Original Articles – Sociology studies

Sociology in the face of environmental sustainability

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Abstract. The essay examines the relationship between sociology and environmental sustainability, highlighting the historical and theoretical roots of the concept of environmental sustainability. It traces the evolution of sociological thought on the environment, from the Enlightenment to contemporary debates, emphasizing the concept of the relationship between man and nature. The essay also addresses the issue of greenwashing, analyzing the gap between discourse and practice in environmental policies. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of a social and cultural perspective on the environment for a deeper understanding of sustainability.

Keywords: environmental sociology, sustainability, greenwashing, nature, social theory.

1. SOCIAL THINKING AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The 'classics' of sociology, and we are referring here in particular not only to Durkheim but also to Marx and Weber, were generally insensitive to the physical aspects of society, as they were largely determined by the need to affirm the autonomy of the social sciences with respect to the natural sciences from the *quarrel* against environmental determinism and biological determinism. Those same physical aspects, however, had somehow permeated the thinking of many of the pre-classical authors who can be found at the origins of sociological thought.

And in fact Durkheim and Weber move, if you like, precisely from a critique of the environmental and psychological determinism inherent in a proto-positivistic approach and the need for a reaffirmation of human freedom and will by emphasising man's superiority over nature; in particular, it can be noted that while Durkheim proceeds according to an anti-biologistic approach, Weber proceeds in open polemic with Darwinian and Spencerian evolutionism. On the other hand, Marx himself, in his critique of the classical political economy of Smith, Ricardo and Malthus, had also polemised against a certain agrarian determinism and against the hypostasis of a *homo oeconomicus* conditioned only in a physicalist sense.

This attitude of the classics and the founding fathers of modern sociology has caused environmental issues to be reduced to special, sectorial soci-

ologies, losing that fundamentally cultural value that the pre-classics had somehow intuited in dealing with natural phenomena in their relationship with the human environment.

The environment has thus long been reduced to a question of spatial differences in studies of urban, rural and territorial sociology, and the school of social ecology (or human ecology) itself was born in this context through a cultural operation of applying the concepts of ecology to the human species. R.E. Park is generally the author referred to in order to explain the genesis of this approach, which resolves itself into a sort of general theory of society and more properly of the relations between the biotic level of social relations and the cultural level; this social theory, however, was coined, as it were, to be applied to the study of modern cities, in particular the urban development of industrial cities (see the studies of Burgess, McKenzie, etc.).

Even the school of human ecology (or Chicago school), however, was born on the basis of an environmental emergency and draws largely on the empirical investigations of the late 19th century (such as Ch. Booth's on life and poverty in the city of London) and its aim is generally practical intervention. It should be noted, however, that in the human ecology of the Chicago school the concept of environment, understood as the natural environment, is almost nil and the category of space itself has a very relative value; but there is no doubt that it stands as the theoretical and cultural matrix of a series of studies, mostly of the American brand, which for years have dealt with community problems, demographic problems, and migration problems.

It is symptomatic that even a certain development of American functionalism, emphasising the need not to disregard the relationships between biological evolution and cultural evolution, wished to indicate the fundamental elements of the human ecological system through the adoption of the acronym POET (Population, Organisation, Environment, Technology) and, partly along these lines, a very particular strand of studies called 'ecology of organisations' originated, which sees social organisations as organisms united in populations and in a competitive relationship with each other.

Thus the classics of sociology have generally neglected the physical-environmental aspects (dealt with instead by human geography and anthropology), which, on the other hand, had been dealt with to some extent, realising their importance, by the pre-classics. But if it is true that the latter had a certain sensitivity in dealing with the environmental question, it is equally true that aspects relating to nature as a value in itself were often confused through a sort of projection of human ele-

ments onto the discourse of 'nature' and this very often fostered a confusion between values in itself *of nature* and values referring instead to *human nature* and therefore also in this case strongly anthropocentric and socio-culturally connoted.

However, in attempting to identify, albeit synthetically, the main moments in which some of the pre-classical authors dealt with the man-nature relationship, one cannot fail to bear in mind that, as has recently been noted, in defining the Man-Environment relationship, a kind of *dualism* prevailed for a long time, with the Subject understood as Thought-Spirit-Reason on the one hand, and Nature-sensibility on the other.

Empiricism, on the one hand, and rationalism, on the other, emblematically represent this state of affairs in which *ordo essendi* and *ordo cognoscendi* seem to run parallel tracks without ever meeting.

This duplicity of approaches seems to enter into crisis with Kant, who, as is well known, sustains, right from the opening of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the importance of the sensible and its logical priority in man's gnoseological process ("All our knowledge begins with perception"). And, even if Kant himself will end up maintaining a dualism, which will take the form of the fundamental dichotomy between science and ethics, the relationship between Man and Nature is not only complicated, but also enriched, opening the door, from a logical point of view, to a cultural and social reflection on the environment.

Already in the midst of the Enlightenment climate, Montesquieu and Rousseau, rightly considered by Durkheim to be 'precursors of sociology', albeit with quite different perspectives, reflected on the relationship in question through analytical categories that were to become genuine operational concepts in the sociology of knowledge.

Montesquieu, as we will recall, introduces a principle of great sociological importance, according to which the law must adapt to the type of society for which it is produced. And the latter is seen precisely in its conditioning to natural factors, such as, for example, fundamental, climate, natural resources and modes of livelihood. To these must be added cultural conditioning such as the customs, habits and institutions of a given people.

Montesquieu's environmental relativism leads the author to believe that science should not seek the general principles that govern all societies, but rather the normative and regulatory principles of *individual* societies.

Ultimately, there is a high ethical tension in Montesquieu's discourse, especially in the pre-revolutionary climate, which leads him to search for conditions for the implementation of freedom, convinced as he is that these

conditions must vary according to countries, climates, environments, economies, and institutions.

Rousseau, as is well known, places himself along the lines of natural lawism and the analysis of a hypothetical state of nature.

This seems to be a logical category rather than an actual fact and comes to draw, depending on one's point of view, the relationship of man with his natural environment in a logically *presocietal* condition: a relationship that is seen, depending on one's perspective, as something problematically negative, in some cases; maximally positive, in others.

The state of nature as portrayed very effectively by Hobbes, in the part entitled 'De Homine' in *Leviathan*, reflects a man-nature relationship based on insecurity, fear, and above all loneliness; Rousseau, on the other hand, a century later, will base his representation of the state of nature on the myth of the 'good savage', finding in it, and in the perennial image of an ever-renewed Robinson in his politics of solitude (Polin), a fundamental archetype recapitulated in all mythologies and all religions, at least in the western world, and atavistically declined now as a golden age, now as an era of peace, now as Eden or earthly paradise.

It is in this sphere (logical and not chronological, as it may never have existed but was always longed for) of perfect fusion between man and nature that the modern concept of 'natural law' was born (as the matrices of ancient natural law can already be found in the Greek classics - for example in Sophocles' *Antigone* and in Christian philosophy) and that a kind of naturalistic morality renamed 'natural lawism' was founded.

Natural law, historically opposed and alternative to legal positivism (both poles of one of the greatest dichotomies in the history of the philosophy of law), can be well analysed from the perspective of *social legitimation* insofar as it tends, as is well known, to provide a basis for the compliance of a certain political and social order, or, as the case may be, for the *delegitimisation* of a certain political and social order. Classical natural law, in fact, operates on the basis of the assumption that, *before and beyond* written laws (positive law), there exist *unwritten* laws of a higher level that can only be known through the use of reason and that are proper to human *nature* and therefore, valid beyond space and time, come to represent the parameter by which to judge the goodness of the positive laws themselves (thus becoming an instrument for *controlling* every process of *secularisation* and *secularisation* of law).

From *the hypostatisation*, therefore, of these principles and the ontological condensation of what are defined as natural rights (or natural law) arises the possibility of a *legitimisation* of the social, that is, of a critique and thus a corresponding *delegitimisation* of the social itself. It is precisely on the basis of natural law doctrines that the legal and political critique of various social arrangements has been based for years, and it should not be forgotten how all the work of delegitimising *the ancien régime* by the French Enlightenment was largely based on natural law modules, as, moreover, had the political philosophy of the previous century (Hobbes, Locke, Filmer) to legitimise instead the new nascent liberal state, on the basis of the guarantees it gave to natural rights that were hypothesised, of course, within a scenario of a *state of nature* logically and chronologically preceding the rule of law.

Rousseau, in his critique of the civil society of his time, which is based on selfishness, violence and inequality, points precisely to the state of nature as the condition in which man should have continued to live.

According to Rousseau, society spoils and bastardises nature, and the idea of the state of nature (which may never have existed for Rousseau himself) is merely a critical tool to stigmatise the injustices of the present and of the established social order; from this point of view, the state of nature comes to be merely an ideal benchmark against which social and political institutions cannot fail to display their irrationality.

The myth of the good savage is exemplified as the reconnection with nature through criticism of the hetero-direction of civilised society.

From the above it can be clearly understood how modern natural law is more interested in asserting a particular and historically determined cultural perspective of human nature than in considering the *natural environment* in a broad cultural perspective. In fact, one need only think of the historical determination of the fundamental natural rights it affirms (life, liberty, private property) to understand how it is merely a tool for legitimising the modern liberal state against the old absolutism, and how what is considered natural, universal, eternal, is merely a cultural product strongly conditioned by a particular historical epoch.

The sociology of classical knowledge, which has worked on the analysis of the social conditioning of thought, has therefore had good game in dismissing natural law theories as ideologically flawed procedures that are based on intellectual constructions founded on values that, having emerged from certain historical situations and being the reflection of certain points of view, are by their nature historically contingent and certainly not characterised by apodicticity and universality.

All this reasoning also makes one realise how the state of nature hypothesised upstream of this intellectual

construction often had very little to do with a discourse *on* nature *apart from* specific interests that only the anthropic element, in the centrality and specificity of this event, could historically, but only historically, explain.

Contemporary sociology, too, has not gone beyond the management of the environment in an organisational and technological manner, at most postponing the ecological problem to an environmental impact assessment. The environment, in this way, is sectorialised within metaphysically labelled disciplines and loses that fundamental value implicit in the notion of 'environment as culture' that is already intuitively present in the very authors at the origins of sociological thought, who had often managed to grasp the cultural nexus of the subject-nature relationship. The great constructions of the classics of sociology, on the one hand, and the development of post-Parsonsian functionalism, on the other, seem to have introduced that discourse, and today it appears essential to avoid further dichotomous processes that are based on a representation of the subject as 'other' with respect to the environment and of the environment as the external sphere of the subject; both perspectives, in fact, present themselves as, shall we say, 'reductionist' insofar as the subject is reduced in this way 'to a Promethean or narcissistic Robinson and the environment to an inert nature, separate from man'. In both cases, *'the otherness that for man is not only given by the natural environment, but by the naturalness of his own body and the plurality of his coexistence' is in* fact amputated. This means, therefore, that just as the Subject 'is not a *Homo clausus*, an I-without-us, to quote Norbert Elias, so the Environment is not a nature indifferent to human presence' (Cerroni, 1991, p. 214).

Years ago it was noted that if Gramsci was able to make Benedetto Croce 'his privileged interlocutor' in the cultural debate, it was because his Marxism, like Rodolfo Mondolfo's, 'had discharged nature' (Paccino, 1972, p. 229), giving rise to a series of *apriorisms* and a sort of latent idealism that permeated a certain part of Italian Marxism.

As has been pointed out for some time now: "This aprioristic prefiguration, found in the Gentile-Mondolfo line (*while extraneous* to Antonio Labriola, who only *a posteriori* was *compromised* and baptised the father, in some cases degenerate, of the phantom 'Italian Marxism') and substantially accepted by Gramsci, sees the 'core' of the *realist* doctrine of history in the 'dialectical' principle of the *Praxis* that is reversed. It is no coincidence, then, 'that almost the entire Italian post-World War II Marxist tradition claimed to resolve the problem of the "criticality" of the doctrine in the anti-determinist battle...' (Marramao, 1971, pp. 287-288).

The attempt to construct social action in Labriola thus appears different, where the interest in natural history is as much present in the elaboration of the operative concept of *genetic morphology* as in the interest and importance given to the analysis of 'telluric conditions'.

In this way, the connection to Darwinian interests, on the one hand, and the attempt at the explanation of the economic formation of society as a peculiar process of natural history, on the other, are reconnected to the general instance of the explanation of socio-historical facts, transcending the philosophical-social mediation of Spencerian positivistic evolutionism.

1. GREEN WASHING AND PUBLIC POLICY

If nothing else, sociological analysis, albeit indirectly, has in some way identified how there is an actual datum from which to start: man and nature are two aspects of the same reality, but at a given point in human development this generates contradictions with the surrounding environment. The contrast is not given generically between man and the natural environment, which, in extreme synthesis, constitute a holistic unity and cannot 'ontologically' oppose each other: man is a product of nature and cannot 'destroy' it; instead, he can destroy the specific conditions that make the life of the human species on Earth possible. Which, of course, does not ultimately lead to an opposition between man and nature, but to a conflict *in* mankind over its chances of survival on Earth. For nature to take the form of Earth or Mars is of no consequence. It matters, all right, to mankind as a social entity that wants (would like) to preserve itself.

The opposition thus arises between society's contingent pattern of development and the environment that contains it. The environmental issue, which arose more or less in the middle of the 20th century, can be defined as the set of relations between society and space. This space is being affected by man, in increasingly invasive forms and ways. The reaction of the natural environment is that of a progressive deterioration of living conditions *for* humans on Earth. The measurement of the specific impact of the capitalist system on nature is a matter of debate, but empirical evidence suggests that there is an impact and it is negative. To reiterate: it is not the natural environment that is ruined, but the overall quality of human life that worsens. Hence the centrality assumed by the environmental issue as an eminently political problem. If it is not the generic 'man' entity that comes into conflict with nature, but the particular model of development predominant at a given historical

moment, it is around this factor that the environmentalist dialectic will develop.

The environmental question has thus established itself as a social construction, a terrain of confrontation between different political visions and imaginaries. Yet over the decades it has undergone a process of normalisation that some authors define as both epistemological and political. Epistemological normalisation concerns 'technological solutionism': the contrast between the productive model and the natural environment could be resolved through technical development. Political normalisation concerns the alleged compatibility between the current liberal system of government and the solutions best suited to safeguarding the natural ecosystem. Both of these processes contain truths that should not be underestimated, but have as their underlying limitation that of the depoliticisation of the issue. The terms of the question, which as we have said concern the relationship between the production system and the environment, are misrepresented in an opposition between man and nature due to the physiological expansion of man's own social activities. The natural organism is split into a dualism that ideologically (one might even say 'idealistically') separates man and nature, and their contrasts naturalised and essentialised. With this, the environment is made into something external and opposite to man, and the conflict at some point inevitable.

As far as the 'technical' solution is concerned, this cannot be left solely to the competition of market forces: these would indeed produce technologically advanced solutions, as is the case on a daily basis, but the concrete application and dissemination of these solutions would sooner or later lead to a clash with the productive forces behind technological development itself. Put another way: many of the solutions we expect from technological progress already exist, the problem is to make them pass from the scientific level to the social level. *To impose them*, therefore, while respecting the settling criteria that transition, any transition, entails.

And here the second, directly political, order of problems intervenes. 'Liberal' environmentalism proceeds by individualising the problems and solutions to the environmental question: it is through the sum of personal (or even corporate) behaviour that the fateful 'general interest' is arrived at, in this case declined in the ecosystemic sense. Yet the attempt to break reality down into abstractly equivalent units does not produce the socialisation of solutions, but the elitist selection of these. It will be the well-to-do classes, the economically and culturally better off, the socially better off and geographically favoured - in other words, a clear minority of the Earth's population - who will have at their disposal a carnet of ecological choices to draw from on a voluntary and inscrutable basis. This is what already happens in practice in the world: a small proportion of the population that can afford ecologically sustainable consumption, compared to a majority of the world's population that is forced into the unambiguous choice of pollution. And it is still to be established that the lifestyle of the global north, made up of private cars, air travel and unlimited access to consumption, is less polluting than that of the population of the global south, where pollution is more visible.

Essentially, the preservation of individual freedom, the legally regulated and delimited pursuit of the private interest, the freedom of enterprise and the market, if taken in an extended sense, are at odds with the realisation of political solutions based on the communitarian character of choices, the imposition of norms and lifestyles oriented towards ecosystem preservation. The 'ethical neutrality' of liberal-liberal democracy, by preserving the individual's sphere of autonomy, is also less predisposed to fully elaborate public policies in which a communitarian will is imprinted. The environmental question is then entirely internal to the political dialectic, and concerns the choices that, precisely, distinguish a coherently environmentalist political position from those marked by *greenwashing*.

In a technical sense, greenwashing is a corporate practice aimed at acquiring a 'green reputation', i.e. an ecological one, in the absence of concrete entrepreneurial and production policies other than competitors disinterested in the issue. In the broadest sense, greenwashing is a discursive practice that, acting in the terrain of communication and marketing, preserves the idea that 'ecological modernisation' can take place while maintaining the capitalist institutional and productive framework unchanged, adopting instead punctual, circumstantial solutions, marked by the good use of existing technology, and if anything, blaming the consumer who does not conform to the choices of environmental sustainability. Historically, other political-economic models, such as socialism, have also proved unsuitable for addressing the environmental issue. The fact remains that capitalism's vocation for unlimited production prevents the promotion of effective and structural solutions to the issue.

The unveiling of the instrumental substratum of this what we might call 'green liberalism' has produced, as an understandable (but alienated) form of reaction, the variously conspiratorial and denialist one that, together with the criticism of greenwashing, also invests the reasons that make this model of development progressively unsustainable for mankind on Earth. According to the colourful dietrological narratives, ecologism

(a set of *woke* rhetoric spread by an unspecified 'global technocracy') would be at odds with the realm of individual freedom to consume. It would be one - yet another - attempt at 'global governance' inspired by the 'great reset'. And yet, at the bottom of things, the reactionary critique of environmentalism grasps the crux of the matter: the environmental issue, if addressed in the radical terms that reality dictates, involves precisely the construction of a general limit to the individual freedom to independently dispose of his or her own destiny (as a private consumer and as a private company). It is a choice of civilisation, that is, of politically alternative ways of imagining the progress of civilisation itself, the direction of its development, and the means to achieve it. Every conception of sustainability, be it ecological or, on other levels, economic, financial, digital, and so on, is either understood in the sense of an irruption, in the sphere of individual rights understood in the 'Rawlsian' sense, of a rational will capable of thinking the historical process and political-economic development, or it is part of that *eco-friendly* veneer through which one would like to depoliticise and technicalise the great political issues of our time. Environmental sustainability, understood in its fullest sense, is only possible provided it is accompanied by a form of social transformation that collectivises problems and solutions, rather than individualising them. Techniques, technological development, the sphere of individual rights, are all necessary elements for a solution that can only look to a form of collective planning. Sustainability cannot be the result of behaviour, even if favoured by appealing narratives and economic bonuses; rather, it must be the concept that inspires the action of public policies aimed at governing things and people differently.

2. WHAT SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY?

All this makes it clear how, even starting with the environmental issue, *sustainability* has now entered the current lexicon of everyday life and in its consolatory shorthand conciseness can give the feeling of being able to completely define the contradictions and sometimes pernicious anfractuosities of development. All for the purpose, at least it would seem, of rescuing the neo-liberal paradigm through an operation of linguistic *maquillage* without, however, questioning it and thus renouncing the possibility of transcending it.

It is in fact since the 1980s of the last century, when the Reagan and Thatcherite versions of the blind faith in the market unleashed by the new capitalism became radicalised, that reasoning on sustainable development and sustainability began to mature. In fact, with the Brundtland Report of 1987, this topic was also addressed at a public level and in this way a more appropriate theorisation of it began to take shape. The term 'sustainability', perhaps because of its polysemy, is much used and perhaps abused, but there is no doubt that the theoretical outcome is represented by the identification of the axiom relating to the certainty that economic development can be reconciled and reconciled with environmental and social issues in order to resolve one of the most tragic dichotomies of contemporary life: that indicated by the conceptual pair economy/environment.

The concept of sustainability thus appears to suffer considerably from a mediating ambiguity that must dialectically resolve the oppositionality of contradictions. This ambiguity, which has nonetheless found its success and which in turn has not been limited to the classic 'quarter-hour of fame', is configured as a project, or rather a cultural imaginary, capable of not wanting to abdicate economic development, using the panacea of the complex use of technical rationality and the participation of the private sector in general in the construction of public choices as tools. In short, one can still read in its watermark a typical, albeit tempered, form of neo-liberalism that becomes the central building block of a *basic personality*, to put it in anthropological-cultural terms, that is, of a precise new *WELTANSCHAUUNG*.

Perhaps one can also transcend the equivocal nature of the concept by avoiding overbearing economicist reductionism and leaving room for the spaces of participation and new subjectivities, but undoubtedly in common usage the very term 'sustainability' seems to be placed precisely in this 'pedagogical' context, (which therefore accepts a tempered neo-liberalism) and not elsewhere as one would sometimes have us believe.

Such considerations can also be framed in the more general and otherwise often very differentiated approaches of current eco-Marxism (we refer to John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett's explanation of the metabolic divide on the one hand, and Moore's world ecology on the other, but here also to Malm's fossil capitalism as an example only).

In all cases, Marx's analysis in *Book I* of *Capital*, which identifies the labour process as the general condition of the organic man/nature exchange, which in turn comes to constitute an aspect common to all social forms in human history with the nature-society relationship examined on the morphology of the labour process in the various historical formations and the related transformation for valorisation from use value (goods/products) to exchange value (goods/goods), is taken up. In the era of capitalism and the subjugation of labour to capital,

one can also open up the analysis on the nature-society nexus (unpublished Chapter VI of *Book I of Capital*) with the addition of value creation in the historically determined social formation between nature-labour and value.

To this consideration can be added those of André Gorz who speaks of the costs of capital to regenerate the environment, or the more recent ones of Jason W. Moore who speaks of the unpaid labour of extra-human nature, and James O'Connor who speaks instead of the conditions of production counting the natural world among them.

This critical overview is part of the passionate and multifaceted debate that has been taking place on these issues for decades now. And the challenge is open.

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