

Sociology, Ecology and a Global Economy

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Article abstract

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Sociology, Ecology and a Global Economy

M. Patricia MARCHAK

The question put to me at a recent meeting of university researchers, provincial government representatives, and business leaders was, what can sociology offer to the 'sustainable development' cause?

It was a fair question. The applied scientists had already said their piece, arguing a persuasive case for the lion's share of new research funding. With adequate funding, said they, automobiles could become non-polluting, alternative transportation modes could be developed, pulp mills could eliminate their toxic wastes, acid rain could be controlled, and waste management could become the industry of the future. The business leaders were primarily concerned with how new technologies could be put into production quickly, so that British Columbia would be ahead of the global competition for the vast, anticipated profits to be made from sustainable development.

The emphasis was on problem solving and the assumption was that we already knew the nature of the problem. The solutions were technological. My mind, trained to question assumptions and to be skeptical of technological solutions, was not well attuned to this debate. I knew, however, that to flub this one was to miss the chance of being involved with the search for solutions to issues of enormous importance. Sociologists do have much to say that is relevant, if we can discover the way to say it so that it will be effective.

These thoughts are on my mind as I try to answer the questions put to me by the editors of *Cahiers de recherche sociologique*. They ask: does sociology provide specific knowledge, what directions should sociology take now, and what is its relationship to other disciplines? I was instructed to express my personal views and values, and to 'represent' anglophone, Canadian sociology.

1 Specific topics in Anglo-canadian sociology

Sociology in anglophone Canada, during the 1950s and 1960s, was imitative of American schools of thought. These posited a universalistic society, or at least a monotone society, throughout North America. Their version, at that time, was singularly free of interest in economic power, class dynamics, or global politics. The publication of the *Watkins Report*, and other data on foreign ownership, were the catalysts for the growth of Canadian political economy, a perspective that emphasized differences more than similarities, and economics more than culture. Political economy was interdisciplinary from the beginning and its focus was on the very features of Canadian society that were omitted from American interpretations.

Political economy perspectives dominated the 1970s, pushing American theories aside. During that decade, Canadian sociology was directed, to a large extent, toward the issues of foreign ownership and control, the staples producing economy, class structure, regional disparities, the labour process, and the nature of both federal and provincial governments. Two debates continued throughout the 1980s. One was centered on the specific historical reasons for Canada's failure to develop an advanced industrial structure. The other, related issue was francophone Quebec's relationship with the rest of Canada.

Though not programmatic, it cannot be denied that these enquiries were motivated in some part by an ideological bias toward the maintenance or establishment of at least one, and possibly two, independent societies north of the American border. My feeling is, this motivation has dissolved in anglophone Canada, and has possibly been replaced by cynicism and a sense of defeat since the Free Trade debate. The response to that will no doubt be different in Quebec.

Apart from that ideological process, however, there were scholarly reasons for a decline in political economy. Though stimulating debates were undertaken, political economists began, toward the middle of the 1980s, to sense that the paradigms with which they were working were deficient in important ways. The major problems in the analysis we had used through the 1970s, lay in the uneasy combination of the Innis-cum Watkins staples theory and a selective version of neo-Marxism. We were unable to develop a solid theory of the interaction between class and state, and we had great difficulty combining the somewhat 'economistic' version of history with an appreciation for culture. We continued to debate, but could not resolve, the relationship between gender and class inequalities. We were also deficient in our grasp of organizations and organizational power, independent of class power. A regrouping, and a period of groping for new ways of looking at political economy, are currently in progress.

Research on feminist issues has become predominant within Canada over the past decade, coinciding with a substantial increase in the proportion of women employed in or studying sociology. It is possible that feminist theory has displaced political economy as the mainstream set of issues. One of the central problems in feminist theory is patriarchy; and as feminists have worked with this concept, they have obliged political economists and others to reconsider some of our theories of capitalism. Patriarchy predates capitalism; it cannot be easily meshed, theoretically, with class analyses; and it challenges us all to develop a new approach to dominance and inequality that may well go beyond gender considerations.

Possibly the largest body of research in Canada consists of regional studies. I think it is fair to say that we have developed a substantial understanding of ethnic relations in Quebec; of fishing communities in Newfoundland and the Maritimes; of the processes of assimilation for many immigrant groups in Ontario and Manitoba; of agrarian movements on the Prairies; of resource towns in Alberta and British Columbia; and of native communities in the north. It was not theory that made me organize much of my Canadiana library by territory! Quebec takes up two shelves all by itself: a fair indication of where our energies have been directed.

Other branches of sociological inquiry developed over the 1980s, include studies of social control (of which criminology is a component), studies in communications, and studies of cultural agencies. Continuing attention has been given to traditional areas such as demography, political and industrial sociology, family studies, religion, and ideology.

Does all this activity lead to specific knowledge? I believe it does. We are able to discuss specific conditions, cultures, structures, institutions, and relationships within bounded territorial societies, and that is no small feat. If specific knowledge means information that can be transmitted to others in straightforward packages, or that can be used in policy decision-making, yes, sociology can provide such knowledge. We can, for example, provide concrete, empirically based, immediately useful insights on language transmission, ethnic relations, community dynamics under various conditions, past and even probable future outcomes of certain economic or social policies, employment and management practices, and political processes. We can also offer lucid and logical interpretations of historical developments.

Specialists in communications regularly contribute to policy debates about broadcasting, for example. Specialists on prairie farming communities can knowledgeably advocate specific policies related to agriculture. Urban sociologists are frequently hired by municipalities to conduct research of an applied nature. Criminologists can provide concrete advice to law enforcement agencies (or their

adversaries). Demographers can offer reasoned predictions on population trends, and useful (often controversial) contributions to debates on immigration policy.

If specific knowledge is given a somewhat wider meaning, sociologists can still hold their own in providing insights and understandings of a deeper, less concrete nature, on the situations of those we study. I believe that sociological contributions in the fisheries, for example, have been notably important because they have challenged a predominantly economic understanding of fishermen's behavior. Sociologists, in collaboration with anthropologists, have produced solid research evidence that community control of fisheries is viable, under certain circumstances; that the economists' version of common property is misleading and possibly harmful; and that fishermen do not necessarily operate on simple, rational interest calculations.

There is, I think, a greater appreciation for these insights now than in the past, in good part because of the growing awareness of ecological damage that occurred in the absence of knowledge about social groups. In an area where I do a lot of research, the forest industry and forestry communities, I have noted an enormous change in attitudes toward sociology in the past few years. Forestry schools are actively recruiting sociologists to their staffs, recognizing, albeit belatedly, that they had trained technicians who were largely unaware of the political and economic institutions that buffeted their profession. The crisis in our forests is not caused by foresters' acts of commission, so much as by their acts of omission; and these are the result of narrow vision rather than evil intent. Policy-makers have discovered that their faith in multinational corporations did not, after all, lead to stable communities and increased levels of employment; sociologists are able to offer explanations for this, and some policy-makers are finally listening.

I am less certain that all this knowledge adds up to a general understanding of social processes. However, this may be a positive, rather than a negative, observation. The general theories of economic behavior espoused by economists, have turned out to be woefully inadequate; furthermore, because they have been so widely believed and embedded in policy, they have even been seriously detrimental to human societies.

2 Various approaches to social phenomena

In some respects, sociology is an umbrella, not a discipline. Its practitioners investigate a broad range of issues and use diverse methodologies. There is no single, core issue, no theoretical consensus, around which the rest is organized.

In other respects, however, we are indeed a discipline; and the core of the discipline is neither a theory nor a methodology, but a way of seeing the social world. It is a set of eyes and ears attuned to human beings, their common bonds and their diversity, their histories and their cultures, their dreams and their tragedies. It focuses on social groups, not individuals, and is concerned with social processes, not private actions. In some measure, it is an institutionalized rejection of the dominant paradigms of this society, especially, perhaps, of Adam Smith's version of free market economies operated by 'rational' individuals. While it lacks a paradigmatic theoretical core, sociology is more attuned to the intellectual tradition that includes Rousseau and Marx, than it is to the tradition of Locke, Smith, and Ricardo.

Social science emerged with industrial capitalism. Appropriately, its concerns were with property and government. What is property, what is the actual and the proper sphere of government, what is the source of power, how is authority exercised, what constitutes citizenship, how is wealth created and distributed, what are the respective rights and capacities of the individual and the collectivity? What causes inequality, and how should we respond to it? Those questions have remained central to our inquiries over three centuries, and we have continued to treat the answers to these questions as the central debates of the social sciences.

The Smithian version of society indulges in some very strong and unsubstantiated assumptions. One, is that people are, by nature, overwhelmingly motivated by self-interest. A second, is that the earth is a vast reservoir of resources freely available, and value is created by the application of labour to these resources. A third, is truly ideological and almost programmatic: that growth, in and of itself, is 'good'. Property rights are understood as essential preconditions for the development of resources, on the assumption that self-interested individuals will not produce goods and services unless guaranteed returns on their investments. Inequality is viewed as an unfortunate condition, but largely brought about through individual deficiencies.

Sociological understandings are at odds with this version, in significant ways. We have tended to question whether there is such a thing as 'human nature', looking more to culture as a conditioner of how humans behave toward the earth, as well as toward one another. We have tended to question whether unlimited growth is beneficial. We have considered the downside of private property rights, and have viewed the extreme individualism of contemporary society as a defect, rather than as a natural evolution. Inequalities have been interpreted as consequences of social processes, and most particularly of the combination of private property rights and market operations.

Classical and neoclassical economists have occasionally presumed to have specific knowledge about the way the world operates, when in fact what they have is a very limited knowledge of how people, conditioned by their theories and living in an advanced industrial, capitalist economy, will make choices when the markets do not include the usual alternatives. Sociologists have not been so presumptuous, but even so we have tended to assume many of the same conditions, or to ignore many of the same persistent themes in societies.

As an example of what we have left unexplored, consider the persistent evidence throughout human history, regarding the tendency for powerful elites to use whatever system they dominate to enrich themselves or their friends, or to do positive harm to their enemies. Consider, as well, the apparently persistent tendency for male leaders to assume that all females subservient to them are also potential sexual partners. Both economists and sociologists have treated the evidence on such matters as these as anomalous; these behaviors are seen as extraneous to our social systems, or as somehow abnormal. We do this, I imagine, because they do not fit into either of our general theoretical traditions. Military force, juntas, and dictatorships, combined with market economies, are equally mystifying and for the same reason. If, however, we begin to take history and contemporary evidence seriously, and recognize that many of these behaviors persistently occur in one system after another, we would be obliged to move beyond either theoretical tradition in search of an explanation.

Our present difficulty with the answers provided by our intellectual forebears, whether of the Smith-Locke variety or the Rousseau-Marx schools, probably stems from the timing when our intellectual pursuits began. We leave such problems to philosophers and psychologists. However, our procrastination has finally caught up to us, and the two streams of thought that have challenged our current paradigms are feminism and ecology; both are telling us in ways we cannot ignore, that we are deficient in the range of realities we encompass with our disciplines.

The analogy of the Copernican universe may perhaps be useful here. Suppose we have an explanation for the universe, certain details of which are under debate, when abruptly the debate changes course. Some observations, some theoretical insights are injected into the discourse that posit a different order altogether. Naturally, we object and Galileo might be ostracized; but still, we cannot cast aside the disturbance.

Feminism has introduced the concept of patriarchy, a system of power that predates and possibly supersedes property-based power systems. Ecology has introduced the problem of human dominance over the rest of nature, a problem that may have historical roots in the growth of Christianity, or in the industrial

revolution, or in markets, or in population growth: we simply do not know. It could also be a problem embedded within human nature. Neither patriarchy nor dominance over nature can be ignored, and both profoundly challenge the core assumptions of both Smithian and Marxist theoretical traditions.

Add to these challenges the expansion of the market economy on the global stage, and the sudden discovery that there are limits to economic growth. Our theories are embedded in a version of the world that has separate national units, each with its own bourgeoisie and proletariat, its own culture and history. This is simply no longer an accurate reflection of global society. Both Smithian and Marxist economics assume a growing economic pie for each of these national units; they diverge in how the distribution should take place, not over whether the pie itself should expand. They share a labour theory of value, and neither has much to say about the earth other than to treat it as a resource for industry.

Where the core issue was inequality in an expanding economy, we have to consider what happens when the economy cannot expand. Where we were concerned with the issues of national sovereignty, we have to consider what happens when national boundaries are merely political and no longer contain the major actors that direct their economies. Where we were puzzling about the existence of poverty in the midst of affluence within nation states, now we must encompass a single world where poverty on a scale well beyond that encountered in our earlier work has to be explained. The explanations will not be sufficient if they trade only in shopworn theories of capitalism; the reality is more complex.

Much of our present dilemma lies in the difficulty of figuring out how much to attach to industrialism, how much to capitalism, and how much to something beneath them both. The urge to control nature appears to have roots that pre-date either industrialism or capitalism; but the introduction of industrial modes of production, as well as capitalist control of those modes, has released human capacities to control nature on a vastly different scale than under any other conditions.

The critique of market societies has crumbled over the past decade. Eastern European societies are moving toward market economies, dismantling communist governments, and providing such a powerful attack on central management that critics external to these societies are left wallowing in quicksand. We are obliged to recognize that the centrally-managed states were as destructive of the earth and as corrupt at the top, as societies espousing markets. But the failure of existing alternatives to capitalism is not in itself an endorsement of Smith and Locke. The capitalist societies have solved some human problems while, in the process, creating others so deep and so disturbing, that to ignore them at this stage of history is to abandon hope for human survival. And the Smith-Locke paradigm,

so embedded in modern economic thought, has itself become a major obstacle to change. The 'new right', which is its current embodiment, has extremely dangerous potential to inhibit essential re-conceptualization of the social universe.

The disturbing aspect of much of the 'sustainable development' debate, is that it assumes we know the nature of the problem and need only seek the technical solutions. If we do not know the roots of our own attempts to control nature, nor fully understand how capitalism intersects with human wellsprings deep beneath it, then we are far from knowing the nature of our problems. Sociologists do not have specific knowledge on this score. Furthermore, I believe we have been so engaged in our pre-Copernican dialogue, that we have not found adequate questions for this task.

3 What do sociologists do?

Having offered this critique, I must now soften it. We have no general theory to guide us and the theories we have relied on are manifestly inadequate. Nonetheless, we have developed a deep, rich, and vital body of knowledge and understanding about the wellsprings of human behavior and social interaction, that will serve us well in this new global economy with its ecological crisis. What we have is not specific knowledge, in the applied and immediately useful sense, but rather a way of seeing the world that can now be applied to specific issues of a new kind.

What, precisely, do sociologists do? Typically, we inquire into both how a social situation is structured, and how participants perceive the structure and respond to it. From these enquiries, we hope to learn not only what exists in some objective and 'factual' sense, but also the human response to what exists. We may have a variety of objectives, but there are two that are generally applicable. One, is to understand a social group well enough to be able to predict, or interpret retrospectively, its reactions to events. The other, is to analyze the deeper levels of relationships between groups, institutions, or events, and human responses to them. To do the first, we need to put ourselves in other peoples' shoes. To do the second, we need to develop theoretical insights, as well as empirical information, on the interests, sentiments, and histories of human groups that transcend the superficial level of observation. Our theories may be deficient, but we have, even so, developed a fair body of diffuse knowledge that will help us re-conceptualize the human universe.

What might the elements be of a general theory that goes beyond our present positions? My guess would be that we will have to bring in to the forum of sociological theory, a greater appreciation for mythology — and not just Christian

mythology —, for the 'conquest of nature' syndrome appears elsewhere, too; more concern with the historical change in kinship systems that takes place with industrialism; and greater understanding of large-scale and, especially, corporate social organizations.

Sociologists know, based on empirical studies, that human motivations are far more complex than 'rational self-interest' explanations comprehend. Indeed, we know that where collective interests are culturally acknowledged, where interdependence between individuals is essential or encouraged, where kinship relationships remain strong, individuals do not operate on the same 'rational self-interest' basis as they do in modern industrial and capitalist societies. Anthropological literature is rich in specific knowledge about non-industrial and non-market societies, knowledge that challenges conventional wisdom about common property conflicts, human motivations, and the social bases of human action. By using such knowledge, sociologists can maintain a consistent measure by which they may recognize industrial society as a particular form of organization, rather than as the 'normal' form. Even so, we are not yet able to distinguish between industrial society as the generic form, and capitalist society as the predominant, but not the only possible, mode of industrial society.

My opinion is that the difference between societies organized on a kinship basis and those organized on an individual/bureaucratic basis, is fundamental to an analysis. If this takes us back to Weber, so be it; it will be a temporary visit. Where kinship is the basic organizing principle, ethnic organizations and the preservation of linguistic communities appear to be its natural extensions. Nationhood based on ethnicity is its perfect embodiment. Since the industrial revolution, kinship, ethnic, and linguistic unities have eroded; in their place, territorial organizations, corporate enterprises, and states that have no coherence other than geographical location, have been established. As industrialism spreads, as workers become mobile and separated from land, as capital moves around the globe in search of profits and cheaper labour supplies, the organization of kin groups tends to disappear. Individuals fend for themselves, competing in the industrial labour markets, creating transitory lives and temporary families.

However, the same process does not occur universally. Kin groups and corporate extensions of them remain strong in Japan and most of Asia, as they do in Africa and Latin America. Since Japan and Peru, for example, are clearly dissimilar in other respects, we cannot attribute this to uneven capitalist penetration. To comprehend these diverse outcomes of entry into market economies, we need to know a good deal about previous cultures, earlier social and economic organizations, and the nature of the markets into which these peoples have entered. Power is, in a sense, up for grabs, and it matters a great deal whether the grabbers are armies, corporate organizations, parliamentary parties, or

well-organized kin networks (which might also be drug cartels, or any other similar grouping). In short, we need to recognize some developments that tend to affect global society in similar ways, while identifying the particular interactions between these and existing cultures and institutions that make individual societies distinctive.

In much of the world, including Canada, the central existing organization is the corporation and not kin or kin-related groups. The corporation might be organized for a variety of purposes — government agencies, universities, schools, churches, and private businesses are all corporate organizations, though their respective powers are unequal. Individuals are employees or clients of these organizations, and they are employed or served irrespective of kin, ethnicity, or religion. This is not because they have won civil rights; it is because the corporation is a fundamentally different kind of organization than the family. One belongs by virtue of employment or a legitimate claim to service; organizations are relatively impersonal. Yet they are also the core unit of membership for much of the society.

Corporate law treats these organizations as 'natural persons', and not without reason: they act, own, transform, alienate, fight, and defend their territories, in pretty much the same way kin and ethnic groups do, and in the process their diverse members can become unified. It is organizations, not individuals, which control industrial wealth and take critical actions that alter the face of the earth. It is also organizations which stumble, and are unable to bring together their diverse individual talents to achieve collective aims. We need to understand the differences that lead to the domination or decline of various organizations.

To understand corporate organizations, I think we have to conduct more fieldwork within them. We need to have in-depth ethnographic studies on how they operate, where decision-making is actually done, how policies are initiated and pushed through or obstructed, and how one corporation differs from another. We need studies that go beyond political economy, though not studies that are naive about political and economic context. It is interesting to know who owns what; more vital would be studies of who decides what, and why. How does an idea get onto the agenda? At what point do corporate leaders take an environmental issue seriously, and what is their path of action? How do the troops interpret their orders? Class analyses will not provide us with the answers we need about such fundamental events in our world as the funding decisions of the IMF, or the debt crisis, or the collapse of Eastern European governments, or the intolerable poverty present in much of the world. We absolutely must now direct our attention to the dominant global organizations, if we are going to offer any significant insights to these topics, including ecological crises.

I mentioned mythology deliberately; mythology is not ideology, though it may be embedded in ideology. In industrial countries served by science and strongly attached to technological solutions for whatever ails us, we have discounted mythology in our intellectual paradigms. However, science itself is rooted in mythologies, and our collective visions of who we are and where we are going have deep roots in ancient mythologies and religions. Why do we assume that, as individuals and societies, we must constantly grow, constantly change, constantly evolve into something further? How are modern institutions and, particularly, modern corporations constructed on the basis of these ancient beliefs?

4 Beyond the social sciences

The boundaries between the social sciences are entirely arbitrary, and they impede our journey toward understanding. Certainly, we need to work with anthropologists, political scientists, economists, geographers, historians, and lawyers: that goes without saying. However, I think we must now go beyond the social sciences.

Consider the formidable issues of our time, phrased as sociological research but with suggestions of additional information required to do that research well. One, is the destruction of tropical rain-forests and their native inhabitants. Sociologists can trace the interests of the Brazilian military and agrarian classes and external corporations, the actions of the IMF and World Bank, the debt crisis and the role of the private banks. We will also require knowledge about trees, soils, climate, the processes by which oxygen is generated, water table levels, and food sources generate by growing trees. We need an understanding of the population explosion and its dynamics. In fact, and this is why I have chosen this example, expertise in all these areas has been focused on the Amazon issue. Sociologists have been active participants in this research. The interdisciplinary nature of the work in the Amazon is largely the reason that this crisis has become so well known, and why we might still hope that the destruction can be halted, even at this late stage.

Other examples have not yet reached this stage. Voices in the wilderness cry out that if the industrial world continues to use energy at present levels, drought will expand around the globe and many more millions will die from starvation and thirst. Sociologists are not experts in world climatic conditions, but we can work with those who are to document, interpret, and demonstrate the linkages between what the industrial world does and the extent of damage elsewhere. Neither are we experts on automobiles and their contribution to the greenhouse effect; but we can contribute meaningfully to discussions about alternative transportation modes, and conduct research on urban communities that would suggest alternative forms of

organization less reliant on private transportation. We should, as well, work with economists in another particular area: research on the marginal utilities of various alternatives under different conditions. Given a society so organized around individual preferences, and a market that obliges us to make what economists call 'rational self-interest' choices, how high would the cost of vegetables go before land were used for agriculture instead of highways, or time spent growing carrots instead of writing books?

This last example raises a fundamental problem that we must insist on addressing, yet again, but with a new urgency: inequality. The cost of vegetables in industrial countries is very low. If the cost goes up, exporting countries might benefit and we would use land more effectively; but the poor in our own regions would be starved of essential nutrients. The only solutions to ecological imbalances, that would not unequally harm those who have no land and no options, are collective solutions and not individual ones. This is not merely an ideological preference for collective solutions; we are now talking about global survival strategies, and it is to these that sociologists can usefully direct their attention.

Sociologists do have specific knowledge useful for immediate and short-term purposes. We also have a considerable wealth of more diffuse knowledge about cultures, institutions, and social processes. We have always struggled over theory, partly because we have always had to work within an ideological context defined by classical economics. We have been the nay-sayers, not because we are any more pessimistic and negative by nature than economists (or any others), but because we have understood something about the costs of the growth ethic. We are still struggling to develop a more comprehensive theory of human activity, and we are probably now at a critical theoretical juncture as we contemplate the implications of the input from feminism and ecology, and the changes in global society. However, we do have a very important task to perform right now: to identify and provide research on issues that affect human survival and, in this respect, we have some insight, background, and depth to our research that will enable us to contribute to the development of solutions.

I am inclined to tell my colleagues at the meeting on sustainable development, that sociologists are central to any research on environmental issues. For the record, that is what I believe. The problem of acid rain, as well as many other issues, is not merely technological; it is also sociological. The question is not how to control the rain, but how to control our own behavior.

Sociology will provide us with the understanding of social groups, institutions, motivations, and relationships that are fundamental to the way this society is organized, and thus to the environmental crisis. It is not specific

knowledge that we need; it is a deeper comprehension of who we are, as social animals, and why we act the way we do, both collectively and through our organizations. We do not have any answers yet, because we are still trying to identify the appropriate questions; nonetheless, we are better equipped to do that right now than most others. If we are serious about addressing this human crisis, then sociology is useful as it has never been before.

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Résumé

Ce texte présente les principales approches et les thèmes de la sociologie anglo-canadienne des quarante dernières années en dégageant leurs limites et certaines lacunes théoriques. Les pratiques sociologiques et les dimensions sociales qui devraient être prises en compte pour améliorer les schémas théoriques y sont discutées. L'auteure montre l'importance d'aller au-delà du cadre des sciences sociales pour construire une analyse pertinente de l'humanité et de l'activité sociale.

Summary

This paper presents the main approaches and issues of Anglo-canadian sociology of the last forty years, showing their limits and their theoretical inadequacies. It discusses the current practices of sociologists and asks the question: which social dimensions should be taken into account to strengthen sociological theory. It emphasizes the necessity to go beyond the framework of the social sciences to build a proper understanding of humanity and social activity.