

Light Green Environmental Sociology

A Commentary

By David Orton

An Invitation to Environmental Sociology by Michael Mayerfeld Bell
3rd edition, Pine Forge Press, California, 2009, 368 pages, paperback
ISBN: 978-1-4129-5655-0

“Virtually all environmental sociologists recognize today: Whatever else nature might be, it is also a *social construction*. Nature is something we make as much as it makes us. How we see nature depends upon our perspective on social life. And as this perspective changes across time and place, history and culture, nature changes with it.” Michael Bell, p. 190

“Ecocentric theorists are right to argue that human beings are NATURAL beings, but they are wrong to suggest that the biological is somehow more ‘real’ than the social. Such a view remains a serious obstacle to ecocentric theories of self and society as well as to any accommodation between ecocentric and sociological approaches to environmental issues.” Philip Sutton, **Nature, Environment and Society**, 2004, p. 114

“I do not think ecology sufficient to explain every aspect of human culture...We must also discover how human culture evolved, how social, political, and religious factors, etc., became predominant at various times. Ecological models frame such factors’ significance, but do not replace them.” Fred Bender, **The Culture of Extinction: Toward a Philosophy of Deep Ecology**, 2003, p. 102

“The overwhelming thrust of the ‘environmental’ movement is dedicated not to the interest of Nature, but to the security and sustainability of the advancement of the human enterprise.” John Livingston, **Rogue Primate**, 1994, p. 214

Introduction

An Invitation to Environmental Sociology, by sociologist author Michael Bell, is meant to be “a core text for courses in Environmental Sociology”, and, according to the book jacket, useful for other courses like “Introduction to Environmental Issues” and “Environmental Ethics”. My reading of it was by chance. My wife ordered the book for herself, based on a reference given in an environmental sociology internet discussion group which she monitors and where my own writings from a left biocentric perspective are sometimes posted. I studied sociology many years ago, as a graduate student (The New School in New York City) and taught it for two years in Montreal in the late 1960s, before my teaching services, which tried to combine activism and the

academic life, were no longer required. I have not kept up with “the discipline” but some interest in sociology and “the sociological imagination” has remained. As a supporter of deep ecology -- both theoretically and in an applied sense -- how ecocentrism or the natural world and sociology have impacted each other in the relatively new area of environmental sociology is therefore of interest. I wondered how Michael Bell’s book would compare with Philip Sutton’s interesting 2004 sociological text **Nature, Environment and Society**, which overall is extremely positive towards deep ecology and ecocentrism, and which was favourably reviewed by me (with some criticism) in 2004 under the title “[Ecocentric Transformation](#).”

Notwithstanding the criticisms I am going to raise, there is an immense amount of scholarship in this book and a storehouse of information. Positions of various thinkers, for example, Malthus, John Rawls, Thoreau, Thorstein Veblen, etc. are summarized and evaluated in an understandable manner and some interesting social data is given. The same is done with the various tendencies in environmental sociology and their leading exponents, for example, Ulrich Beck’s thoughtful ideas on what he calls the risk society: “In the words of Beck, in class society ‘being determines consciousness,’ and in risk society ‘consciousness (knowledge) determines being.’” (p. 227) Bell has an interesting non-traditional academic background for a sociologist, with degrees in geology and forestry and “several joint degrees in environmental studies and sociology.” (p. 241)

A very significant and puzzling difference between Bell and Sutton is that the ideas of Arne Naess (1912-2009), play no role in Bell’s view of environmental sociology, except perhaps by exclusion and by featuring one-sided critics of ecocentrism like Ramachandra Guha. There is a kind of “deathbed repentance” discussion of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in the last couple of pages of the book, but it is not very informative and with no mention of Naess. Also, other deep ecologists, like Fred Bender or important Canadian deep ecology-inspired thinkers, like John Livingston (1923-2006) and Stan Rowe (1918-2004), a co-author of the influential ecocentric **A Manifesto for Earth**, are not, apparently, to be considered worthy of discussion, notwithstanding the importance of all three thinkers for a radical and deeper ecocentric environmentalism. (Bell does discuss the late Val Plumwood, who was significantly influenced by deep ecology, under ecofeminism.) Nineteenth century Thoreau, who is presumably “safe” -- a person many can abstractly agree with -- is given some prominence. However, notwithstanding the inclusion of Thoreau, Bell’s book overall opposes Thoreau’s basic position: “‘In Wildness is the preservation of the World.’” (p. 164)

Naess is mentioned once in passing, along with “many environmental ethicists” (p. 166), but there is no discussion of the contribution of Naess to ecocentric or “deep” environmentalism. Nor is there a discussion of “shallow” or light green thinking -- outlined by Naess -- and which is dominant in the environmental and green movements. Deep ecology views on the formation of the ecological Self are not presented. There is no discussion of the implications for contemporary society and sociology of Naess’ statement that “the earth does not belong to humans” and the implications of this for a private property and consumption-obsessed culture, as in the United States, where Bell is based. While there are 37 pages of references in **An Invitation to Environmental Sociology**, there is *not one* reference to the work of Naess.

For deep ecology supporters, “society” and individual consciousness must become inclusive of plants and other animals and the earth itself, for humankind to come into a long term sustainable relationship with the natural world. The American ecologist and forester Aldo Leopold eventually also came to see this, as some of his essays, e.g. **Thinking like Mountain** or **The Land Ethic**, published after his death, show. Environmental justice, from a deep ecology perspective, is much more inclusive than social justice. Arne Naess, who has been the main philosophical influence on the radical ecocentric environmental movement, spoke of the necessity for individuals and societies to move past egoistic self-consciousness to a ecological Self-consciousness (spelt with a capital S to signify this), which encompasses the Earth. Councils of All Beings -- an organizational form developed within the deep ecology movement -- is one manifestation of a practical training ground for acquiring ecological Self consciousness, away from a consumer self-identity. But this is not discussed in Bell’s book. As the Canadian eco-philosopher and environmental activist (and leftist) Stan Rowe put it: “We are Earthlings first, humans second.” (**Earth Alive**, p. 21)

Sociology taught me that how people view both the social and natural worlds, and their conception of “self”, is conditioned to some extent by their cultural and religious socialization and their position in the class structure of whatever society a person was born into. This conditioning does not however deny the actual objective or materialistic existence of Nature, from my perspective. Social perceptions can be in conflict with the reality of the natural world, even in capitalist industrial societies such as Canada. Here is an example: for a brainwashed supporter of industrial forestry, a “forest” can be a biologically sterile plantation of sprayed, even-aged, single species coniferous trees destined for a pulp mill, birthed from short-term economically profitable clear-cut logging. Opposing this is a forest which includes the plant and animal diversity of the multi-species, multi-aged original Acadian forest, with about thirty indigenous tree species and diverse wildlife, once occurring widely in the Canadian Maritimes.

Regarding social perceptions, or the social construction of realities -- is not society itself such a construct and in this sense quite different from the material reality of the natural world, which ultimately has an independence from the viewer? Activists can learn from sociology and the sociological imagination, but contrary to the intent of the quotations by Bell and Sutton given above, the natural world does have an independent reality which exists notwithstanding how people perceive it. I would also argue, again contrary to what these two environmental sociologists say, that the natural world is more real than the socially constructed worlds of various human societies, and that it highly influences their formation. Aren’t environmental catastrophes, both present and coming down upon us in the near future, influencing how societies have to organize themselves? In this sense Nature is conditioning, or as deep ecologist Fred Bender notes, “framing” the debate. So why is this so hard for environmental sociologists to accept? Sociology is after all a human-centered discipline, where many of its important theorists, like Durkheim, came out of the human-centeredness of the nineteenth century industrial revolution. This is a real carry-over legacy, it seems, even though sociology is now struggling to come to terms with the environmental movement and what it has to teach.

Michael Bell argues that “most environmental sociologists are themselves environmentalists” (p. 196), but there is a very big difference between shallow (reform) and deep (radical or revolutionary) environmentalism and the analysis which flows from either position.

Further Discussion

As mentioned in the Introduction to this commentary, there is a lot of very useful information and social data in **An Invitation to Environmental Sociology**. For example, Bell reports on the sharp increase in income inequality today. Social justice for humans must be an essential part of any evaluation of the “sustainability” of industrial capitalist society, as it is an important aspect of the theoretical tendency left biocentrism. Yet clearly, the overall trends are against this, with the data that is shown by this author:

“Income inequality has dramatically increased in recent decades. In 1960, the fifth of the world’s people living in its richest countries commanded 30 times as much of the world’s income as the fifth of people living in the poorest countries -- a figure that in most people’s view was bad enough. Roughly 100 years earlier, in 1879, it was 7 to 1. But today, that richest fifth commands 66 **times** as much of the world’s income as the poorest fifth.” p. 21

Other interesting information which bucks conventional wisdom was the following data from the United States:

“In recent years, social status has emerged as an important predictor of environmental concern, at least in the United States, and in completely the reverse direction of the old charge that environmentalism is an elite concern. People from privileged social groups now tend to have significantly less support for environmentalism than others do. In general, support for environmentalism is higher among women, people of color, and people with lower incomes.” p. 168

The author says, in answering why, “that there is an ideological connection between social domination and environmental domination.” (p. 169) This would be a conclusion drawn by the late Murray Bookchin and social ecology supporters, although not so mentioned by Bell.

On Balance and Human-centeredness

Overall, Michael Bell comes through as one of those “balanced” fence-sitting writers: “The relationship between society and the environment is a dialogue. Each shapes, but does not determine the other.” (p. 86) He has quite a flair for coining terms which seem to promise a theoretical breakthrough, e.g. “dialogic democracy” (p. 271), “dialogic development” (p. 275), or “virtual environmentalism” (p. 267), but in the end such nomenclature turns out to be quite vacuous. Fancy gimmicky words aside, this book has a status quo societal, not nature, tilt: “Wilderness is, in the end, a state of mind more than a state of nature.” (p.201) This theme, which permeates this book, is that nature is a social or human concept. I do not think the grizzly,

the wolf, the cougar, the wolverine or the woodland caribou would agree with this author, but perhaps they do not enter the conceptual discussion?

Bell speaks of the “spectacular success” of the German Green Party (p. 228) -- whereas Rudolf Bahro (1935-1997), a deep Green German theoretical fundamentalist, and one of the Green Party co-founders, left the party in the early 1980s because he considered that electoral Greens were only brushing the teeth of the industrial capitalist dragon. Similarly, Bell quotes Al Gore admiringly, as inspirational for mobilizing the ecological society (p. 237). He also invokes the Brundtland Commission -- which promoted ‘sustainable development’ -- for governing the ecological society (p. 263). [For a different view, see for my review, “[Al Gore’s Ideological Limitations](#)”, of his book **Earth in the Balance** and my [critique of ‘sustainable development’](#) and the Brundtland Commission.]

The author does not take a stand against the introduction of new biotechnology and Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) rice varieties and their efficacy. (p. 101) Contrary to Bell, it is not correct to say, without qualification, that Bt is a “biological” control agent (p. 120) as it contains various chemicals as stickers or adherents, whose disclosure is normally concealed by the spray manufacturers. Bell gives a further balanced view on why the US fought the Iraq War when he says “The extent to which the Iraq War is about oil is a matter of political judgment.” (p. 79)

Another balanced view is on the extremely brief and misleading discussion on anthropocentrism and ecocentrism: “Thus, the wise anthropocentrist is also an ecocentrist and vice versa, not one or the other.” (p. 286) But what if the two positions are in conflict, as they most often are, which gives way? For example, do we put a stop to fishing blue fin tuna when the existing numbers are a shadow of their former glory and the tuna are hunted all over the world using sophisticated technologies, including planes, for the big fish which fetch thousands of dollars when delivered to high-end seafood consumers? The typical anthropocentric environmentalist in Atlantic Canada -- where these fish are caught in late summer and fall -- would not touch this issue with a ten-foot pole. Also, they do not publicly oppose the industry- and government-supported annual commercial slaughter of the ice seals (harp and hooded seals) by fishermen, which occurs every year in this region. Seals “compete” with fishermen for “our” fish, is the everyday mantra. It is those with ecocentric sentiment, a relatively few voices, who speak out on such issues in this region, where commercial fishing is a major industry and source of jobs. [For an ecocentric view on marine life, see the article “[Seals and Greens: Some Value Conflicts](#)”]

John Livingston’s quote in the introduction to this commentary is relevant in the anthropocentrism discussion. Livingston is Canada’s Arne Naess. As Livingston further notes: “The ‘development’ ideologues do not hear the screaming of the buttressed trees or the wailing of the rivers or the weeping of the soils. They do not hear the sentiment agony and the anguish of the non-human multitudes -- torn, shredded, crushed, incinerated, choked, dispossessed.” **Rogue Primate**, p. 60

Livingston was an ecological seer, whose views deserve more attention. For example, the 1981 book **The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation**, showed the empty ritualism of environmental assessment panels across Canada and their destructive legacy for wildlife and the Earth. He called such panels “a grandiloquent fraud, a hoax, and a con.” (p. 33) Yet to this day, legions of anthropocentric environmentalists, professing a concern for the environment and disregarding Livingston and their own experience, eagerly embrace participation in such assessment panels. This gives the panels legitimacy and enables the so-called developments to roll on, bringing more of Nature into industrial production. [My 1997 article “[Environmental Hearings and Existential Dilemmas: The Sable Gas Project](#)” discussed a situation in the Maritimes (a region which has become a fossil fuel extraction zone for the United States), where ecocentric environmentalists put Livingston’s view on environmental assessments into practice.]

The majority of environmental and green activists, then, are not normally ecocentric. An ecocentric organizer must usually combine anthropocentric interests as an entry point into an environmental conflict with more Earth-centered concerns. For example, in an environmental issue like a forest spraying situation, the ecocentric organizer recognizes that perhaps for most people who initially become mobilized, human health or anthropocentric concerns can be dominant and is what motivates them to action. The interests of the ecosystem in not being sprayed, will be raised by those with a more ecocentric consciousness -- those who see themselves as Earthlings first and human beings second, and for whom nature is not a social construct.

Yet another balanced position in Bell’s book is on so-called “smart growth”, which he seems to support, as he does “green taxes”, “industrial ecology” and “dematerialization.” Radical ecocentric environmentalists would see these ideas as covering over the need for fundamental changes in industrial capitalist society, which, because of its inherent expansionary nature, does not respect ecological limits. For Bell, however, “The basic idea of smart growth is to reject the standard polarization between anti-growth naysayers and pro-growth yaysayers, familiar to development controversies across the country.” (p. 278)

This last point leads to a discussion of Bell’s attitude towards industrial capitalism itself.

On Attitude to Industrial Capitalism

“Since accumulation of property leads inexorably to ecological unsustainability, from the evolutionary perspective, capitalism is the deviant economic system.” Fred Bender, **The Culture of Extinction**, p. 111

The main thrust in this introductory environmental sociology text, is to take the existing capitalist economic system for granted -- “capitalism seems here to stay for a good while yet” (p. 278) -- along with treating nature as a “resource” for humankind, and then to argue that there can be a sustainable relationship within this system for humans, providing some changes are made. He

expresses what he calls “the central issues of environmentalism” as being “sustainability, environmental justice, and the rights and beauty of habitat.” (See pp. 34 and 89, for example.) Yet sustainable, like sustainable development, can mean a myriad of things and varies depending on the eye of the beholder. When we speak of justice, is this human-centered or all-species centered and what if they are in conflict? The rights and beauty of habitat has some promise, but, at crunch time, is it Earth first or people and corporations first? One of the major sociological themes of Bell’s book is of Nature as social construct, so how can beauty have its own intrinsic validity and not be dependent on the human beholder for legitimacy? Could huge industrial wind turbines, with their road and power line support structures -- and with their blade kill of birds, bats and butterflies -- be considered beautiful? After all, this is in part the justification used for allowing their placement in parks and protected areas and other relatively unspoiled rural areas. Such wind turbines, with their industrialization of the countryside, provide some token non-fossil fuel energy component, without any change in high consumption lifestyles or reductions in human populations.

As Bell informs students more generally in his text:

“One of the great benefits of capitalism, we are often told, is its openness to creativity. If so, then let’s use this creativity. Let’s use it for environmentally appropriate ends. Let’s try out a few different forms of economic relations that are kind to people and the environment and see if we can figure out how they might work.” p. 283

Yet this author does have, it seems, some latent anti-capitalist sentiment. The following quote has promise, although an anomaly in this book: “The tendency of unfettered market forces is for increased growth, increased production, increased environmental consequences, and increased inequality.” (p. 60) He can include, as one of his 18 self-references, an article written for the Marxist academic eco-politics journal **Capitalism, Nature, Socialism**.

Some pale Marxism is also perhaps reflected in Bell’s use of the term “dialogue” which acknowledges some indebtedness to Marxian dialectics, but he says Marx “overpolarizes the explanation of social change.” (pp. 293-294) The overall argument in the book, however, is to take capitalism as a given, within which to practice environmental sociology:

The author sometimes makes ecologically silly statements, for the sake of some hypothetical argument, which serve to undermine taking the environmental crisis seriously. For example: “Growth in consumption, production, and population does not necessarily degrade the environment -- at least theoretically. In fact, population growth itself has no environmental consequences at all...Improved technology and social organization could possibly compensate for any potential impacts and even leave the environment in better shape than it was to begin with.” p. 89

This statement also shows the basic anthropocentrism (and obliviousness) of this position, since more humans, no matter what their consumption patterns, means less living space for other life forms with which we share this planet.

Conclusion

In past animistic indigenous societies, which existed for thousands of years, and unlike the last two hundred years plus of industrial society, humans were integrated into the natural world and largely saw themselves as responding to it. As Calvin Martin noted in his wonderful comment about such indigenous hunting and gathering societies, in his 1992 book **In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time**: “Only a fool would imagine himself as somehow exclusively a *human* being.” (p. 18) Such a shift in consciousness, which is part of a deep ecology-inspired environmentalism, also needs to be part of a truly representative environmental sociology, trying to convey the essence of the challenge from contemporary environmentalism.

My sense of **An Invitation to Environmental Sociology**, is that there is a lot of useful information presented by Michael Bell, but the exclusion of deep ecology and the radical environmentalism which flows from this philosophy is a major flaw. One has to conclude that the environmentalism which Bell says he supports is what Naess called a “shallow” or light green environmentalism. For students, then, this means they have to engage with a Light Green Environmental Sociology. As the author expresses on the last page of his text: “If for no other reason than they are good for our interests, we need to have sentimental bonds with the ecosystem as well.” (p. 286)

This book takes industrial capitalist society as a given and also its basic human-centered attitude towards the natural world and to our fellow species. The author seems incapable of understanding a deep ecological environmental imagination and on how to merge this with that sociological imagination which C. Wright Mills inspired sociology students with, including myself, so many years ago. Ecocentric environmentalists interested in sociology await an environmental sociology which will present a deeper environmental perspective. Unfortunately, this book is not it.

October 2009

To obtain any of the Green Web publications, write to us at:

Green Web, R.R. #3, Salt Springs, Nova Scotia, Canada, BOK 1PO

E-mail: greenweb@ca.inter.net

Back to

[The Green Web](#)

[Taste of Green Web Writings and Left Biocentrism](#)

http://home.ca.inter.net/~greenweb/Light_Green_Environmental_Sociology.pdf

Last updated: October 25, 2009