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Ecology and the 'Sui Generis' Profession

In a recent issue of *ISLE*, a US based journal for Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, Julia Martin writes: "I imagine a package of lit crit breakfast cereal, the staples of race, class and gender supplemented with a new ingredient: "New improved, with added ecology!"...The product is marketed throughout a chain of academic shopping centres, but unfortunately many people are reluctant to buy...What does saving rhinos, rain forests and the ozone layer have to do with poverty and oppression anyway? (1)

I share Martin's frustration, fired by the experience of trying to integrate my life as an eco-political activist with working life as an academic professional. For the discipline of sociology is no less indifferent to its ecological condition than English Lit. In some ways, the flippant review of my work in the local *Journal of Sociology* seems symptomatic of the problem. (2) But the blinkering of sociology was inevitable from the moment Durkheim first carved out the territory for his "new profession" by pronouncing it "sui generis".

The first SAANZ Environment and Society Section came together at the University of NSW conference in 1982. Several contributors - Plumwood, O'Connor, Trainer - went on to be celebrated internationally but momentum lapsed in the organisation itself. Since then, a body of new journals have fostered vibrant exchanges on the humanity/nature interface - *Environmental Ethics*; *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*; *Organisation & Environment*; *Environmental Values*; *Environmental Politics*; *Democracy & Nature*. Yet the field remains largely alien to Australian sociologists. Hopefully, Redclift and Woodgate's encyclopaedic handbook will remedy this and provide legitimation for younger scholars of environmental sociology. (3)

True, some committed rural sociologists have taken up the politics of biodiversity post Rio, and there are occasional head counts of who in the general population "sees Green", but the profession at large does not treat "ecological literacy" seriously. Given the multiple ways in which class, race, and gender, oppressions are "materially" interlinked with ecological degradation, a wider focus would deepen the ethical stance of sociologists.

Even so, it is not enough just to "add and stir" environmental concerns into the standard sociological mix. As the review of my book illustrates, a piecemeal liberal pluralist approach too readily sets feminist interests against Greens and Greens against indigenes, by default securing the status quo for those in power. After all, who has profited from concealing the interdependence of "humanity and nature" so-called? Or for that matter, who loses out from assertions that these terms are "nothing but" social constructs?

In re-framing the "proper study of mankind", the metaphysical lens which divides humanity from nature needs to be replaced by a lens that regards all fractions of humanity "through the prism of nature". This means reading social questions with an "eco-centric" as opposed to anthropo-centric eye and more interdisciplinary "lateral thinking" in sociology. Again, this can be highly rewarding: my research, for example, has opened up dialogue with philosophers, political theorists, geographers, economic historians, folk in STS, environmental, cultural and women's studies, from Lancaster, to Manila, to Boulder, to Quito.

When social questions are viewed through the prism of nature, the "political economy" which has been a mainstay of welfarist sociology in this country, refracts to a "political ecology". The latter is more sensitive to indigenous autonomy and recognises protection of cultural diversity and bio-diversity to be one and the same question. As Guha, Martinez-Alier, and Barry demonstrate, political ecology is already quite developed on the Indian sub-continent, in the Spanish speaking world, and among some women theorists.(4)

This grassroots perspective simultaneously endorses and defies the sociological canon. It affirms Marx's understanding of how practical action shapes thought and it sees passionate advocacy generating relevant and accurate knowledge. But once eurocentric blinkers are dropped, classic notions of "class" and "value" beg interrogation. A political ecology focuses on the transformational agency of "meta-industrial workers" - a subject of history whose defining feature is reproductive labour skills which minimise risk and hold complex living systems together.

Currently, too much social policy research is unreflexively embedded in a eurocentric assumption that the dominant model of high tech "development" is simply "given". And more, it is embedded in an unreconstructed masculinist idea about what constitutes "politics". On this basis, how can sociologists define themselves as global citizens, let alone help communities create alternatives to a universally exploitative and unsustainable global free trade regime?

It is unlikely that the critical conjuncture known as "globalisation" will resolve unless "a common denominator" to the discourses of ecology, socialist, feminist and indigenous struggle can be found. This places a demand on the sociological profession far more exacting than the one posed by feminism as a single issue politics in the 80s. In rising to the challenge, how can we avoid taking our own experience as representative of the whole? The "sui generis" profession is after all a fairly atypical minority.

Notes

- (1) Julia Martin, "New, with Added Ecology: Hippos, Forests and Environmental Literacy", *ISLE*, 1994, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1-11, p.1.
- (2) Barbara Adkins, "Review of Ecofeminism as Politics: nature, Marx, and the postmodern", *Journal of Sociology*, 1999, Vol. 35, No. 2, 234-35.
- (3) Michael Redclift and Graham Woodgate eds., *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (Northhampton, MA: Elgar, 1997).
- (4) Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism* (London: Earthscan, 1997) and John Barry, 'The Emergence of Ecofeminist Political Economy', *Environmental Politics*, 1998, Vol. 7, No. 3, 150-55.

