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The Relation Between Sociology and Threats to Our Survival

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that increasing threats to our survival call for a deeper sociological engagement with environmental issues. The argument is presented in different sections: firstly, the need for a reorientation of the discipline around the complex interrelation and interdependence of society and nature. This reorientation could build on the sociologial work on environmental risks by Ulrich Beck and that on "slow violence" by Rob Nixon, both of which acknowledge the power of class relations. The injustices this involves suggest the need to re-examine sociological research practice from "extracting" information from "informants" to empowering relations of mutual exchange and reciprocity. The challenges this involves are illustrated by an account of "exchange workshops" in mining-affected communities. The paper ends with a call for more sociological involvement in social movements, particularly for a just transition from fossil fuels.

KEYWORDS

Nature; slow violence; just transition; empowerment; inequality; community

Introduction

"Omnicide (meaning the total destruction of all life on earth) is a real possibility", so Margaret Eichler (Eichler 1991: 4) warned in her presidential address to the Canadian Sociological Association in 1991. Intrigued by these words, I published an article titled "Sociology as if Survival mattered" in the *South African Sociological Review* (Cock 1994). The article argued for more sociological involvement in impact assessments, especially in those of intended "development" projects which ignored environmental factors and threatened the livelihoods and health of local communities. Almost 30 years after that paper was published, my paper here is calling for a deeper sociological engagement with environmental issues. It does this for two reasons: these issues are accelerating threats to all forms of life on our planet; and they are worsening social relations of inequality and injustice. In essence, they are the defining threats of our time.

The argument is developed in five sections: the first argues that a deeper engagement means an examination of disciplinary focus, which involves a reorientation of our sociological discipline around the complex interrelation and interdependence of society and nature. The second section outlines the development over the past few decades of environmental sociology in relation to environmental risks and violence. The third section reasserts the importance of the concept of "class" within any

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emergent subfield entitled "environmental sociology". The fourth suggests that our research methodology could move away from a form of social data extractivism to the empowerment of our "research subjects" as partners. The fifth and sixth sections illustrate the complexities of this mode of an empowerment by a brief account of a modest research project on mining-affected communities in South Africa, which included "sociological reflections" about the nature of a just transition engaged mutually between the sociologists and community members involved in this research process. The paper concludes with a summary argument for sociological intervention in the struggle for a just transition from fossil fuels.

Reorienting sociology around the interdependence of society and nature

The environment has been largely ignored or obscured in early sociological analysis. This neglect goes back in part to the Durkheimian emphasis on sociology as explaining social facts with other social facts. A key concept in environmental sociology is "Nature", which as Raymond Williams has suggested, is "perhaps the most complex word in the (English) language" (Williams 1980: 32). It is a dense social concept, a keyword whose meanings are always unstable and contested.

If not ignored in historical sociological writings, nature is usually discussed in terms of a dualistic notion of a nature–society binary and nature as an external force. This is deeply ingrained in western thinking, even 200 years after Humbolt's revolutionary vision of Nature "as a living whole" in which "Everything is interaction and reciprocal" (Wulf 2016: 59). It has even been suggested that perhaps progress demands loosening the hold of western rationality with "Its objectifying, instrumental attitudes towards an externalized nature" (Peet and Watts 1996: 264). Dualistic thinking means that nature is often reduced to a store of resources for (especially capitalist industrial) economic activity, or a sink for our waste products. Writing of the Nile River, Mitchel criticizes the simplistic and unstable dualistic view of a world "divided into human expertise on the one side and nature on the other" (Mitchell 2002: 35).

Apart from this dualism, sociology has been criticized for a narrow disciplinary focus, which, in neglecting nature, ignores different non-human life forms. Mitchell writes: "the characteristic of explanations in social theory, is namely that all actors are human … Human beings are the agents around whose actions and intentions the story is written" (2002: 29). Writing of the importance of mosquitos in the development of the Nile River valley, Mitchell writes, "the mosquito is said to belong to nature. It cannot speak … . What is called nature, or the material world, moves like the plasmodium (spores of the mosquito) in and out of human forms or occurs as arrangements like the river Nile, that are social as well as natural, technical as well as material" (2002: 50).

Similarly, Escobar laments that "no longer does nature denote an entity with its own agency, a source of life, a discourse, as was the case in many traditional societies. The active principle of the modernist conceptualization is the human agent and his/her creations, while nature is confined to an ever more passive role" (1996: 52).

Since the 1980s, movement away from this narrow disciplinary focus has been promoted by the development of environmental sociology.

The development of environmental sociology

The earlier disciplinary neglect of nature and the biophysical environment began to change in the 1980s when environmental hazards attracted sociological attention. More recently, two sociologists in particular have contributed powerful arguments to the development of environmental sociology.

Ulrich Beck has addressed the problem of the relative invisibility of much of the damage to nature. Much of that damage is hidden from both sensory perception and social awareness**.** This means that environmental threats have to pass through a process of social recognition, and a number of factors make this recognition difficult (Beck 1992). The first source of difficulty is that environmental risks are ubiquitous, and pollutants, for example, are "the stowaways of normal consumption. They travel on the wind and in the water. They can be in anything and everything, and along with the absolute necessities of life—air to breathe, food, clothing … they pass through all the otherwise strictly controlled protected areas of modernity" (Beck 1992: 41). Secondly, "many of the newer risks (nuclear or chemical contamination, pollutants in foodstuffs …) completely escape human powers of direct perception. The focus is more and more on hazards which are neither visible nor perceptible to the victims" (Beck 1992: 27). Thirdly, many of these threats are only detectable and explicable through the application of specialized forms of scientific knowledge, knowledge which many people lack.

Beck elevates environmental damage to define an entire social formation, a "risk society". The risks he is concerned with, especially toxic pollution, are extensive and slow or marked by an invisibility that is characterized by "a loss of social thinking" (Beck 1992: 25). This focus on risk is not class-blind. Beck suggests that "like wealth, risk adheres to the class pattern, only inversely, wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom" (1992: 168).

Furthermore, much of the environmental crisis—climate change, toxic pollution, deforestation and oil spills—involves a violence that takes place gradually and often invisibly. Nixon captures this in his concept of "slow violence", which challenges conventional understandings of violence. "Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space" (Nixon 2011: 2). By "slow violence" he means "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2011: 2). In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, he shows that much environmental damage takes the form of this slow violence that extends over time, "is insidious, instrumental, undramatic, accretive and relatively invisible" (Nixon 2011: 2). Even the extensive impacts (and the official recognition) of the dramatic, ecological catastrophes of Bhopal and Chernobyl were slow to develop. He calls for a rethinking about violence, which challenges "conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound and body bound" (Nixon 2011: 3). We need, he argues, "to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular or instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2011: 2).

These notions—by writers like Nixon and Beck—of "slow violence" and "the social recognition of environmental risks" have enriched environmental sociology. This has been

defined as "careful, committed conversation about matters concerning the intersection of society and the environment—rather than a field with discernible characteristics that can be clearly distinguished from other fields" (Dunlap 2020: xix). This captures the expansive, "inherent, interdisciplinary nature of environmental sociology" (2020).

However, despite these developments, Kasper maintains that "environmental sociology has not yet achieved its goal of reorienting the discipline to account for human—ecosystem interdependence" (2016: 32). Furthermore and crucially, capital's response to the current environmental crisis is the commodification of nature. This involves the transformation of nature into economic relations, subordinated to the logic of the capitalist market and the imperatives of profit, an important area for further research.

Environmental sociology needs a strong intervention of scholar-activism. Holleman maintains that this first emerged due to the rise of the environmental justice movement brought into the field by scholars such Robert Bullard and Dorceta Taylor, who "distinguished the 'Environmental Justice Paradigm' from earlier perspectives and pointed to a new direction for theory and practice" (Holleman 2020: 25). The writing and action of Taylor has had a global impact. Moreover, she introduced the concept of "environmental racism" at a conference in Johannesburg in 1988, which led to the founding of Earthlife Africa and the environmental justice movement in South Africa.

Contributing to the reorienting of environmental sociology is an emerging environmental Marxism with a strong ecological focus. According to Burawoy (2004), this "reorientation of the discipline" draws on the classical concerns of sociology with social inequality and particularly social class and links these to environmental issues. It is rooted in the fact that subordinate classes are the worst affected by climate change, especially rising temperatures and extreme weather events such as droughts and floods.

The importance of class

There are two very different threats to the relevance of class in contemporary sociological analysis including within the emergent subfield of "environmental sociology". One is a class-blind understanding of climate change in terms of a new geological epoch, sometimes called "the sixth great extinction" (Kolbert 2014) or the Anthropocene, in which nature is dominated by "humanity" as a universalistic social category. In this class-blind paradigm, "the Indian subsistence farmer (and) the African herder become part of one 'humanity' with the inhabitants of the rich world, despite clearly being very differentially responsible for ecological devastation" (Baskin 2015: 16). However, within both these worlds it is the extravagant consumption of the wealthy and the powerful who are fundamentally responsible for climate change and usually protected from its impacts.

The second threat lies in intersectional analyses. This has value in how it takes account of the multiple, interconnected sources of exploitation and oppression to which different people are differently subjected. However, an intersectional lens does not always expose how power relations operate or its effects. Moreover, it often asserts that all forms of oppression have an equivalent value while Marxism gives a special relevance to class in capitalist society, but not in a reductionist way. According to Marxists, class is more than an identity category, it is a part of a system of power relations, a constituent of capitalist accumulation. However, the "projection of Marxism as a simplistic theory that collapses everything into class or 'the economy' has become commonplace, an

unquestioned premise in academic and popular discussions" (Mojab 2015: 206). In many intersectional studies "the insistence on equivalence and the vehement objection to the primary of class are the driving factors" (Banerjee 2017: 12). The flattening of oppressions and their lack of anchor in many intersectional studies sheds little light on their possible causes or why they persist. Class analysis in my view has an explanatory primacy, it enables us to comprehend race and gender oppression and how these categories are activated as mechanisms to facilitate exploitation.

We should also examine our research practices in the light of deepening inequality. A crucial question to confront is whose interests our research serves; whether it is empowering the oppressed and marginalized or simply extracting information that serves the dominant classes.

Empowering or extractivist research

Mazibuko Jara points to a widespread extractivist research methodology "which simply extracts information from key informants often using such knowledge as an instrument of oppression" (interview, Johannesburg 2019). Furthermore, if claimed to be neutral and objective, "the role of objective outsider with its resultant professional exploitation of subject matter can be viewed as an academic manifestation of colonialism" (Lewis 1973: 581). Instead, there is a strong argument for research to "create an alternative knowledge that is radical, gendered, empirically sound and politically enabling" (Mukherjee 2011: 168). Similarly, Mott and Nilson argue that theory is not produced individually but collectively "via reflection within political struggles based upon the lived experience and courage of excluded and marginalised communities" (2011: 1). Research, it is suggested, should be done "in solidarity with such struggles for social justice" and involve "horizontal relationships of mutual learning" (Mott and Nilsen 2011: 1). This perspective inspired a modest, collaborative SWOP project involving Victor Munnik, Dineo Skosana and myself during 2017–2021.

A research approach: empowering through "exchange workshops" at some selected South African coal-mining sites

This project was an experimental form of participatory action research following decolonial and feminist research practices that emphasize dialogue, empowerment through reflexivity, mutual learning, sharing lived experience, horizontal social relations and reciprocity.

The research was informed by how the people most affected and least responsible for the climate crisis are neglected: the voices and lived experience of the thousands of coal workers and the communities living near coal-fired power stations and mines are not heard and the fundamental cause of the climate crisis is not acknowledged. Furthermore, the concept of a just transition has largely been appropriated by powerful elites, stripped of its visionary potential and shrunk to mean a shift to a new largely privatized energy regime in a perverted form of "green capitalism" dependent on expanding markets and new technology. As one analyst warns, "there is a distinct danger that one direction (of a transition) is towards a decarbonized ecologically unsustainable future which leaves existing inequalities intact" (Swilling 2019: 131).

All the research sites we selected of mining-affected communities were in Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Mpumalanga Highveld, which contains almost all of Eskom's 16 coal-fired power stations and accounts for 83 per cent of the country's coal production. All are spaces of displacement, deprivation and exclusion. Many people have experienced dispossession by coal-mining corporations, involving loss of their land and livelihoods, desecration of ancestral graves, damage to their homes from blasting, the suffering and death of their animals during forced removals and serious illness from exposure to air pollution amounting to 2,200 deaths annually (Skosana 2021; Hallowes and Munnik 2016; 2017; Cock 2019; 2022). The three Mpumalanga research sites—Phola, Vosman and Arbor—are situated near Emalahleni ("the place of coal"), which has been described as one of the most polluted places in the world. Vosman forms part of the Kwa-Gugu township outside Emalahleni. It is surrounded by coal-fired power stations and mines, including Khutal Colliery, which is one of the largest underground coal mines in the world. An open-cast mine is close to people's houses. One workshop participant maintained that "we are living in hell here".

Besides a review of primary and secondary sources, interviews and a scoping exercise conducted by three trained community researchers who interviewed informal traders and coal workers, the research relied on "exchange workshops". These involved an exchange of two types of knowledge: direct, experiential, knowledge of the problems of living in a mining-affected community, as articulated by community members themselves, and formal knowledge from the academic researchers, such as information about other environmental justice struggles, new policy developments and contested understandings of a just transition and other issues raised as questions from community members.

We understood "politically enabling" to mean a modest attempt at empowering community members with the information and confidence to formulate demands and increase the effectiveness of those already active in the struggle to ensure that the transition from coal is just and transformative. The exchange workshops were perhaps empowering in the sense of providing (and provoking) collective reflection on people's everyday lives, including experiences often defined as individual troubles—but in discussion were redefined as shared social issues that required collective solutions, in other words, C. Wright Mill's definition of "the sociological imagination". We make no definitive claims about the efficacy of these workshops except to acknowledge that we learned a good deal; and the leaflets on climate change and a just transition that we produced, translated into different African languages and distributed at the end of the meetings were subsequently widely used by environmental justice organizations working in the areas.

The key questions here concern the meaning and modalities of a just transition, particularly how to promote a deepened understanding of climate change, as well as the importance of closing the coal mines as part of the transition from fossil fuels, but doing so in ways that involved deep and extensive community participation and provide alternative employment or livelihoods for coal workers. These issues are increasingly contested and call for the participation of sociologists.

Sociological engagement in the struggle for a just transition

Government remains wedded to extractivism, which is at the centre of the minerals energy complex, a system of accumulation encompassing critical links and networks of

power between the financial sector, mining corporations and government (Baker 2015: 8). In essence, this defines the just transition in an approach "which poses no threat to the mainstream, pro-growth, business dominated narrative, a narrative that was largely created by a global corporate elite" (Sweeny and Treat 2018: 27). However, it does promote a threat to coal workers.

In 2017, Eskom announced the imminent closure of six coal-fired power stations by 2029: Hendrina, Kriel, Komati (now "refurbished"), Grootvlei, Arnot and Camden. While the Eskom CEO supported a just transition in which some coal plants are closed and replaced with newly built renewable energy, Mineral Resources and Energy Minister Gwede Mantashe described this as "economic suicide" (Paton 2021). Yet no plans have been announced for retrenched coal workers, whether Eskom employees or the contract workers, who often constitute the majority of the workforce.

For the thousands of workers involved in the coal value chain, a just transition which means primarily the imminent closure of several coal-fired power stations is deeply threatening: "this just transition will kill us", one workshop participant commented. In many communities our research-based exchange workshops exposed an extensive ambivalence about resistance to coal, rooted in a deep dependence. Not only does coal mining and burning provide jobs, but coal workers provide a market for the many women who rely on informal sector activities around the coal-mining sites. For many, a "just transition" is an empty concept that lacks substance and is unrelated to their immediate survivalist needs. Nor are there extensive efforts on the part of government to engage with mining-affected communities. For example, the recent closure and "refurbishment" of Komati power station was simply announced.

In this context there is a need for sociologists to work with civil society, particularly organized labour, to provide information and analysis about the climate crisis and specifically the relation between coal production, carbon emissions and the impacts of climate change. The importance of working with organized labour is particularly relevant to address the negative tendency to retreat into a defensive position focused only on protecting existing jobs. However, two labour federations are engaging creatively, as outlined below.

Beginning in 2010, COSATU played a key role in introducing and promoting a deep, transformative understanding of the concept of a just transition that involved the redistribution of power and resources. After workshops and meetings with all COSATU-affiliated unions, a policy framework by COSATU's Central Committee claimed that a just transition meant "putting the needs of working and poor people first in the social and economic changes ahead of us" (COSATU 2011: 1). The document formulated 15 climate change policy principles linking sustainability and justice and included the recognition that the fundamental cause of the climate crisis is the expansionist logic of the capitalist system, and that a new low-carbon development path is needed that addresses the need for decent jobs and the elimination of unemployment.

This document was the product of a reference group established by the research arm of COSATU on which all 22 affiliate unions were represented, as well as activists from some environmental justice organizations. Drawing on "coalition power", this formed the embryo of a red–green coalition to drive a just transition strategy. However, there were differences between the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), which should have been addressed more directly. While NUMSA organized for socially owned and democratically controlled renewable energy,

the NUM was increasingly defensive of the interests of coal miners, in the face of the threats of job losses from mine closures, falling coal prices, mechanization, absolutist demands from environmental activists like "Keep the coal in the hole" and the divestment movement. Then (and now) the NUM continues rather to argue for "clean coal" from expensive and untested technological innovations such as carbon capture and storage.

Since then, COSATU has produced a blueprint for a just transition that builds on the 2011 document and acknowledges "human beings location in nature" as well as our vulnerability (COSATU 2022). This blueprint argues for "a new African eco-socialism which is democratic and participatory and based on three principles: economic transformation towards democratic ownership, sustainable work, livelihoods and well-being and a low-carbon and climate resilient economy. … We humans are not outside nature. Employers have treated nature as a resource to be conquered for profits—just like our labour—and this abuse is threatening the survival of us all" (COSATU 2022: 4). There was an enthusiastic response to this document when it was launched in Johannesburg on 10 March 2022. This new COSATU approach is close to the social power approach of SAFTU, which has argued for cooperation between labour and the climate justice movement.

According to the President of the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), "the lack of climate action from our government means we must take to the streets, build a broad and diverse movement and demand action for a just transition from fossil fuels. It is for labour and the climate justice movement to stand together for a just and sustainable world" (SAFTU President Vavi 2019: 5). SAFTU is "in favour of a just transition … . In a way that protects the livelihoods of mining and energy workers and the lives of communities most affected by environmental pollution" (SAFTU media statement 2 June 2019). This is significant, because those mining-affected communities living next to coal mines and coal-fired power stations have suffered the most and have been largely excluded from debates on a just transition.

SAFTU's argument for cooperation between labour and the climate justice movement is significant. While this "struggle" space is very fragmented, groupings such as the Climate Justice Coalition (of which SAFTU is a member), the Climate Justice Charter Movement, Groundwork, Earthlife and the Centre for Environmental Rights are growing and, moreover, could be strengthened by the participation of more sociologists.

At present there is no mass-based movement for a just transition, no collective actor or master frame for direction. I therefore argue that in the cacophony of voices addressing a just transition there is a need for sociological engagement: for theorization, description, analysis and explanation of the different interests involved, the obstacles, conflicts and alternative futures. There is the potential, despite challenging obstacles, to build from below a "counter-power" that challenges social inequality and environmental injustice. Deeper connections between organized labour, mining-affected communities and environmental justice organizations could cohere into a convincing vision of a just transition that is transformative and unifying.

Conclusion

In South Africa many people with sociological training are doing valuable work on all these issues. However, we need more research that addresses the fluid and complex connections between society and the environment including different life forms. For

example, research on the dangers of seismic mining on the Wild Coast, which addresses the impact on marine creatures as well as on local fishing communities; research on the corruption of a state dairy project, which involved extreme cruelty to farm animals; on the powerful interests who have appropriated the concept of a just transition to block transformative change; research on the social and environmental dislocations that local communities experience with the expansion of mining; and research on the causes of climate change, and if it is the expansionist logic of capital, whether we can look to the cause of the problem to provide solutions.

Whereas my own 1994 article as noted in the Introduction argued for more sociological involvement in policy interventions such as impact assessments, this new moment nearly three decades later requires sociologists' involvement in social movements. Burawoy has conceptualized an "organic public sociology" "in which the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active and often counter public" "in making visible the invisible" (Burawoy 2005: 269). What is thus needed is an enlarged disciplinary focus, to devote more scholarly attention to the complex interactions between society and the environment, to widen the field of what is considered sociologically important, including non-human life forms, and what is considered violent, to draw attention to unseen and unrecognized environmental violence.

The development of environmental sociology urges us to question the conventional assumptions about development, economic growth and progress, to make visible the processes of accumulative environmental damage and the casualties it creates, especially from the climate crisis; and to follow a class analysis to show how globally the "risks" and "threats" fall, especially on the poor and the vulnerable, those with the least resources to protect themselves. We should recapture the transformative notion of a just transition and side with the poor and vulnerable for a shared future. What this implies is to reject the catastrophic negativism of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists who have now moved the Doomsday Clock to 90 seconds to midnight, the closest it has been to the symbolic time of the annihilation of humanity and the earth since 1947 when humanity first begun to face the implications flowing out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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