

What reasons do
dunlap and catton
give for the neglect of
the physical
environmen...



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There is a problem with the way humans interact and view their environment. This problem causes mankind to neglect, abuse and manipulate their surroundings with little or no regard for the consequences. Obviously, this causes many ills to all inhabitants of the forgotten earth, including humankind themselves. The latter is invariably recognized today by the public and through out academia, however as Dunlap and Catton highlight this was not the always the case and it is only a recent development. They highlight the fact that this strange behaviour seems to stem from the fact that human beings forgot along time ago that they are themselves part of nature.

The concepts of enlightenment theory and conquest of nature are everyday reminders of this oversight. This essay will explore the reasons presented by Dunlap and Catton in the 1970's for why sociology has traditionally remained inept in accounting for rising environmental problems. It will focus on the effects of prevailing opinions about the environment, namely that of the dominant western worldview and its implications on sociology which emerged as a discipline around the same time. It will further highlight the basic assumptions of the human exceptionalist paradigm (HEP) in sociology, which for Dunlap and Catton have served to procure the neglect of the physical environment in mainstream sociology.

Dunlap and Catton in trying to explain the emergence of environmental sociology, placed part of their emphasis on the inability of conventional sociology to address environmental problems, which they saw as stemming from its emergence during a time where the dominant western worldview of the late 19th century prevailed. This Worldview was characterized according <https://assignbuster.com/what-reasons-do-dunlap-and-catton-give-for-the-neglect-of-the-physical-environment-in-mainstream-sociology/>

to Dunlap and Catton by strong anthropocentric views that humankind is at the center of the world and is the dominant species. Furthermore this period harbored views of optimism and belief in progress due to rapid industrialization, urbanization, trade and most importantly technological innovation. Humans as such came to view themselves as increasingly free and unique from the natural environment, furthermore through technological progress no object within the world could not be adapted and dominated to their own ends (Dunlap 1980, p6).

Here the environment is consequently seen as a vast 'resource' in abundance, rather than a 'constraint' whereby the history of humanity through progress need never cease as there is a solution to everything; in essence an era of scarcity was inconceivable and the idea of interdependence of living things was largely ignored (Dunlap and Catton 1978, p 42). Furthermore Dunlap and Catton argue that Sociology despite the latter: was also concerned in the need to establish itself as a separate discipline with an autonomous field of study; consequently recognition of the importance of physical environments came to be restricted and distorted in an effort to avoid the 'taboos of geographical determinism' and 'biologism': in essence 'professional aversions' is what Dunlap and Catton argue have also 'led to Sociology's misperceptions or under-valuation of environmental implications for sociology' (Dunlap and Catton 1979, 245). Dunlap and Catton highlight the latter in a number of ways: for example they highlight an elemental difference in the sociological terminology of 'environment', which is entirely different to that of other disciplines. For 'non-sociological parlance "the environment" means our physical surroundings, the

biosphere'. In contrast, within mainstream sociology, "environment" can be social or cultural (1979, 245).

They maintain that sociology has consequently underrated studies such as 'Landis's (1949)' and 'Mukerjee's (1930, 1932)', which in their words 'had clearly seen that Homo sapiens could be assured stable and lasting dominance in the web of life only by understanding and working with ecosystems and forces' (1979, 245). Once more Dunlap maintains that the founding fathers of sociology, such as Durkheim and his explanation of 'social phenomena only in terms of other "social facts"' 'have further contributed to sociology's tendency to explain social change in terms of values, economic organization, culture, or technology instead of the physical environment (Dunlap 1997, p21): they have also by viewing Homo sapiens as unique due to intellectual capacity, attendant language, organization, culture and technology construed these characteristics as sources of human 'exemption' from ecological principles governing all other forms of life. This wave of thought in sociology is what Dunlap and Catton, have argued truly underlies sociology's neglect of the physical environment: 'The Human Exceptionalist / Exemptionalist Paradigm (HEP)' according to Dunlap and Catton holds a number of basic assumptions. For example humans are a unique species for they have culture, furthermore culture can vary almost infinitely and can change much more rapidly than biological traits. Once more many differences are socially induced rather than inborn, consequently they can be socially altered and convenient differences can be eliminated, thus there are no limits to progress. Further assumptions hold that social organization and technology will maintain a population within the carrying

capacity of its environment, thus ensuring successful adaptation (Dunlap and Catton 1978, p43).

Dunlap and Catton highlight how such a neglect of the physical environment permits sociologists such as Amos Hawley (1975, p8-9) to write that ' there are no known limits to the improvement of technology' and ' the population pressure on non-ecological resources is neither currently being felt or likely to be felt in the early future' (Hawley cited in ' The American Sociologist' vol. 3). The assumptions of the HEP are inherently problematic for Dunlap and Catton, and they cite David Potter's alert to his colleagues which they believe has equal relevance for sociology: ' The factor of abundance, which we first discovered as an environmental condition and which we converted by technological change into a cultural as well as a physical force, has (... influenced all aspects of American life in a fundamental way' (Potter 1954, p141 cited in ' American Sociologist'): this is because it means that sociology basically ignores the concept of ' carrying concept', it also neglects the idea of the interrelation of living organisms within an ecosystem.

Furthermore HEP assumptions mean that sociologists do not recognize biogeochemical limits to material progress - there are ' no known limits to the improvements of technology'. Dunlap and Catton also argue that these assumptions deny that there is no population pressure on non-agricultural resources. In essence sociology and its dominant HEP theories have rendered sociology ignorant of the laws of other societies (1978, p 44).

Furthermore it would be erroneous to presume that the study of interaction between the environment and society which is the core of environmental sociology today, had never been realized before; in fact Dunlap and Catton <https://assignbuster.com/what-reasons-do-dunlap-and-catton-give-for-the-neglect-of-the-physical-environment-in-mainstream-sociology/>

assert that this relationship had been highlighted by Schnaiberg several years before emergence of environmental sociology which serves as a sharp reminder of how sociology has neglected the physical environment due to its own distinguishing method of enquiry and the prevailing dominance of the HEP (1978, p44). In fact Dunlap and Catton proceed to suggest that the study of such an interaction rests on the realization that sociologists can no longer afford to ignore the environment in their investigations; indeed Dunlap and Catton propose that what is needed in sociology, is an awareness of environmental problems and a change of inherent attitudes within the field. In contrast to the HEP Dunlap and Catton advocated a new wave of thinking, a new paradigm – the ‘ New Ecological Paradigm’ which holds that humans may have exceptional characteristics such as culture, technology and the like but they are but one among many interdependent species linked interdependently to the whole eco-system.

Once more they highlight that in contrast to HEP assumptions of humans being affected only by cultural and social factors, that the natural environment is just as important. Another key element to their critique of the HEP is that sociologists need to recognize that the world is finite rather than abundant to infinitum: this fact means that the earth’s resources do in fact impose constraints upon the growth and organization of human societies (1978, 45). However one must not presume that the HEP has been forgotten; in fact within sociology itself there is still a debate between those who support the HEP such as Hawley (1975 cited in ‘ The American sociologist’) and those who support the NEP such as Dunlap and Catton: in fact Buttel (1978 cited in ‘ The American Sociologist) criticizes their work and argues

that environmental sociology does not signal a paradigm shift for sociology, but rather that traditional competing theories are still dominant within the discipline. Furthermore he asserts that environmental sociology has had a modest effect and is simply another sociological field (1987 cited in 'Annual Review of Sociology'). Dunlap and Catton in fact argue that Buttel confuses between a theory and a paradigm, in that a paradigm is a much deeper assumption, furthermore different competing theories such as conflict and order can exist within the HEP or equally in the NEP (1980 'A New Ecological Paradigm for Post-Exuberant Sociology' cited in American Behavioral Scientist).

In conclusion then, Dunlap and Catton's work was provoked by rising ecological problems, and the need to shake the blinders of the HEP, as it were within Sociology as a discipline. They argue that Sociology emerged at a time when the dominant world-view assumed that progress was unlimited in a world thought to be resource abundant. Furthermore such a view held that human beings were in fact superior to any other species, for they have culture. For Dunlap and Catton these views influenced Sociology to the extent that within Sociology itself a Human Exceptionalist paradigm was formed and became the dominant view, which signaled the true neglect of the physical environment.

Dunlap and Catton argued that this neglect was further reinforced by Sociology's need to establish its self as an independent field of study, especially with regard to its founding fathers, notably Durkheim's 'social facts'. Dunlap and Catton end, by calling for greater sociological attention to the environment, in line with rising public attention to environmental issues <https://assignbuster.com/what-reasons-do-dunlap-and-catton-give-for-the-neglect-of-the-physical-environment-in-mainstream-sociology/>

such as pollution, and advocate their own paradigm – NEP which is a critique of the HEP but also suggests that human beings should regard themselves as part of the eco-system and that human affairs are not simply affected by social and cultural factors but also by natural factors as well. They advocate growing awareness to environmental problems and a realist approach whereby sociology can make a contribution in terms of understanding these problems, through focus on interactions between society and nature and less adherence to HEP myths. Indeed there are further examples of realist approaches within Sociology such as Newby, Martell and Dickens support Dunlap and Catton's NEP and its implications for sociology.

However there is still a long way for Sociology and indeed all other sciences to go before human beings understand the true implications of their actions upon the physical environment and its lasting effects for future generations!