

**QUALITATIVE SOCIOLOGY**

**Special issue:**

**Social Equity and Environmental Activism:  
Utopias, Dystopias and Incrementalism**

*Allan Schnaiberg, Editor*

*1993*

**INTRODUCTION: INEQUALITY ONCE MORE, WITH (SOME) FEELING**

*Allan Schnaiberg*

**INTRODUCTION: INEQUALITY ONCE MORE, WITH (SOME)  
FEELING**

*Allan Schnaiberg  
Department of Sociology  
Northwestern University  
Evanston, IL 60208*

This special issue represents a rather erratic dialogue within sociological research. While social inequality has been an enduring focus in social research, it has commanded rather limited intellectual and political resources within the specialty that has come to be known as *environmental sociology*. Despite a history of research since the early 1970s in this arena, it is curious how little we have analytically integrated *environmentalism* and *equity*. This volume outlines some of the social consequences of this disattention by both social researchers and environmental movement adherents.

From my own perspective, I find this disattention a puzzling paradox. It is comforting for us to attribute this strategic disregard as simply due to the ignorance of social scientists, or due to competition for attention posed by other changing social or ecological factors. These might include the rise of an unprecedentedly-large voluntary social movement labelled as "the environmental movement", or the scientific rediscovery of pollution and its health effects in the 1960s and 1970s.

Perhaps others currently working within environmental sociology itself, or in other social scientific research, can accept this interpretation. But I cannot, for the simple reason that I have been calling for attentiveness to this issue for over two decades. In **1973**, I concluded my very first published paper, *Politics, participation and pollution: The 'environmental movement,'* with the following statement (Schnaiberg, 1973: 623):

Therefore, any proposal for environmental action must clearly incorporate the elements of social justice, and there must be a commitment of the middle-class proponents to *explicitly* build in such considerations. This is a political necessity, as well as a moral prerequisite, since the coalition of rich and poor is sufficient to doom any proposal. But the coalition of the poor and the middle-class *may* sufficiently offset the existing political imbalance to provide passage of significant proposals. [*Emphasis in the original*]

In **1975**, at the earliest stage of the so-called *energy crisis* in the United States, I attempted to call social scientists' attention to emerging policies of energy pricing and allocation. I did this both to analyse energy policies in their own right, and as an illustration of other modern *environmental protection* policies I labelled then as *planned scarcity* (and later as *managed scarcity*). This concept stressed the distributive aspects of such policies. There, I argued that:

The debate in social policy literature focuses heavily upon the issue of the impact of planned scarcity environmental politics, but with little empirical basis. In part, this stems from the difficulty of evaluating the impact of many pollution abatement and resource preservation policies, and the relative lack of social resources to such socioeconomic evaluations.

The answers to the distributional impact of planned scarcity are crucial for social scientists in terms of their own policy preferences among the three types of [policies]. At present, most social scientists simply ignore the issue, in part due to their perception of the academic and policy division of labor....

At minimum, we need to understand the current situation of socioeconomic impacts, not merely to project them into the future, but also to

focus on points where planned social change may induce non-regressive impacts of resource policies... [Schnaiberg, 1975: 10]

By **1980**, when I published *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity*, I still felt compelled to frame this synthetic work with the following plea (Schnaiberg, 1980: 5):

Throughout these chapters, there is a unifying theme. Social inequalities are viewed as interwoven with each environmental concern. In my perspective, there can be no value-free evaluation of environmental concerns. Our focus on particular environmental concerns, our choice of explanatory models to help us confront these concerns, and our social policies resulting from such explanations -- all of these are built around and influence preexisting social inequalities. Thus, this book is....about making our social and physical environment a fit place for both the powerless and the powerful to live and work in. From a sociological perspective, it is never sufficient to point to *the* environment as having been protected. The question must always be asked, for whom and from whom? Environmental quality and social welfare issues are not socially or politically separable. [*Emphasis in the original*]

Throughout the 1980s, I continued to emphasize these themes. I helped coordinate an international conference on *distributional effects* of environmental policymaking, in Berlin in 1984 (Schnaiberg, Watts & Zimmermann, eds., 1986). By this time, there was a handful of social scientists who were beginning to pay attention to inequalities in environmental protection movements and policies. However, their work was peripheralized in most environmental policy discourses.

Interestingly, by 1984, virtually all of these emerging social analysts were, like me, Caucasian male researchers, generally tenured or with some job security.

By contrast, this volume represents another set of voices. Here, they ground the issues of social equity and environmental protection by exploring more of the *feelings* of the disempowered. Generally, the papers here are products of younger male scholars (Gould and Weinberg) and younger female scholars (Krauss, Taylor and Espeland). All of these scholars are more deeply concerned with the social needs of significant disempowered social groups, both ethnic-racial minorities and classes within the majority group. Moreover, their discourse integrates observations at the individual, familial, and community levels, and in voluntary associations and *interest groups* of varying degrees of organization.

Kenneth Gould, Adam Weinberg and Allan Schnaiberg's paper helps frame the broad issue of the remoteness of the environmental movement from concerns with social inequalities associated with both environmental degradation and environmental protection. Paradoxically, their analysis comes full circle, back to the opening quotation in this Introduction. They trace both the historical roots of this disattention, and the paradoxes of the Rio Conference of 1992, which explicitly dealt with such inequalities on a global level. In the final sections, they specify a new model of *sustainable legitimacy* for a new coalition of middle-class and other increasingly-disempowered groups.

Next, Celene Krauss's work documents the emergence of a less-studied facet of the modern "environmental movement industry", which arises from women's concerns about their families' health, and their confrontations in the face of expanding local toxic waste dumps and toxic waste treatment facilities. Her work compares U.S. women's groups from blue-collar communities, and notes the differences among women from white, African American and Native American communities. These contrasts highlight both gender issues and issues of social class and political empowerment, often using as movement "resources" elements of historical disempowerment.

Dorceta Taylor's work extends our comparative social mobilization perspective across genders and societies, by probing the evolution of both male and female-based minority environmental groups in another declining industrial society, Britain. Her work enables us to contrast ways in which the U.S. and the U.K. social structures differ in mobilizing minority groups, which frequently merge goals of minority access to resources with the protection of such resources. The potential of, as well as the limitations of these groups and coalitions are explored on both organizational and political planes.

Finally, Wendy Espeland's work explores state procedures which typically disempower one of the most materially-deprived U.S. minority groups -- Native Americans. She traces the continuing bureaucratic-professional domination of the Yavapai by federal land management agencies, despite the unprecedented social inclusion of this disempowered group into land-use decision making under provision of NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act). NEPA's legal structure offered only a limited forum for alternative cultural prescriptions for using Arizona land. But despite this latest example in a history filled with neglected promises to respect Native American resources, this new NEPA process did indeed offer a wider base for political mobilization of other social movements by the Yavapai, leading to new coalitions to support protection of their ancestral land.

The last three papers clearly expose the reader to new possibilities for coalition-building to protect vulnerable social groups, a task that the first paper sees as vital to sustaining a legitimate environmental justice movement. Our attentiveness to these issues is needed, to push social distribution concerns higher on the social and political agenda of environmental movements, since every environmental policy is also, *de facto* , a social distribution policy.

**References**

Schnaiberg, A. (1973). Politics, participation, and pollution: The 'environmental movement.' Pp. 605-627 in J. Walton and D.E. Carns (eds.), *Cities in Change: Studies on the Urban Condition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1975). Social syntheses of the societal-environmental dialectic: The role of distributional impacts. *Social Science Quarterly* 56 (June), 5-20.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1980). *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schnaiberg, A., Watts, N., & Zimmermann, K. (Eds.). (1986). *Distributional Conflicts in Environmental- Resource Policy*. Aldershot, England: Gower Publishing.