

MILIEU SOCIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Milieu sociology is an analization of interactions between societies and their natural Milieu. The field emphasizes the societal factors that influence Milieu resourcemanagement and cause Milieu issues, the processes by which these Milieu problems are societal constructed and defined as societal issues, and societal responses to these problems.

Milieu sociology emerged as a subfield of sociology in the late 1970s in response to the emergence of the Milieu movement in the 1960s. It represents a relatively new area of inquiry focusing on an extension of earlier sociology through inclusion of physical context as related to societal factors.

Keywords: Milieu, Ecosystems, Humans, Non-human Natures, Power, Societal inequality

DEFINITION

Milieu sociology is typically defined as the sociological analyze of socio-Milieu interactions, although this definition immediately presents the problem of integrating human cultures with the rest of the Milieu. Different aspects of human interaction with the natural Milieus studied by Milieu sociologists including population and demography, organizations and institutions, technology, health and illness, culture, and societal inequality. Although the focus of the field is the relationship between society and Milieu in general, Milieu sociologists typically place special emphasis on analyzing the societal factors that cause Milieu problems, the societal impacts of those problems, and efforts to solve the problems. In addition, considerable attention is paid to the societal processes by which certain Milieu conditions become societal defined as problems. Most research in Milieu sociology examines contemporary societies.

HISTORY

Ancient Greeks idealized life in nature using the idea of the pastoral. Much later, Romantic writers such as Wordsworth took their inspiration from nature. Modern thought surrounding human-Milieu relations can be traced back to Charles Darwin. Darwin's concept of natural selection suggested that certain societal characteristics played a key role in the survivability of groups in the natural Milieu. Although typically taken at the micro-level, evolutionary principles, particularly adaptability, serve as a microcosm of human ecology. Work by Craig Humphrey and Frederick Buttel (2002) traces the linkages between Darwin's work on natural selection, human ecological sociology, and MILIEU sociology.

Sociology developed as a scholarly discipline in the mid- and late-19th and early 20th centuries, in a context where biological determinism had failed to fully explain key features of societal change, including the evolving relationship between humans and their natural Milieus. In its foundational years, classical sociology thus saw societal and cultural factors as the dominant, if not exclusive, cause of societal and cultural conditions. These lens down-played interactive factors in the relationship between humans and their biophysical Milieus.

Milieu sociology emerged as a coherent subfield of inquiry after the Milieu movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. The works of William R. Catton, Jr. and Riley Dunlap, among others, challenged the constricted anthropocentrism of classical sociology. In the late 1970s, they called for a new holistic, or systems perspective. Since the 1970s, general sociology has noticeably transformed to include Milieu forces in societal explanations. Milieu sociology has now solidified as a respected, interdisciplinary field of analyze in academia.

CONCEPTS

EXISTENTIAL DUALISM

The duality of the human condition rests with cultural uniqueness and evolutionary traits. From one perspective, humans are embedded in the ecosphere and co-evolved alongside other species. Humans share the same basic ecological dependencies as other inhabitants of nature. From the other perspectives, humans are distinguished from other species because of their innovative capacities, distinct cultures and varied institutions. Human creations have the power to independently manipulate, destroy, and transcend the limits of the natural Milieu (Buttel and Humphrey, 2002: p. 47).

According to Buttel (2005), there are five basic epistemologies in Milieu sociology. In practice, this means five different theories of what to blame for Milieu degradation, i.e., what to research or consider as important. In order of their invention, these ideas of what to blame build on each other and thus contradict each other.

NEO-MALTHUSIANISM

Works such as Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* (1969) reformulated Malthusian thought about abstract population increases causing famines into a model of individual selfishness at larger scales causing degradation of common pool resources such as the air, water, the oceans, or general Milieu conditions. Hardin offered privatization of resources or government regulation as solutions to Milieu degradation caused by tragedy of the commons conditions. Many other sociologists shared this view of solutions well into the 1970s. There have been many critiques of this view particularly political scientist Elinor Ostrom, or economists Amartya Sen and Ester Boserup.

Even though much of mainstream journalism considers Malthusianism the only view of Milieuism, most sociologists would disagree with Malthusianism since societal organizational issues of Milieu degradation are more demonstrated to cause Milieu problems than abstract population or selfishness per se. For examples of this critique, Ostrom in her book *'Governing the Commons': "The Evolution of Institutions for*

Collective Action (1990) argues that instead of self-interest always causing degradation, it can sometimes motivate people to take care of their common property resources.”

To do this they must change the basic organizational rules of resource use. Her research provides evidence for sustainable resource management systems, around common pool resources that have lasted for centuries in some areas of the world.

Amartya Sen argues in his book *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (1980) that population expansion fails to cause famines or degradation as Malthusians or Neo-Malthusians argue. Instead, in documented cases a lack of political entitlement to resources that exist in abundance, causes famines in some populations. He documents how famines can occur even in the midst of plenty or in the context of low populations. He argues that famines (and Milieu degradation) would only occur in non-functioning democracies or unrepresentative states.

Ester Boserup argues in her book *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: The Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressure* (1965) from inductive, empirical case analysis that Malthus's more deductive conception of a presumed one-to-one relationship with agricultural scale and population is actually reversed. Instead of agricultural technology and scale determining and limiting population as Malthus attempted to argue, Boserup argued the world is full of cases of the direct opposite: that population changes and expands agricultural methods.

Eco-Marxist scholar Allan Schnaiberg (below) argues against Malthusianism with the rationale that under larger capitalist economies, human degradation moved from localized, population-based degradation to organizationally caused degradation of capitalist political economies to blame. He gives the example of the organized degradation of rainforest areas which states and capitalists push people off the land before it is degraded by organizational means. Thus, many authors are critical of Malthusianism, from sociologists (Schnaiberg) to economists (Sen and Boserup), to

political scientists (Ostrom), and all focus on how a country's societal organization of its extraction can degrade the Milieu independent of abstract population.

NEW ECOLOGICAL PARADIGM

In the 1970s, The New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) conception critiqued the claimed lack of human-Milieu focus in the classical sociologists and the Sociological priorities their followers created. This was critiqued as the Human Exceptionalism Paradigm (HEP). The HEP viewpoint claims that human-Milieu relationships were unimportant sociologically because humans are 'exempt' from Milieu forces via cultural change. This view was shaped by the leading Western worldview of the time and the desire for Sociology to establish itself as an independent discipline against the then popular racist-biological Milieu determinism where Milieu was all. In this HEP view, human dominance was felt to be justified by the uniqueness of culture, argued to be more adaptable than biological traits. Furthermore, culture also has the capacity to accumulate and innovate, making it capable of solving all natural problems. Therefore, as humans were not conceived of as governed by natural conditions, they were felt to have complete control of their own destiny. Any potential limitation posed by the natural world was felt to be surpassed using human ingenuity. Research proceeded accordingly without Milieu analysis.

In the 1970s, sociological scholars Riley Dunlap and William R. Catton, Jr. began recognizing the limits of what would be termed the Human Exceptionalism Paradigm. Catton and Dunlap (1978) suggested a new perspective that took Milieu variables into full account. They coined a new theoretical outlook for Sociology, the New Ecological Paradigm, with assumptions contrary to HEP. The NEP recognizes the innovative capacity of humans, but says that humans are still ecologically interdependent as with other species. The NEP notes the power of societal and cultural forces but does not profess societal determinism. Instead, humans are impacted by the cause, effect, and feedback loop of ecosystems. The Earth has a finite level of natural resources and waste repositories. Thus, the biophysical Milieu can impose constraints on human activity. They discussed neither a few harbingers of this NEP in 'hybridized' theorizing about topics that

were neither exclusively societal nor Milieu explanations of Milieu conditions. It was additionally a critique of Malthusian views of the 1960s and 1970s.

Dunlap and Catton's work immediately received a critique from Buttel who argued to the contrary that classical sociological foundations could be found for Milieu sociology, particularly in Weber's work on ancient "agrarian civilizations" and Durkheim's view of the division of labor as built on a material premise of specialization/specialization in response to material scarcity. This Milieu aspect of Durkheim has been discussed by Schnaiberg (1971) as well.

ECO-MARXISM

In the middle of the HEP/NEP debate, the general trend of Neo-Marxism was occurring. There was cross pollination. Neo-Marxism was based on the collapse of the widespread believability of the Marxist societal movement in the failed revolts of the 1960s and the rise of many New Societal Movements that failed to fit in many Marxist analytic frameworks of conflict sociology. Sociologists entered the fray with empirical research on these novel societal conflicts. Neo-Marxism's stress on the relative autonomy of the state from capital control instead of it being only a reflection of economic determinism of class conflict yielded this novel theoretical viewpoint in the 1970s. Neo-Marxist ideas of conflict sociology were applied to capital/state/labor/ Milieu conflicts instead of only labor/capital/state conflicts over production. Therefore, some sociologists wanted to stretch Marxist ideas of societal conflict to analyze Milieu societal movements from this materialist framework instead of interpreting Milieu movements as a more cultural "New Societal Movement" separate than material concerns. So "Eco-Marxism" was based on using Neo-Marxist conflict sociology concepts of the relative autonomy of the state applied to Milieu conflict.

TWO PEOPLE FOLLOWING THIS SCHOOL WERE JAMES O'CONNOR (THE FISCAL CRISIS OF THE STATE, 1971) AND LATER ALLAN SCHNAIBERG.

Later, a different trend developed in eco-Marxism via the attention brought to the importance of metabolic analysis in Marx's thought by John Bellamy Foster. Contrary to previous assumptions that classical theorists in sociology all had fallen within a Human Exemptionalist Paradigm, Foster argued that Marx's materialism led him to theorize labor as the metabolic process between humanity and the rest of nature. In Promethean interpretations of Marx that Foster critiques, there was an assumption his analysis was very similar to the anthropocentric views critiqued by early Milieu sociologists.

Instead, Foster argued Marx himself was concerned about the Metabolic Rift generated by capitalist society's societal metabolism, particularly in industrial agriculture— Marx had identified an "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of societal metabolism," created by capitalist agriculture that was destroying the productivity of the land and creating wastes in urban sites that failed to be reintegrated into the land and thus led toward destruction of urban workers' health simultaneously. Reviewing the contribution of this thread of eco-Marxism to current Milieu sociology, Pellow and Brehm conclude "The metabolic rift is a productive development in the field because it connects current research to classical theory and links sociology with an interdisciplinary array of scientific literatures focused on ecosystem dynamics."

Foster emphasized that his argument presupposed the "magisterial work" of Paul Burkett, who had developed a closely related "red-green" perspective rooted in a direct examination of Marx's value theory. Burkett and Foster proceeded to write a number of articles together on Marx's ecological conceptions, reflecting their shared perspective. More recently, Jason W. Moore inspired by Burkett's value-analytical approach to Marx's ecology and arguing that Foster's work did not in itself go far enough, has sought to integrate the notion of metabolic rift with world systems theory, incorporating Marxian value-related conceptions. For Moore, the modern world-system is a capitalist world-ecology, joining the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of

nature in dialectical unity. Central to Moore's perspective is a philosophical re-reading of Marx's value theory, through which abstract societal labor and abstract societal nature are dialectically bound. Moore argues that the emergent law of value, from the sixteenth century, was evident in the extraordinary shift in the scale, scope, and speed of Milieu change. What took pre-modern civilizations centuries to achieve—such as the deforestation of Europe in the medieval era—capitalism realized in mere decades? This world-historical rupture, argues Moore, can be explained through a law of value that regards labor productivity as the decisive metric of wealth and power in the modern world. From this standpoint, the genius of capitalist development has been to appropriate un-commoditized natures—including un-commoditized human natures—as a means of advancing labor productivity in the commodity system.

SOCIETAL-MILIEU DIALECTIC

In 1975, the highly influential work of Allan Schnaiberg transfigured Milieu sociology, proposing a societal-Milieu dialectic, though within the 'neo-Marxist' framework of the relative autonomy of the state as well. This conflictual concept has overwhelming political salience. First, the economic synthesis states that the desire for economic expansion will prevail over ecological concerns. Policy will decide to maximize immediate economic growth at the expense of Milieu disruption. Secondly, the managed scarcity synthesis concludes that governments will attempt to control only the direst of Milieu problems to prevent health and economic disasters. This will give the appearance that governments' act more Milieu consciously than they really do. Third, the ecological synthesis generates a hypothetical case where Milieu degradation is so severe that political forces would respond with sustainable policies. The driving factor would be economic damage caused by Milieu degradation. The economic engine would be based on renewable resources at this point. Production and consumption methods would adhere to sustainability regulations.

These conflict-based syntheses have several potential outcomes. One is that the most powerful economic and political forces will preserve the status quo and bolster their

dominance. Historically, this is the most common occurrence. Another potential outcome is for contending powerful parties to fall into a stalemate. Lastly, tumultuous societal events may result that redistribute economic and political resources.

TREADMILL OF PRODUCTION

In 1980, the highly influential work of Allan Schnaiberg entitled *The Milieu: From Surplus to Scarcity* (1980) was a large contribution to this theme of a societal-Milieu dialectic. Moving away from economic reductionism like other neo-Marxists, Schnaiberg called for an analysis of how certain projects of "political capitalism" encouraged Milieu degradation instead of all capitalism per se. This ongoing trend in Marxism of 'neo-Marxist' analysis (meaning, including the relative autonomy of the state) here added the Milieu conditions of abstract additions and withdrawals from the Milieu as societal policies instead of naturalized contexts.

Schnaiberg's political capitalism, otherwise known as the 'Treadmill of production,' is a model of conflict as well as cooperation between three abstracted groups: the state, capital (exclusively monopoly capital with its larger fixed costs and thus larger pressures for ongoing expansion of profits to justify more fixed costs), and (organized) labor. He analyzes only the United States at length, though sees such a treadmill of production and of Milieu degradation in operation in the Soviet Union or socialist countries as well. The desire for economic expansion was found to be a common political ground for all three contentious groups—in capital, labor, and the state—to surmount their separate interests and postpone conflict by all agreeing on economic growth. Therefore, grounds for a political alliance emerge among these conflictual actors when monopoly capitalism can convince both of the other nodes to support its politicized consolidation. This can appeal to the other nodes since it additionally provides expanding state legitimacy and its own funding while providing (at least at the time) secure worker employment in larger industries with their desired stable or growing consumption. This political capitalism works against smaller scale capitalism or other uses of the state or against other alliances of labor. Schnaiberg called the 'acceleration' of the treadmill this

derivative political support for monopoly capitalism's expansion. This acceleration he felt was at root merely an informal alliance—based solely on the propaganda from monopoly capital and the state that worker consumption can only be achieved through further capitalist consolidation.

However, Schnaiberg felt that Milieu damage caused by state-political and labor-supported capitalist expansion may cause a decline both in the state's funding as well as worker livelihood. This provides grounds for both to reject their treadmill alliance with monopoly capital. This would mean severing organized labor support and state policy support of monopoly capital's desires of consolidation. Schnaiberg is motivated to optimism by this potential if states and labor movements can be educated to the Milieu and livelihood dangers in the long run of any support of monopoly capital. This potentially means these two groups moving away from subsidizing and supporting the degradation of the Milieu. Schnaiberg pins his hopes for Milieu improvement on 'deceleration' of the treadmill—how mounting Milieu degradation might yield a breakdown in the acceleration-based treadmill alliance. This deceleration was defined as state and working labor movements designing policies to shrink the scale of the economy as a solution to Milieu degradation and their own consumptive requirements. Meanwhile, in the interim, he argued a common alliance between the three is responsible for why they prefer to support common economic growth as a common way to avoid their open conflicts despite mounting Milieu costs for the state as well as for laborers due to Milieu disruption.

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