

Preface

At first glance, environmental sociology may sound like an oxymoron. If the natural environment represents the realm of the non-social, as it does most likely for many sociologists, what could a sociology of the non-social be about? The short answer is that there are many ways in which the non-social plays a part in the social universe. The long answer, the complexity of which is tackled in part in the pages to follow, is that the “social” or, to be more precise, social agents are oftentimes in the unenviable position of King Midas. This legendary king of Phrygia is said to have acquired from Bacchus the power to turn everything he touched “to yellow gold” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11). Joyful at first, the king with the golden touch soon learned that his potentially unlimited wealth could have soon brought his death by starvation: any piece of tender meat would have instantly turned to gold in his mouth and no sip of wine - turning into liquid gold - could have quenched his thirst. Ovid says that Bacchus felt pity for the man and offered him the chance to wash up his power in a river flowing up in the Lydian heights.

The Midas touch is a useful metaphor for understanding our relationships with nature. Nature is for human society a great source of wealth, a source of knowledge and a source of artistic inspiration. Yet, every time we reach to it, we transform it in positive or negative ways and often beyond recognition. Sociology is well positioned to answer the question of who are “we” who stretch our greedy or curious hands to nature only to discover that oftentimes we change her and ourselves in ways which are not always obvious. Environmental sociology is the study of social – environmental interdependencies and of the reciprocal transformations of society and nature under increasing industrialization and urbanization.

What is this book about? The book consists of a collection of essays exploring some of the ways in which sociologists have theorized the relationships between society and environment. It covers a definite historical period, from the 1920s to the 1990s, dealing with the theories that preceded the establishment of environmental sociology as well as the approaches that gave it a distinct identity within the discipline. The six main chapters are all conceptual papers. Each of them explores a number of topics connecting social science ideas with ecology and environmental science through a series of interrogations about the nature of their relationships. The interrogations are, to be sure, formulated mostly from a social science perspective as the book is addressed to sociologists.

How can the environment be integrated into a sociological framework of analysis? By simply recognizing that the environment should have a place in sociological theorizing, its relevance for social life would still remain obscure if one does not inquire into how various ideas of the environment have been pursued in the history of the discipline. This idea of societal-environmental interactions¹ will be explored from a variety of vantage points with the aim of exposing the rich articulations of the environmental problematic in the history of sociology. Since there is no clear-cut route leading from premises to conclusion, the book can be seen as an exploratory theoretical inquiry from the early twentieth century to its closing decades.

Why is this book offered? The intended market for this book is the Romanian academia, especially those scholars who work in or are interested in the intersections of the social and

¹ This corresponds directly to Dunlap and Catton’s (1978: 44) “programmatic” contention that the major task of environmental sociology should be the study of society – environment interactions.

environmental sciences. There is a dearth of environmental sociological writings in Romania. To my knowledge, there is only one book-long study on environmental sociology published by Laura Nistor under the title “Sociology of the environment: a study of attitudes and behaviours in Romania” (2009)². Two other introductory pieces to environmental sociology in Romanian are the articles entitled “Environmental sociology as creative marginality: A Review of Its Theories from the ‘Limits to Growth’ to the risk society” (Alexandrescu 2008) and “Sociology and the environment. Integrative perspectives” (Nistor 2008)³.

The book also holds potential value for readers interested in sociological theory-building or theorization. More exactly, it offers an explicit attempt to *theorize* social – environmental relationships with the aim to improve or deepen our understanding. This means that selected theoretical ideas are systematically explored and linked to each other in order to achieve a more comprehensive or in-depth understanding of the implications or potential application of existing theories. This is perhaps best illustrated in chapter four, where an ecologically inspired perspective on society as an ecosystem – in which a variety of (social) species populations interact – is reinterpreted by means of Max Weber’s ideal type constructs. The final result is a flexible construct of eco-social groups or social species which researchers can fashion according to their interests, while eschewing some of the unfruitful debates in environmental sociology.

The value of the book for a broader international public resides in its specific historical and interpretive focus. Historically, the book covers a lesser known period of environmental sociological ideas in the history of (mostly American) sociology, between the period of the classics such as Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel or the Chicago School (e.g. Buttel 2000, Gross 2000, Gross 2001, Dunlap et al. 2002, Hannigan 2006, Rosa and Richter 2008, MacDonald 2011) and the emergence of environmental sociology proper (e.g. Catton and Dunlap 1978, Buttel 2002, Dunlap 2008). Chronologically, this covers roughly the period between the 1950s and the 1970s and the authors of these period are discussed in chapters two, three and four, with occasional extensions to more recent publications. The interactions between society and environment revolve around the population – organization – environment – technology (POET) model and involve mostly material interactions between industrial and urban society and its natural environment. In such a view, the Midas touch is “hard” and consequential as it creates enduring conflicts and changes in both environment and society.

From an interpretative point of view, chapters one and five and the last part of chapter two (section 2.9.2) are meant to show that in sociologists’ preoccupation with the environment there are sometimes underlying social and intellectual concerns that are not necessarily related to the environment per se. This analysis is not meant to debunk these approaches but rather to show that social concerns can sometimes take naturalistic form while still remaining social in their essence. In such cases, the Midas touch of the social upon nature can be as light as that of a butterfly.

The structure of the book consists of six chapters. The first chapter is devoted to a discussion of the beginnings of human ecology, an area of scholarship initiated by the sociologists of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s. This formative period of human

² The original Romanian title reads: *Sociologia mediului înconjurător: aplicații privind atitudini și comportamente în România* (2009).

³ The original titles are: “Sociologia mediului ca formă de marginalitate creatoare. O privire asupra teoriilor sale de la “limitele creșterii” la societatea riscului” and “Sociologie și mediu înconjurător. Perspective integrative”.

ecology is discussed in detail, as it is particularly dense in ideas and also because it presents an interesting paradox. Although it explicitly deals with the natural environment – or what Robert E. Park calls the “biotic substructure of society” – in the explanation of social phenomena, ecological factors (as understood in the natural sciences) are virtually absent from its theorization. What is present, however, is a *naturalized* form of social processes and phenomena.⁴ An alternative sociological interpretation of what human ecologists call the biotic order of human communities is provided in terms of Tönnies’ distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Additional support for the naturalization argument is provided by an inquiry into some of the key concepts of human ecology and of its Darwinian tradition. This inquiry also offers some intriguing insights on the circular migration of concepts from eighteenth and nineteenth century social thought to the natural sciences and then returning to sociology and to human ecology in the early twentieth century.

The second chapter covers a broader area of mid-century human ecology and environmental sociology. A relatively even-handed discussion of the strengths and limitations of various approaches and theoretical models is presented. I pay close attention to the POET model, also known as the “ecological complex”, to a number of three of its subsequent elaborations, and to two models of environmental impact. Also discussed are the political economy approach and the New Ecological Paradigm for environmental sociology. This chapter concludes with a systematic treatment of the ways in which each of the approaches surveyed conceptualizes the interactions between environment and society.

The third chapter applies a realist lens on the concept of social ecosystem as a way to extend (environmental) sociologists’ ecological imagination, thus emulating Mills’ trailblazing argument for developing the sociological imagination. This is achieved by adjoining the notion of society as ecosystem as developed by economists and sociologists with the case study and interpretations offered by the Indian ecologist Madhav Gadgil and environmental historian Ramachandra Guha (1995).

The fourth chapter is the most ambitious effort in this book to integrate different perspectives developed at different times into one synthetic approach. The social species or eco-social groups approach is offered as a sociological lens for studying societal-environmental interactions. The *social species* idea is borrowed from an article by Edward Stephan (1970), where it was used to describe various populations (human, animal or plant) that co-exist and interact in an ecological community. Stephan’s multi-species model is used as a theoretical magnifying glass for exploring social – natural configurations. More exactly, I contend that the concept of social species/eco-social group can be used for human groups that can be identified on the basis of three distinct criteria: as part of an ecosystem, as being involved in a social structure and as participating in an universe of socially constructed meanings. In methodological terms, social species concepts can be constructed as Weberian ideal types, in which the three points of view – corresponding to the three criteria mentioned above – are simultaneously or successively *accentuated*: an ecological, a social structural and a social constructionist point of view.

The fifth chapter continues this approach in an attempt to elaborate an ideal type of environmental or “green” groups. The social constructionist viewpoint is chosen for its maximal significance in conceptualizing such groups. An inquiry at the ecological and

⁴ To my knowledge, the term “naturalization” was first used in Robert Young’s book chapter “Darwinism *Is* Social” (1985, emphasis in original).

structural levels lends support to the argument that the specificity of large-scale environmental movement organizations can best be revealed in their construction of ecological ideologies and worldviews.

The sixth chapter follows an approach similar to the one pursued in the first chapter. More exactly, a historical sociological account of the rise and development of environment sociology is offered, based on Karl Mannheim's argument that the roots of changes in the world of ideas or scholarship should be sought in the changing socio-historical circumstances of the period in which those shifts occurred. Through this interpretive lens, environmental sociology appears as a field of scholarship which emerged with the shift from a rhetoric of convergence to one of conflict in postwar America, with the challenge of the affluent society thesis by the environmental movement and the postwar crystallization of the knowledge class.

Finally, the seventh chapter summarizes the main points discussed throughout the book. The different approaches are compared using the three criteria developed in chapter four by locating them – this time by means of a visual model – within a three-dimensional space. The three dimensions of environmental sociology are the ecological, the structural and the constructionist. This mapping exercise appears as a more fruitful alternative to the continued use of key debates and key themes to describe different positions in environmental sociology, such as constructivism vs. realism, ecological modernization vs. ecological realism etc. (Lockie 2015). The second part of the concluding chapter presents some possible points of contention regarding the social species approach outlined in chapter four, along with their proposed resolution. The aim is to show that there is no one absolute or Archimedean point from which to see the manifold articulations of the environment into social configurations. Instead, the environment – society nexus should be seen as contingent on ecological exchanges, on a host of structural factors that lead to *unequal* ecological exchanges and on the variable social definitions of these exchanges.

The book is addressed to an audience interested in environmental sociology but also to a broader public interested in the intellectual openings provided by a less usual perspective on social life. Undergraduate and graduate students as well as researchers puzzled by the messy frictions between social and natural processes may find useful theoretical clues for thinking in an integrative and critical way about the sociological relevance of environmental changes.

A number of people have contributed to this book with their constructive feedback, stimulating discussions or intellectual support. My great thanks are due to professors Anton Allahar and Roderic Beaujot from Western University for being my supportive MA thesis supervisors. Chapters one, two, four and five were initially developed as part of my master's thesis. Thanks are also due to professors John Hannigan and Joseph Bryant from the University of Toronto with whom I took a course on environmental sociology and one in historical sociology, respectively. Both of them encouraged me to develop the ideas presented in chapters three and six of this book. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for providing the intangible support needed when writing a book-long study such as the one offered here. Any shortcomings obviously fall within my responsibility.

Chapter 1

Chicago Human Ecology and the Naturalization of the Social Order

Human ecology, developed by the Chicago School in the first decades of the twentieth century, appears to be one of the first approaches in sociology to take into account the natural environment in explaining social phenomena⁵. Besides providing the first comprehensive attempt to conceptualize the environment from a sociological point of view, human ecology also sought to apply an ecological perspective in the empirical study of human life, in particular, of urban communities. The present chapter is motivated both by historical interest and by the observation that human ecology has persisted as a distinct field of study up to the present day. It should be pointed out, however, that its underlying assumptions have changed over time and this process has mirrored the development of ideas regarding society-nature relationships, although the explicit focus of human ecology has always been “the study of relations between man [*sic*] and environment” (Quinn 1971:4).

This chapter addresses the question of the nature of the environment as theorized by Chicago human ecology. Are the processes and forces that shape human communities, as depicted by the human ecologists, real ecological processes in the sense of the natural sciences, or are they rather social processes? Has a scholarly Midas – one capable of turning social ideas into natural matter of factness – slipped within the pages of the early human ecologists?

The context for these questions is provided by a resurgence of interest in the classical roots of ecological ideas in the history of sociology. For example, the work of Matthias Gross traces the history of environmental ideas in the work of early American sociologists (Gross, 1999) and especially in the writings of American sociologist Edward Ross (Gross, 2002, 2010).

These questions stem in part from the observation that some of the authors who have reviewed the work of the Chicago School have analyzed its strengths and pointed out its limitations, but mostly discussed human ecology on its own terms. For example, Jean-Guy Vaillancourt (1995: 4, 6 – 7), Lewis Coser (1977: 363 – 364), Winifred Raushenbush (1979: 163 – 167) or John Hannigan (1995: 14 – 16) have not sought to question whether the ecological structures (the biotic base of society) and processes (competition, dominance, succession etc.) described by the human ecologists are in fact “ecological” and “subsocial” in the first place. For example, Vaillancourt (1995: 6) criticizes human ecologists, among others, for “exaggerating the impact of [environmental factors in explaining social phenomena]”, taking for granted their reality as ecological phenomena. Before addressing these questions, we introduce the theoretical arguments offered by the representatives of the Chicago human ecology, namely Roderick McKenzie, Ernest W. Burgess, Louis Wirth and especially Robert E. Park.

⁵ There are range of more or less scientific theories developed in the social sciences that have investigated the influence of the physical environment on human life. In the area of *political geography* noteworthy are Ellsworth Huntington’s theory of the drying up of the earth, Halford J. Mackinder’s theory of the “heartland” or the German theories of the *Lebensraum* (“Living space”) based on the ideas of Frederick Ratzel. These theories, at present largely discredited, held a rather deterministic view of the influence of geographical factors on society. Vidal de la Blanche and the French School of *human geography* rejected this strict determinism in favour of a more probabilistic conception of the relationship between the natural environment and social life (Duverger 1972: 265 – 272).

1.1 Definition of Concepts: Human Ecology, Community and Society

Roderick McKenzie defines human ecology as the “study of the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive and accommodative forces of the environment” (1967: 63 – 64). In this early stage, human ecology was conceived as an extension of plant and animal ecology into the realm of human collective life. This extension refers to the application of concepts developed in what could be called biological ecology – competition, dominance, invasion and succession (Michelson 1976: 8) – in order to explain human activities and interactions. Society as a whole is conceived in terms of ecological processes, being defined by Park “from the ecological point of view and in so far as it is a territorial unit, [as] just the area within which biotic competition has declined and the struggle for existence has assumed higher and more sublimated forms” (Park 1952: 150 – 151).

The common term used by ecologists to designate a plant, animal or human habitat and its “occupants” is that of *community*. This is defined, according to Park, by the following characteristics: a) A population organized at a territorial level; b) This population is rooted, to a certain extent, in the soil it inhabits; c) The individuals comprising the population are mutually interdependent at a symbiotic rather than at a societal level (Park 1952: 148).

In a more specific sense, the human *community* is characterized by symbiotic relationships, it is structured along spatial and temporal dimensions, has a physical structure with competition and the division of labour as its organizing principles (Wirth 1945: 484). In this way, the community is distinguished from society, which is based not on mere competition and economic interdependence, but also on solidarity, conventions and a moral order (Park 1952: 181). It appears that Park’s distinction between community and society does not have its roots in the sociological tradition, but is more likely a *sui generis* dichotomy that emerged from his ecological perspective on social life.

1.2 Competition, Dominance, and Succession in Nature and Society

For human ecologists, the mechanism of *competition* appears to be central in explaining social order in human society in much the same way in which Darwin used the notion of “struggle for existence” to explain the orderly interrelations of species in the realm of nature:

Nothing is easier than to admit in words the truth of the universal struggle for life, or more difficult – at least I found it so – than constantly to bear this conclusion in mind. Yet unless it be thoroughly engrained in the mind, the whole economy of nature, with every fact on distribution, rarity, abundance, extinction, and variation, will be dimly seen or quite misunderstood. (Darwin 1872: 46) (...) Many cases are on record showing how complex and unexpected are the checks and relations between organic beings, which have to struggle together in the same country (idem: 51).

Park also borrowed from *The Origin of Species* the notion that, in natural as well as in human habitats, competition is coupled with cooperation – given that in both instances the individuals or species compete but are also dependent on each other – in the form of a complex process of *competitive cooperation* (Park 1952: 147). From this point of view, the individuals and institutions that make up any human community enable the efficient functioning of the social system through their involvement in a general process that consists of both competition and cooperation.

In an earlier work – *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* – Park and Burgess defined competition as “the process through which the distributive and ecological organization of society is created” (1969: 508). Competition is conceived as a universal process in nature, displaying essentially the same characteristics in plant, animal or human communities. Thus, “competition” is conceptualized by Park and Burgess as “*interaction without social contact*” (1969: 506 emphasis in original). In Park’s view, social contact is linked to the presence of consciousness and the possibility of communication at a symbolic level (1969: 506). The different forms that competition assumes in social life – such as political, economic or ethnic conflict among others – are mere variations on the basic “theme” of the struggle for existence, given that “in human society, competition is always complicated with other processes” (Park 1969: 506).

By applying the concept of competition to urban communities, human ecologists have sought to explain the organization of cities (more precisely, of American cities) and the patterns of their development. Competition arises when industrial and commercial institutions struggle to occupy those areas of the city that have the highest land values, that is the city centre or Central Business District. Competition is highest in these areas and tends to diminish with decreasing land values towards the outer limits of the urban community (Park 1952: 152).

From a human ecological perspective, competition performs two vital functions in any form of human or non-human community. First, it allocates every individual or species to the particular position within the habitat, which allows its development in accordance with its own needs but also with those of its neighbours. “The metropolis is, it seems, a great sifting and sorting mechanism, which, in ways that are not yet wholly understood, infallibly selects out of the population as a whole the individuals best suited to live in a particular region and a particular milieu” (Park 1952: 79). Second, competition ensures the survival of the whole community by restoring “the communal equilibrium” (Park 1952: 150) in case this is affected by internal or external disturbances. These two aspects are intimately related because, by re-establishing the biotic and social equilibrium, competition also brings about a more thorough and territorially extensive division of labour (Park 1952: 154) which can offer more “niches” of survival for the members of the community.

For Robert Park, competition is essentially economic competition and is the equivalent, in social life, of Darwin’s struggle for existence, even if restricted and altered by norms and conventions (Park 1952: 228). It is interesting that human ecologists did not go further to adopt the other Darwinian concept related to the “struggle for existence”, namely that of “natural selection” or, as Herbert Spencer termed it, “survival of the fittest”. One may speculate as to why the analogy with the natural realm stopped at this point. A possible explanation could be that an emphasis on the selection of the fittest individuals (and the corresponding elimination of the “less fit”) as a result of the struggle would have appeared inadequate when applied to the human world where competition is generally milder. In Park’s human ecology, even the less fit can survive although they are relegated to less favourable “ecological niches”. In this way, they can also take part in the general process of cooperation, which appears to be the climax of competition. In his words, “competition [by re-establishing the communal equilibrium] brings about a condition in which competition is superseded by co-operation” (Park 1952: 150).

Closely associated with the principle of competition are the concepts of *dominance* and *succession*. With regard to dominance, Park points out the similarities between the