

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE
 John A. Hannigan. London: Routledge, 1995. Pp. 236 £40.00 (hard) £12.99 (paperback)
 Katharine Betts

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“Social constructionism” sounds postmodern and John Hannigan wishes to draw links between his approach to environmental sociology and contemporary postmodernism. If postmodernism is taken to mean a growing lack of faith in science, combined with enthusiastic use of the media for political purposes (pp. 179-185), the attempt is legitimate. But the insight that ideas about the world are socially constructed predates postmodernism. It stretches from Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge in the 1930s, to Kuhn’s seminal work on the role of social perceptions in defining scientific knowledge, to Berger and Luckman’s grand attempt to analyse the social construction of reality *tout court*, to a wide literature on the construction of deviance, gender, ethnicity and so on.

Nonetheless, Hannigan’s book synthesises a number of current studies which, together with his own work, do represent a fresh approach in environmental studies. He is also determined to set his approach apart from the growing body of work on environmental stress written from a social perspective where authors take it as their brief to try to explain how and why human society is eroding the natural environment, and to persuade us to change. He argues that the sociologist should deliberately take an “agnostic stance” (p. 31) on the question of environmental threat.

It is curious that some of the most prominent of writers about the substantive interaction between people and the natural world are not sociologists (for example Paul and Anne Ehrlich and Garrett Hardin in America, and Tim Flannery and Doug Cocks in Australia). Other analysts associated with this school of thought go further and allege that sociologists themselves are part of the environmental problem. Along with economists and other social scientists, sociologists are locked into a “human exemptionalist paradigm”. They ignore the natural world and thus, by default, treat it both as limitless resource and bottomless garbage tip. Catton and Dunlap set out this case in 1980, arguing that, irrespective of an individual’s position on any left/right political spectrum, almost all social scientists work with the tacit assumption that people are exempt from nature’s limits. (See “A new ecological paradigm for a post-exuberant sociology”, *American Behavioural Scientist*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 15-47.)

Is agnosticism on the substantive issues the only option open to a sociologist? When sociologists are analysing ideas as ideologies they, quite properly, do not use the truth claims of these ideas as a sufficient explanation for their success or failure. But agnosticism in this particular aspect of their work does not commit them to agnosticism in all aspects of their work. It can, however, be hard to maintain a clear distinction between an extrinsic approach to ideologies and a studied indifference to substantive questions. This difficulty may explain why Catton and Dunlap’s proposal for a “new ecological paradigm” for the social sciences has mostly fallen on deaf ears.

For example, Hannigan argues that Catton and Dunlap’s approach is one of activism rather than analysis (p. 184). He claims that it is not the role of the sociologist to explore the social causes of environmental problems, rather we should examine the social causes of the *perceptions* of environmental problems (see pp. 31, 38, 187-9). Indeed sociologists should restrict themselves to this. The broad task of reconceiving human society as set within the natural world is simply activism while the more specific task of assessing particular ills

(such as global warming or acid rain) is beyond us (p. 188). We are not qualified to play the role of natural scientists (see p. 188). Our skills lie elsewhere and should be employed in analysing, not the substance of an environmental problem, but the audience response to the claims made on its behalf. We should not examine the causes of the problem, its consequences, or magnitude, but rather restrict ourselves to monitoring its career as a social issue. (He does not refer to Richard Dawkins' concept of the meme, a small unit of culture analogous to the gene, but it would fit his argument well.)

Hannigan provides a useful summary of existing work on this social constructionist theme and also presents three case studies of his own: on acid rain, biodiversity loss, and Bovine growth hormone. He shows how claims about aspects of environmental stress compete for our attention — or, rather, how the proponents of these diverse claims push their candidate's credentials with varying levels of success. Some claims hold the stage for a while and then yield place to others (acid rain); some are a roaring success and show no sign of flagging (loss of biodiversity); and some never really arrive as fully fledged environmental problems at all (Bovine growth hormone).

He is working with an ecology of issues model (see pp. 144, 189-190); there is only room for some claims about environmental stress. Numerous factors help to explain their success or failure, but his analysis of the undistinguished career of Bovine growth hormone suggests that an inability to link an environmental worry to the question of social justice seriously handicaps its progress (pp. 175-176). In contrast to Bovine growth hormone, biodiversity loss does well. This is despite the fact that, in Hannigan's view, it is a problem with weak empirical credentials. What is the secret of its success? The answer can partly be found in the way in which biodiversity loss has been attached to the question of Third-World development and the ownership of biological resources, thus making important links with the theme of social justice (pp. 157-160).

This is an interesting and useful book. I hope the author continues to explore the questions he has raised (particular his tantalising insights into the role of the "new middle class" in defining environmental problems and in adopting ecological values as a badge of belonging — pp. 186, 191). But I also hope that he will reconsider his claim that sociology has to chose between disinterested scholarship and committed activism. Work within a new ecological paradigm may be disinterested or it may be committed (or it may be both or neither). Research which takes environmental stress seriously need only be "activism" in the sense that all decisions about research, including the decision not to undertake it, necessarily have some political consequences.

The only serious flaw in this clear and imaginative book is that it assumes that an ecological paradigm could not accommodate the sociology-of-knowledge approach which the author prefers. A sociology which steadfastly ignores the human causes and human consequences of environmental stress will continue to leave these problems to biologists and other natural scientists, and, if the situation should indeed become critical, to economists. Agnosticism about substantive issues is no guarantee of objectivity or value freedom and sociology should not be declaring that the discipline is irrelevant to the work of understanding the interaction between people and the natural world.