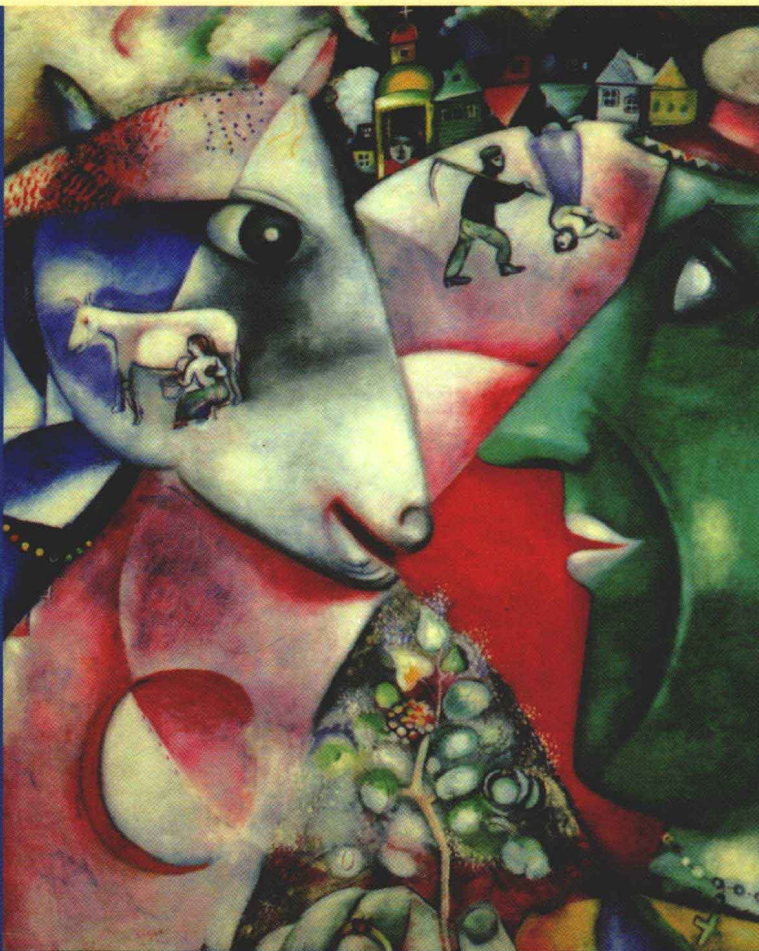


AN INVITATION TO
**ENVIRONMENTAL
SOCIOLOGY**

4
EDITION



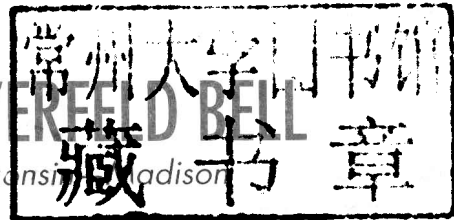
MICHAEL MAYERFELD BELL



4
EDITION

AN INVITATION TO
**ENVIRONMENTAL
SOCIOLOGY**

MICHAEL MAYERFELD BELL
University of Wisconsin-Madison



With Michael S. Carolan

With Illustrations by Matthew Raboin and Matthew Robinson

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FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
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United Kingdom

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Preface

It is a delight to offer to readers this fourth edition of *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology*—indeed, it is many delights. I am gratified that the book remains of sufficient usefulness to warrant a new edition. But far more satisfying is that environmental scholarship has continued to deepen within sociology and related social sciences, and that interest in environmental sociology has continued to broaden within society at large. Each year, the flow of scholarly books and articles increases. So, too, does the volume of texts oriented to students and the number of courses in which students can encounter the field. Environmental sociology has more to say now, and more people who want to hear and contribute to what it has to say. Amid the continuing indications of alarming and accelerating stress on the sustainability, justice, and beauty of our environment, we should remember to appreciate good and hopeful signs like these. There is care and concern out there—lots of it.

But even if environmental sociology has more to say, it is important that we scholars don't drone on about it. With that caution in mind, in this edition, I have focused on integrating new scholarship without lengthening the book. I've achieved this goal for the most part. This edition is only very slightly longer than the previous, and does not contain any new chapters. The wonderful production people at Pine Forge Press have also worked to keep the same inviting feel of the third edition, retaining the evocative artwork of Matthew Raboin and Matthew Robinson, which readers admired. But there is new material in all the chapters, and quite a bit in a few of them, as well as some reorganization.

Here's a chapter by chapter overview of the main changes.

Chapter 1: Environmental Problems and Society. This is the “big numbers” chapter, synthesizing the numerous efforts of government and nongovernment agencies, national and international, to monitor the environmental condition of the planet. I have always sought to keep these figures as up to date as possible, and have worked hard to incorporate the latest information once again. Every section has changes as a result. The biggest addition is a new section drawing together the challenges to sustainability posed by energy production and use. Plus, I have pulled (and updated) some of the material on environmental justice from the third edition's “Body and Health” chapter and moved it here, so as to provide a more comprehensive look at environmental justice from the start. I have also once again renamed the third of the three central environmental challenges—what I now term the “beauty of ecology” but called the “rights and beauty of habitat” in the third edition and the “rights and beauty of nature” in the first two editions. The challenge of *rights* is redundant with the notion of “environmental justice,” unless we take a

narrowly anthropocentric view. And while I moved to the word *habitat* in the third edition to avoid the philosophical tangle of the word *nature*, I think it brought its own problems. *Beauty* and *ecology* seem to me wonderful words that we would do well to think of together. I think I've finally got the phrasing right.

Chapter 2: Consumption and Materialism. Michael Jackson and the excesses of Neverland Ranch lead off the revised version of this chapter, in place of Liberace and his 30 cars and 18 pianos. The section on "Green Advertising" got a remake too. And the discussion of international comparisons of the relationship between wealth and happiness got an update, keeping abreast of the considerable recent attention to this question by scholars and in the media. Otherwise, this chapter is much the same.

Chapter 3: Money and Machines. The main change here is a rewrite of the section on "The Needs of Money," highlighting what I like to call the "wage-price gap" and the "problem of the original capitalist," which should give students a more vivid understanding of the dynamics of capitalist economies. I've also foregrounded the work of John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York on "metabolic rift." The section on "The Dialogue of State and Market" now introduces the important concept of avoiding "zero-sum" thinking. In the second half of the chapter, on technology, I briefly introduce a discussion of Bruno Latour and his colleagues on "actor network theory," which in previous editions only made an appearance later in the book. Their work on technology is vital to have here as well. Elsewhere in the chapter, I updated a lot of facts and figures, especially those about cars.

Chapter 4: Population and Development. For this edition, I have brought in the work of William Catton and his notion of "overshoot," as I ought to have done long ago, in the discussion of Malthusianism and anti-Malthusianism. Plus, I have extensively updated the figures on population growth, international debt, and food production.

Chapter 5: Body and Health. I extensively revised this chapter. As I noted above, I moved much of the review of environmental justice studies into the first chapter. This made room for a new section on the sociology of food and one on the sociology of "mobilities" and "environmental flows," both of which have been much discussed in the scholarship of the last few years. The third edition had only a brief mention of "mobilities" and "environmental flows," and only in the last chapter. And the third edition had a lot on agriculture, as does this edition, but very little directly on food. I have also dialed back my use of the term *invironment* and have abandoned completely the phrase "invironmental justice" as confusing and unnecessary. This chapter still includes a discussion of pesticides and health, but I have rewritten those passages almost entirely, in light of much recent (and shocking) research. In the final section on the sociology of environmental justice, I revised most of the discussion of utilitarianism, which was a bit simplistic and one-sided in earlier editions.

Chapter 6: The Ideology of Environmental Domination. The main changes to this chapter are an updated and improved discussion of the Weberian hypothesis about the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism and a discussion of the gendered metaphors used in media accounts of the Gulf Oil Spill.

Chapter 7: The Ideology of Environmental Concern. This edition updates the results of national and international polls of environmental concern and discusses their relationship to the Great Recession. I also include a new account of the widening partisan divide in environmental concern in the United States. Plus, I tweaked the discussion of ecological modernization, in light of new scholarship.

Chapter 8: The Human Nature of Nature. The main change here is I added a new section on the social construction of “environmental nonproblems,” focusing on climate change skepticism. I also updated the discussion of the realist–constructionist debate and improved the discussion of actor network theory.

Chapter 9: The Rationality of Risk. This edition updates the discussion of Ulrich Beck’s “risk society” thesis, based on his recent publications, but otherwise the chapter is little changed.

Chapter 10: Mobilizing the Ecological Society. I clarified the discussion in a few sections, but otherwise left this chapter unchanged.

Chapter 11: Governing the Ecological Society. This final chapter got a major makeover in the previous edition, and it still looks pretty good to me. I made a few changes nonetheless. My account of my own little environmental sins got an update. I added passages introducing the ideas of “plenitude” and “conscious consumers.” I put in a passage discussing how at least 35 percent of the U.S. economy is not based on profit maximization. And I added a few other small points here and there.

With each edition, the community of people who contributed significantly to the making and remaking of this book happily grows. They include Marilyn Aronoff, Megan Berry, Mike Carolan, Richard Coon, Eileen Curry, Kate Entwistle, Carla Freeman, Will Goudy, Wendy Griswold, Ram Guha, Valerie Gunter, Windy Just, Philip Lowe, Anne Martin, Margaret Munyae, Ted Napier, Pam Ozaroff, Eric Pallant, Bob Penner, Jake Peterson, Stephanie Prescott, Matt Raboin, Chris Ray, David Repetto, Jennifer Rezek, Matt Robinson, Sanford Robinson, Lucas Rockwell, Steve Rutter, Robert Schaeffer, Becky Smith, Kaelyn Stiles, Pam Suwinsky, Hilary Talbot, Astrid Virding, Christine Vatovec, Jerry Westby, Martin Whitby, and Rachel Woodward. I want to give special mention to Teresa Herlinger, the marvelous copy editor for this edition, and to Maggie Stanley for her efficiency, good editorial sense, and deft sense of how to prod an overcommitted author along. Over the years, it’s been a lot of folks. It couldn’t have happened—nor would I have wanted it to have been—any other way.

And let me close once again by thanking my children, Sam and Eleanor, and my wife, Diane Bell Mayerfeld, for the nonstop seminar of our lives. It will always be the ecological dialogue I cherish the most.

MMB
Madison, Wisconsin

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CHAPTER 1

Environmental Problems and Society



Without self-understanding we cannot hope for enduring solutions to environmental problems, which are fundamentally human problems.

—Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974

"Pass the hominy, please."

It was a lovely brunch, with fruit salad, homemade coffee cake, a great pan of scrambled eggs, bread, butter, jam, coffee, tea—and hominy grits. Our friends Dan and Sarah had invited my wife and me and our son over that morning to meet some friends of theirs. The grown-ups sat around the dining room table, and the kids (four in all) careened from their own table in the kitchen to the pile of toys in the living room, and often into each other. Each family had contributed something to the feast before us. It was all good food, but for some reason the hominy grits (which I had never had before) was the most popular.

There was a pleasant mix of personalities, and the adults soon got into one of those excited chats that leads in an irreproducible way from one topic to another, as unfamiliar people seek to get to know each other a bit better. Eventually, the inevitable question came my way: "So, what do you do?"

"I'm an environmental sociologist."

"Environmental sociology. That's interesting. I've never heard of it. What does sociology have to do with the environment?"

I used to think, during earlier editions, that the point of this book was to answer that question—a question I often used to get, as in this breakfast conversation from many years ago. (My children, like this book, are much older now.) Today, I sense a change in general attitudes. Now I don't get so many blank looks when I say I'm an environmental sociologist. Most people I meet have still never heard of the field, but more and more of them immediately get the basic idea behind it: that society and environment are interrelated.

And more and more, the people I meet recognize that this interrelation has to confront some significant problems, perhaps the most fundamental problems facing the future of life, human and otherwise. They readily understand that environmental problems are not only problems of technology and industry, of ecology and biology, of pollution control and pollution prevention. Environmental problems are also social problems. Environmental problems are problems *for* society—problems that threaten our existing patterns of social organization and social thought. Environmental problems are as well problems *of* society—problems that challenge us to change those patterns of organization and thought. Increasingly, we appreciate that it is people who create environmental problems and it is people who must resolve them.

That recognition is good news. But we've sure got a lot to do, and in this work we'll need the insights of all the disciplines—the biophysical sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. There is an environmental dimension to all knowledge. The way I now understand the point of this book is to bring the sociological imagination to this necessarily pan-disciplinary conversation.

A good place to begin, I think, is to offer a definition of *environmental sociology*. Here goes: *Environmental sociology is the study of community in the largest possible sense.* People, other animals, land, water, air—all of these are closely interconnected. Together they form a kind of solidarity, what we have come to call ecology. As in any community, there are also conflicts in the midst of the interconnections. Environmental sociology studies this largest of communities with an eye to understanding the origins of, and proposing solutions to, these all-too-real social and biophysical conflicts.

But who are environmental sociologists? My view of who is a large community in itself—a large community of scholars from many social science disciplines that share this passion for studying community in the largest possible sense. Some might call themselves "environmental geographers" or "environmental anthropologists" or "environmental economists" or "environmental psychologists." Or they might prefer to think of themselves as "political ecologists" or "social ecologists" or "human ecologists" or "ecological economists." What is important is the passion, not the disciplinary label. Increasingly, academic conferences focus

on an issue like global warming or sustainable consumption or sustainable agriculture or environmental justice, not on a specific discipline's take on it. The research papers that come out of these conferences similarly cite scholars from across this wide spectrum. We all have our starting points, of course, our distinctive angles of vision to bring to the conversation, which is great. That is how, and why, one learns from others. But it is the goals that matter, not the starting points. In this book, I discuss contributions from scholars with all these many different departments on their business cards. It is all environmental sociology.

One of environmental sociology's most basic contributions to studying the conflicts behind environmental problems is to point out the pivotal role of social inequality. Not only are the effects of environmental problems distributed unequally across the human community, but social inequality is deeply involved in causing those problems. Social inequality is both a product and a producer of global warming, pollution, overconsumption, resource depletion, habitat loss, risky technology, and rapid population growth. As well, social inequality influences how we envision what our environmental problems are. And most fundamentally, it can influence how we envision nature itself, for inequality shapes our social experiences, and our social experiences shape all our knowledge.

Which returns us to the question of community. Social inequality cannot be understood apart from the communities in which it takes place. We need, then, to make the study of community the central task of environmental sociology. Ecology is often described as the study of natural communities. Sociology is often described as the study of human communities. Environmental sociology is the study of both together, the single commons of the Earth we humans share, sometimes grudgingly, with others—other people, other forms of life, and the rocks and water and soil and air that support all life. Environmental sociology is the study of this, the biggest community of all.

Joining the Dialogue

The biggest community of all: Then clearly, the topic of environmental sociology is vast. Not even a book the length of this one can cover all of it, at least not in any detail. In the pages to come, I will take up the main conversations about the state of relations within this vast community. I won't take up all the side conversations, but I will invite the reader into a good many of them, in order to trace how the larger debates play out in particular neighborhoods of discussion and investigation. Continually, though, the book will return to the front pages of debate, the better to bring the local and the global, the particular and the general, into better communication.

For the most part, this first chapter considers the front pages—of environmental sociology; of the environmental predicament; and, in this section, quite literally of the book itself. (These are the front pages of the book, after all.) After this introduction, the book falls into three parts:

The Material: How consumption, the economy, technology, development, population, and the health of our bodies shape our environmental conditions

The Ideal: How culture, ideology, moral values, risk, and social experience influence the way we think about and act toward the environment

The Practical: How we can bring about a more ecological society, taking the relations of the material and the ideal into account

Of course, it is not possible to fully separate these three topics. The deep union of the material, the ideal, and the practical is one of the most important truths that environmental sociology has

to offer. The parts of the book represent only a sequence of emphases, not rigid conceptual boundaries. A number of themes running throughout the book help unite the parts:

- The dialogic, or interactive and unfinished, character of causality in environmental sociology
- The interplay of material and ideal factors with each other, constituting the practical conditions of lived experience
- The central role of social inequality in environmental conflict
- The connections between the local and the global
- The power of the metaphor of community for understanding these social and ecological dynamics
- The important influence of political institutions and commitments on our environmental practices

The Ecology of Dialogue

By approaching environmental sociology in this way, I hope to bridge a long-standing dispute among scholars about the relationship between environment and society. *Realists* argue that environmental problems cannot be understood apart from the threats posed by the way we have organized our societies, including the organization of ecologic relations. They believe that we can ill afford to ignore the material truth of organizational problems and their ecologic consequences. *Constructionists* do not necessarily disagree, but they emphasize the influence of social life on how we conceptualize those problems, or the lack of those problems. Constructionists focus on the ideological origins of environmental problems—including their very definition *as* problems (or as nonproblems). A realist might say, for example, that global warming is a dangerous consequence of how we currently organize the economic side of social life. A constructionist might say that in order to recognize the danger—or even the existence—of global warming, we must wear the appropriate conceptual and ideological eyeglasses. Although the debate sometimes gets quite abstract, it has important consequences. Realists argue that the practical thing to do is to solve the social organizational issues behind environmental problems, like the way land use laws and current technologies encourage the overuse of cars. Constructionists argue that the first step must be to understand our environmental ideologies, with all their insights and oversights, lest our solutions lead to still other conflicts.¹

Fundamentally, the realist–constructionist debate is over materialist versus idealist explanations of social life. I mean “materialist” here in the philosophical sense of emphasizing the material conditions of life, not in the sense of material acquisitiveness. And I similarly mean “idealist” in the philosophical sense of emphasizing the role of ideas, not in the sense of what is the best or highest. The tension between materialist and idealist explanations is itself a centuries-old philosophical dispute, one that perhaps all cultural traditions have grappled with in one way or another. An ancient fable from India expresses the tension well. A group of blind people encounters an elephant for the first time. One grabs the elephant’s tail and says, “An elephant is like a snake!” Another grabs a leg and says, “An elephant is like a tree!” A third grabs an ear and says, “An elephant is like a big leaf!” To the materialist, the fable shows how misinformed all three blind people are, for a sighted person can plainly see how the “snake,” “tree,” and “big leaf” connect together into what an elephant really is. To the idealist, the fable says that we all have our ideological blindnesses and there is no fully sighted person who can see the whole elephant—that we are all blind people wildly grasping at the elusive truth of the world.

The approach I take to this ancient debate is that the material and the ideal dimensions of the environment depend upon and interact with each other and together constitute the practical conditions of our lives. What we believe depends on what we see and feel, and what we see and feel

depends on what we believe. It is not a matter of either/or; rather, it is a matter of both together. Each side helps constitute and reconstitute the other, in a process that will never, we must hope, finish. I term this mutual and unfinalizable interrelationship *ecological dialogue*.² Throughout the book, I consider the constant conversation between the material and ideal dimensions of this never-ending dialogue of life and how our environmental practices emerge from it.

Ecological dialogue is also a way to conceptualize power—to conceptualize the environmental relations that shape our scope for action: our ability to do, to think, to be. These relations of power include both the organizational factors of materiality and the knowledge factors of our ideas—which, in turn, shape each other. By using the word *dialogue*, I don't mean that everything in this interrelationship is happy and respectful, smooth and trouble-free, or even that it always should be. Dialogue is not a state we reach when we have overcome power; it only happens *because of* power. There is often conflict involved, which is one of the main ways that the material and the ideal continually reshape each other and express themselves in our practices of living. And conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it is exactly what is needed to get us to pay attention. But neither is power all kicking and yelling. There is much cooperative and complementary action in the dialogue of ecology, much conviviality that we relish and that constantly changes us. We experience power in cooperative and complementary action, too. Nor is power necessarily a bad thing. (Imagine for a moment having no power at all in your life and what an awful circumstance that would be.) It's a matter of what power does and how and why, and the legitimacy of its balances and imbalances. These are moral questions that we need to continually ask and re-ask.

Maybe a diagram will help. Have a look at Figure 1.1, a kind of environmental sociological updating of the *Taijitu*, the ancient Chinese yin–yang icon. The *Taijitu* suggests that the world is constituted through the interaction of yin and yang, which together create a unity of earth and heaven—or in more Western terms, of the material and the ideal. Often the *Taijitu* is interpreted to mean that yin and yang are opposites, but the black dot in the white side and the white dot in the black side are supposed to indicate that each is the seed of the other. Also, the *Taijitu* indicates the

Figure 1.1 Ecological dialogue.



Source: Matthew Robinson and the author.