1980s and 1990s mainstream sociology, particularly in America, was undergoing a "cultural turn" towards a more interpretative or constructivist epistemology of social analysis (Saldanha, 2003:420; Buttel *et al.,* 2002:22). This conflicted with the environmental sociology advocated in the 1970s, which had anchored itself in the foundation of realism. The epistemological distinction between realism and constructivism within the sociological discipline added fuel to Dunlap and Catton's early statement on what constituted "true environmental sociology". Although Dunlap's later work retracted this dualism to a certain extent (Dunlap, 2002), environmental sociology remains entangled in this epistemological debate and has struggled to present any kind of unified front. A detailed description of the multiple theoretical perspectives and detailed history contributing to this debate is not within the scope of this paper. However, a basic understanding of key theoretical positions is crucial in understanding why environmental sociology still finds itself in a fairly marginal position in contemporary sociology.

Marxist thought

One of the theoretical perspectives within the realist or materialist school of thought is Marxist environmental theory. In response to the dismissal of early environmental sociologists of the HEP inherent in classical sociology, there have been fairly comprehensive writings on how environmental issues were incorporated into the works of Durkheim[2], Weber[3] and Marx. Although never forming the core of any classical theoretical framework, it appears to be a case of selective reading of the classical works by contemporary sociologists, rather than a complete absence of environmental subject matter on the classical theorists' behalf.

The Marxist perspective is the most successful of these re-interpretations. This is due to a fairly weighted focus on agricultural reforms in Marx's earlier work, which directly addresses issues of environmental sustainability and the effect of capitalism on nature. Capitalism's progression necessitates the use of natural resources beyond the rate of natural renewal, making sustainability of productivity impossible in the long run. Contemporary environmental sociologists have labelled Marx's view that capitalism slowly destroys the very resources it requires to continue as the "second contradiction of capitalism", a contradiction that could lead to its demise (Buttel *et al.,* 2002:8). Authors such as Dickens have brought a more contemporary interpretation of Marx's work into the field, by recognising "the capacity of capitalism to restructure its way out of crisis" (2002:54). Indeed, as Dickens notes, capitalism and its ability to make use of new technologies is often seen as the panacea for the global environmental crisis, not its architect. For example, Environmental Modernization theorists suggest that environmental reforms within capitalism allow for the coexistence of increased technological progress (profits) and sustainability (Mol, 2002:93).

Whichever piece of Marx's writing is highlighted as theoretically applicable to modern ecological analysis, Marxist thought could be seen as providing two important contributions to this field. Firstly, Marxism is a critical theory concerned with social justice. Therefore, it implies that solutions or modes of change need to be incorporated into any analysis of the interaction between society and nature. Secondly, Marx offers Metabolism as a concept that perceives the interconnectivity between nature and society as a system of interaction, a concept that I will build upon later in this essay.

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[2] See Catton (2002) "Has the Durkheim Legacy Misled Sociology?"
[3] See Murphy (2002) "Ecological Materialism and the Sociology of Max Weber"

One criticism of environmental Marxism is that a materialist outlook of an external biophysical environment perpetuates the polarisation of society and nature, the very dichotomy that created distance between what constituted the social and the natural in the formation of the social sciences. And there are aspects of Marx's (1976:649) works, such as discussing what gives rise to industrialisation in "temperate zones", where he appears to concede to "the domination of man over nature". Whilst many Marxist environmental scholars believe this fails to take cognisance of the relational nature of Marxism (Gareau, 2005:130), its historical materialism does set it apart from a social constructivist approach.

Social constructivism

The "cultural turn" of sociology in the mid 1980s brought an increased interest in environmental issues, due to the politicisation of environmental movements and the growing awareness of both national and international environmental degradation and climate change (Buttel *et al.,* 2002:22). This analysis was predominantly aimed at exploring the claims made about nature by different parties, and how these beliefs and fears feed back into social activity (Murdoch, 2001:115); in other words, how ideologies of "nature" are socially constructed. For realists, who believed that any analysis of the environment needed to take into account actual environmental variables, the dominance of social constructivism in sociology was a concern since it appeared to refocus debates about nature as social phenomena, which simply provided a framework for human action (Murdoch, 2001:115). To use Dunlap's own words, constructivism

> seemed so intent on relativizing environmental claims that I feared its proponents would deflect out attention away from analysing societal-environmental relations (2002:16).

However, social constructivism has contributed valuable insights to the field of environmental sociology. It has highlighted the "ambiguity of conceptualising the environment" (Dunlap, 2002:15) and, perhaps more importantly, shown how discourses of the environment serve to maintain unequal power relations within and between nations (Yearley, 1996).

Of course it is misleading to pit these two perspectives against each other. In practice, the majority of research does not follow a "strong" social constructivist approach that dismisses the existence of an external physical environment (Burningham and Cooper, 1999); nor does all materialist analysis neglect the construction of meaning and the variants in interpretations of the environment. Increasingly, it is recognised that both

schools of thought offer valuable perspectives for understanding the feedback mechanisms within the system of interaction between nature and society.

Critical realism and Actor-Network Theory

The theoretical stances of critical realism and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) attempt to bridge this epistemological divide. Critical realism, whilst recognising how historical and cultural constructs shape discourses of the environment, also recognises the existence of a reality independent from the meaning humans attribute to it. To use Dickens words, in critical realism "knowledge is made less dogmatic, more open to criticism from non-scientists, more self-critical, more open to alternative research methods and, where necessary, critical of the process it is examining" (2004:20). It calls for increased collaboration between the social and natural sciences, so that the interactions between the casual powers of nature on the one hand and the social construction of discourses of nature on the other becomes the crux of research agendas (Irwin, 2001:19). This dialectic ontology, grounded in Marxism, is certainly a step forward, yet it could be argued that what critical realism lacks are sufficient tools for explaining the complexities of these interactions. ANT makes an attempt at providing such a theoretical model.

ANT, which originated from the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge, aims to show how objects themselves and the meaning attached to them are constructed through a network of interactions between human and non-human agents (Murdoch, 2001:113). Here the term construction is not limited to the realm of the social, but is a process of co-formation that occurs through the interconnectivity of both human and non-human objects (Saldanha, 2003:424). For example, global warming is co-constructed through a network of interactions of the earth's atmosphere, harmful gases such as CFC, technological measuring devices, human scientists, environmental activists and the media. ANT not only recognises external non-human objects as vital components in the social world, it also gives them agency. ANT moves towards breaking down the dualism of nature/society by recognising that, in Murdoch's view, "rather than being determinant of particular phenomena, these divisions emerge from heterogeneously constructed networks" (2001:120). However, ANT gives "symmetrical" agency to both humans and non-human objects. Prescribing equal "agency" to the biophysical environment seems to side-step the issues of environmental degradation and the unequal power relation between human-to-human and human-to-non-human interaction. To