The Environment-Labour Relationship: New Directions for Sociological Thinking and Research

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Abstract
This paper argues the case for a better sociological understanding of the interplay between the worlds of work (formal/informal, paid/unpaid, productive/reproductive) and environmental problems, particularly in the Australian context. This paper commences with a brief outline of some points of significance around the research terrain, followed by a snapshot of research at the sub-disciplinary intersection of environmental sociology and the sociology of work, with particular reference to questions around the environment-labour relationship. In approaching the scholarship we have canvassed a number of prominent environmental sociology texts and examined the last five years of publication of the Australian Journal of Sociology and Journal of Industrial Relations. In general, we found the sociological literature on the environmental-labour relationship to be relatively undeveloped. Lastly, we consider a framework for advancing research on the environment-labour relationship that incorporates three interconnected sites of labour – the labour market, the household and the community. This kind of interconnected framework could usefully accommodate questions around how social divisions of labour and structures of labour inequality are connected to environmental issues, for example. This research agenda and praxis is vital if our collective environmental survival is to be secured in an enduring, equitable, inclusive, just and democratic manner.

Keywords: environment; labour; work; industrial relations; class; environmental sociology.

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Introduction

This paper argues the case for better sociological understanding of the interplay between the worlds of work (formal/informal, paid/unpaid, productive/reproductive) and environmental problems, particularly in the Australian context. The somewhat undeveloped state of knowledge about the environment-labour relationship hinders efforts to address the pressing environmental and social justice issues on our doorstep. This paper commences with some brief points of significance around the research terrain, followed by a snapshot of research located at the sub-disciplinary intersection between environmental sociology and the sociology of work, with particular reference to the environment-labour relationship. Finally, we consider a framework for advancing research on the environment-labour relationship.

Why the Environment-Labour Relationship Matters

Advancing knowledge about the environment-labour relationship has never been so pressing for a number of reasons. On the environmental front, we face unprecedented threats to the planet and humankind. In the case of climate change, for example, experts agree that the dangers it poses are clear and imminent (IPCC 2007). The social causes and effects of these catastrophes are receiving greater attention from disaster sociologists and political economists (Klein 2008; Keys et al. 2006;
Davis 1998). Macionis and Plummer (2005: 660) point to a ‘rising tide of major disasters’ between the 1950s (20 major disasters) and 1990s (86 major disasters), for example.

On the political front, the new Federal Labor Government was elected, in large part, on pledges to give high priority to the threefold concerns of workplace relations, environmental issues and the spiralling cost of living in Australia (OECD 2007; Cox and Pavelitch 2006). At the levels of state policy, community action and public debate, the interconnections between these issues are becoming clearer – particularly around the labour market implications of environmental degradation. Sociologists have been slow to grapple with these issues and to develop a research framework that can speak to these inter-related concerns. Though there has been some public discussion of equity issues in sustainability debates and policies, for example, it has not been systematically informed by academic evidence (McKenzie 2004).

The relative absence of this kind of research in Australia, compared to our international counterparts, is of little assistance to the growing chorus of unease around environmental justice issues (Sandler 2007; Martinez-Alier 2002). At a recent national roundtable, disquiet about the inadequate research and policy attention given to the social justice repercussions of environmental issues, such as climate change, was palpable (BSL 2007). According to Sherrard and Tate, for instance:

The general lack of consideration of disadvantaged Australians in climate change policy formulation is and should be of concern to all of us, and in particular to the social justice movement. It is a product of the breadth of social and economic issues arising from climate change, the delay in national debate over its reality and implications, the consequent swiftness of movement in the current debate and policy process, the
dominance of business concerns in that debate, and the lack of capacity within the social justice movement to engage the issue (2007: 29-30).

Sherrard and Tate’s comments on the state of national debate echo earlier research by Clive Hamilton (2001) on the dominant influence of private capital on government environment policy through a lobbyist clique he refers to as ‘the greenhouse mafia.’ Hamilton (2001) argues there is an urgent need for a better informed civil society, equipped with scholarly evidence, through which the work of building the political impetus to drive a socially and ecologically sustainability future for Australia might be produced.

As Hamilton’s study indicates, competing political, ideological and class interests shape the dimensions and impacts of environmental issues and responses to them. Similarly, in a research review of environmental inequalities and corporate environmental crime, US scholar David Simon states ‘numerous studies demonstrate that globally, nationally, and locally, upper-class business owners have consistently opposed certain environmental regulations, approved of those that benefited them economically, and used others as a form of social control of the lower and working classes’ (2000: 634). It is difficult to see how notions of environmental equity might be addressed without conducting class and labour analyses of environmental issues; as discussed below, this research terrain, which is central to the scholarship on environmental justice in the United States, has barely begun to emerge in the Australian context.

A Research Snapshot

In approaching the scholarship on the environment-labour relationship we have canvassed a number of prominent environmental sociology texts and examined the last five years (2003-2008) of publication of the Australian Journal of Sociology and Journal of Industrial Relations. In general,
we found the literature on the relationship between environmental and labour issues to be relatively undeveloped. Neither of the Australian journals surveyed contained any articles that engaged with the environment-labour relationship. Indeed, the *American Journal of Sociology* is equally mute on the links between class, labour and the environment. This is not to suggest that such analyses are not reported in other journals (for example McNeil and Williams 2007; Fettig 2004; Ostry 2003; Caneba and Siar 1998), but that several leading disciplinary journals have yet to examine these issues.

The absence of recent journal articles on the environment-labour relationship may indicate little in the way of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, perhaps registering the silo approach that still pervades the academy and the practical, financial and competitive pressures that can undermine capacity for such interdisciplinary endeavours. Alternatively, Hannigan (2006: 15) suggests that while ‘...there is much to gain in applying the sociological imagination to the extra-disciplinary study of environmental issues; for example, through political economy models... Alas, sociologists far too often end up as “underlabourers” in this endeavour, being viewed as supporting actors in a cast dominated by natural scientists and environmental policy-makers’. Needless to say, few answers are to be found in Australia’s flagship sociology and industrial relations journals to questions around the environment-labour relationship.

While the relatively new status of environmental sociology as a sub-discipline provides some explanation for the paucity of material at this time, some prominent environmental sociology texts that summarise the quarter decade of academic endeavour also contribute little to the topic. Many of the leading environmental sociology texts provide a theoretical overview of the field. Cudworth (2003) is no exception, making reference to various theoretical approaches including Deep Ecology, Social Ecology, Marxism and Eco-feminism. While there is some mention of social structures of
domination - capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, militarism and the state - absent from these analyses is any exploration of specific environment-labour issues such as the environmental labour market, environmental ‘volunteerism’, or environmental ‘emotional labour’ (at least in direct relation to doing work which is environmentally destructive). The emphasis on pollution in the Cudworth (2003) text is illustrative. Pollution, which is seen to be worst in ex-state socialist countries, but not coastal China or the mega slum cities of the Global South, is passed off as a problem of economic and political implosion and the absence of suitable controls. Cudworth (2003) does not address the question of labour’s role in response to international/regional environmental disasters or the abatement of pollution and other environmental hazards. Pollution is dealt with as a theoretical abstraction. Few empirical studies are cited. There is no sense of historical periodization. Class analysis is never attempted except to generalise about the composition, but never the social character, outlook or politics, of social movements engaged in environmental struggles. Absent is any exploration of the environment or nature within the parameters of political economy. Accumulation and exploitation on a global, regional or national scale are unknown categories. The book’s silence on the exploitation of labour power and of the natural world is salient.

Badging itself in the tradition of Peter Berger’s (1963) seminal humanist Marxist work An Invitation to Sociology, Bell’s (2004) text brings a holistic approach to environmental questions, with a particular emphasis on consumption. The book offers a general overview of how the economy, consumption, development, population and public health ‘shape’ the environment. Again however, these categories largely remain abstractions. While examples are usefully offered across a global historical spectrum, no materialist analysis is offered, much like the Cudworth (2003) text. Moreover, environmental catastrophe as a looming future for humankind has no consideration in this book. Global warming and economic losses are graphed over the period 1980-2002 and the spread of epidemics are associated with the strange weather events. Yet, Bell is a pessimist about
atmospheric carbon dioxide as the cause of global warming, arguing somewhat controversially that there is no proof that CFCs deplete the ozone layer. Like Cudworth (2003), Bell cites examples of environmental disasters and advocates global environmental justice – but in a vacuum (2004: 209-212). Drawing on the Marxist tradition, the ‘Needs of Money’ and the ‘Treadmill of Production’ are held responsible for environmental destruction. Nonetheless, class analysis is surprisingly absent. The usual sociological hymns are sung: worker productivity, the work ethic, income inequality, time scarcity and the work-spend cycle. Capital becomes a Protestant parable (2004: 130-131). Lenin’s credo – ‘what is to be done’ – is replaced with the question, ‘what is nature.’ Bell replies grandly: ‘Nature is inescapably human, just as humans are inescapably a conception of nature’ (2004: 196). The author offers an invitation to environmental sociology as a bromide. Even though it cites the problems of salinity, overconsumption, acid rain, the profit motive, cancer incidence and green consumerism, there is no line of march on the fundamental, if not terminal, change in nature and the accumulation and exploitation of it on a global scale by capital.

Reflecting his postmodern leanings, Hannigan’s (2006) text gives little space to the connections between labour, social class and the environment – these matters nonetheless remain implicit in the content covered. The bulk of the volume is devoted to considerations of environmental sociology theory, discourse, media and science and risk issues related to the environment. While some attention is given to the environmental justice movement, North-South relations, and social movements – the ways in which labour-capital relations influence those phenomena is not subject to analysis in any detail. We are alerted to debates about the class composition of the mainstream US environmental movement, to international disputes over water privatisation between poorer and richer nations, and to the role of international entities like the International Monetary Fund and transnational corporations, but these are not explained with reference to global capital (2006: 55-62). Instead, Hannigan’s text expounds an ‘emergence model’ of environment and society, which
Hannigan (2006: 139) notes:

...emergence is what happens when an interconnected system of relatively simple elements self-organises to form a more intelligent, more adaptive higher-level behaviour. ... [similarly] social organisation and the production of knowledge are fundamentally fluid, dynamic, and adaptive ... the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami offers and excellent opportunity to study emergence in action. With many existing certainties [and lives] washed away, new actions and formations are possible...

Hannigan relates these ideas to social movements and identity formation. Apart from the dangers and difficulties of applying laws of nature to human society, it is unclear why existing approaches such as world systems theory or disaster capitalism studies are ignored in favour of Hannigan’s ‘emergence model.’ Overall, the text does not bring us much closer to understanding the links between capital-labour relations and the environmental precipice upon which we stand.

In stark contrast, King and McCarthy’s edited volume offers some detailed engagement with these matters with dedicated chapters on work and environmental justice issues. The two ‘work’ chapters analyse the links between the environment and paid employment, challenging the assumption ‘that tougher environmental regulations mean fewer jobs’, and by extension contending, for example, that environmental concerns can provide useful political, economic and ideological cover for the exploitative labour practices of some industries (Freudenburg et al. 2005: 139; also Pellow 2005). Importantly, the King and McCarthy (2005) text goes beyond the point of production to include several examinations of the relationship between the environment and the unpaid work of social reproduction. Taylor’s (2005) chapter, for example, provides an historical overview of the ways in which the working class, people of colour, women and other unprivileged communities have laboured to address environmental problems, despite their marginalisation from the middle-class
dominated environmental movement. Notwithstanding the texts American emphasis, an Australian study of the class and gender implications of government policies on lead contamination is included (Bryson et al. 2005: 107). The authors demonstrate how ineffectual state regulations compel working class women, rather than the polluting industry, to literally mop up the contaminated dust residue blanketing their homes and endangering their families. This domestic environmental labour is, they contend, embedding ‘unequal social class and gender relations.’ A further chapter considers the labour performed by working class communities by examining the impetus behind the *First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit* (Bullard and Johnson 2005). These chapters crucially illustrate the types, range and significance of research that has been conducted elsewhere on the environment-labour relationship.

This brief snapshot provides some sense of environmental sociology approaches to the environment-labour relationship. Overall, far too little is known about how the dialectical relationship between structural constraints and agency (individual and collective) plays out in particular social arenas (such as the labour market, households and community). Hvid and Lund (2002: 9) explain why greater attention to the environment-labour relationship is crucial for advancing social and ecological sustainability:

The lack of focus on work is according to our view, the vulnerable point of the current movements which promote sustainable development. Without active involvement of work as a creative process in the development of sustainability, the movement will block its access to the main creative force of society. Instead, sustainability will, at best, be ignored by working people or at worst be considered a threat for working and living conditions. Steps in the direction of sustainability are almost impossible if people can’t see those steps as improvements of daily life, and without involvement and participation steps towards sustainability will be considered as a threat to the quality of daily life.
In their view, work and the labour movement can be a possible obstacle or creative factor in enhancing sustainability. Applied research is particularly needed to better understand how to harness the positive, and minimise the negative, aspects of this relationship, if a truly just and sustainable future for humankind and the planet is to be forged.

The Environment-Labour Relationship: Directions for a Research Framework

If sociological inquiry is to more fully investigate the environment-labour relationship, then an integrated research framework could be helpful. King and McCarthy’s (2005) collection hints at a useful way of organising future research on the environment-labour relationship. We suggest that the three interconnected sites of labour indicated in King and McCarthy’s text – the labour market, the household and the community – are a useful starting point for developing an integrated framework. Conventionally, these sites are divided into domains of productive labour (paid employment) and socially reproductive labour (unpaid household and community work). What types of research issues might arise from this integrated threefold approach to investigating the environment-labour relationship?

In the labour market questions might focus on aspects of the emerging environmental labour market, for example (Fieldhouse 2005; Krozer 2005; Fettig 2004). If the Australian economy is to move towards clean and sustainable production and service delivery, should we not expect to see a change in the occupational and industrial characteristics of the labour market? More broadly, how are conflicts between capital and labour over environmental issues playing out in the workplace? What might be uncovered from an examination of environmental discrimination and harassment of employees or environmental whistleblowers? What sort of emotional labour is attached to
performing environmentally destructive work? How are changing consumer behaviours, such as carbon offset purchasing, altering the labour market? Are environmental clauses making their way into enterprise agreements? In sum, what are the signs of accommodation or conflict in the way environmental imperatives are impinging on the labour market? These matters are commanding growing academic inquiry in other parts of the world (McNeill and Williams 2007).

On the home front, the impacts of environmental developments on the work of cleaning, caring and consuming require consideration. How are changing divisions of labour in the paid workforce, particularly those due to environmental impacts, affecting domestic divisions of labour in the household? For instance, long and fragmented hours, low pay, poor work/life provisions and weak autonomy - which characterise low paid women’s employment - leave few resources (financial, time and energy) for the work of sustainability beyond the paid workplace (Masterman-Smith and Pocock 2008; Masterman-Smith 2007; Watson et al 2003). The work of ecologically conscious consumption, for instance, requires efforts (labour) towards self-education, navigating marketing ploys, and squeezing expensive ‘green’ products into already stretched budgets. A higher paid woman who has better finances and workplace autonomy will have a different set of options to deal with the work of sustainability, such as commodified care, a private cleaner or on-line grocery shopping. These options free up time and outsource some consumption work (care and cleaning-related, for example), effectively passing responsibility for the work of sustainable consumerism to others. Moreover, as working class households are more often located in environmentally degraded landscapes and streetscapes – the work of cleaning up pollution at the household level disproportionately falls to working class women and their families, as does the labour of caring for workers exposed to environmental hazards (Bryson et al 2005; Hill 1989). These are just some elements of the relationship between environmental issues and household labour that await examination.
Unpaid community labour or ‘community management’ work in response to environmental issues is popularly thought of as volunteering, activism, or social inclusion. We have become accustomed to viewing this work beyond the front fence as an optional or leisurely pursuit. Just as the domestic labour debates once reshaped understandings of household work, women’s work and most recently the work/life collision, new ways of seeing and valuing unpaid community work are required (Masterman-Smith 2006; Pearson 2000; Peel 1993). Unpaid community work - as it relates to environmental matters - employs human resources to protect and thereby reproduce collective use values (clean air and water, uncontaminated parks and streets, for instance) and ultimately the raw materials and natural resources essential for the continued production of exchange values. Moreover, the labour of neighbourhood networking, for example, reinforces bonds of solidarity in material and non-material ways, embodying common experiences, grievances and struggles. This might involve community group work, conservation volunteering or lobbying on environmental health issues (King 2006; CVA 2005; Littig 2002; Green et al. 1999). Often this labour involves defensive actions against state or corporate intrusion on local environments. In essence, this is the work of reproducing social and cultural mores, practices and resources that, in this instance, underpin environmental justice and preservation.

**Conclusion**

Work, in its broadest and classical sense, is a crucial mechanism through which human society interacts with nature (Liodakis 2001). Yet, investigations focussing on the dialectical relationship between the sustainability of work and the work of sustainability, particularly applied empirical research located in advanced capitalist nations, are limited (Burgess and Connell 2005a, 2005b; Hvid and Lund 2002; Littig 2002). At a time when socio-environmental questions are dominated by
behavioural scientists, ecologists and environmental economists, there is a need for critical sociological and political economic approaches to consider, for example, how social divisions of labour, structures of inequality, socio-demographic patterns, and reconfigurations of work, home and community life are connected to environmental issues. This research agenda and praxis is vital if our collective environmental survival is to be secured in an enduring, equitable, inclusive, just and democratic manner (Littig 2002).

References


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