

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Stuart, Diana. 2021. *What is Environmental Sociology?*
Cambridge, Polity Press (9781509544394).

As the consequences of global climate change mount, Diana Stuart's book *What is Environmental Sociology?* provides a timely overview of environmental sociology and potential trajectories towards a sustainable future. As a generalized thread, this book is critical of ecological modernization and individual responsabilization of environmental solutions. Stuart provides various historic and contemporary case studies outlining the associated fallacies of these frames and their inability to meet escalating environmental outcomes (p.88). Stuart establishes a sense of urgency – necessitating an “all in” mentality to prevent further environmental harm. To accomplish this, Stuart promotes an ideological shift informed by environmental justice scholarship to reassess how humans relate to nature.

Part of this effort is seen in Stuart's promotion of public sociology as a reflexive quasi-methodological lens to assess and communicate environmental sociological research. Stuart notes how – despite the influence of contrarian *and* progressive public figures on environmental values and opinions – public sociology advocates for increased accessibility of knowledge, research, and outcomes beyond academic audiences. This premise shapes the larger intentions of Stuart's book.

In chapter one Stuart provides a brief overview of the environmental sociology field and explores the traditionally contentious dichotomies of nature/society, structure/agency, and quantitative/qualitative that shaped the discipline. Stuart signals the value of interdisciplinary research and multilevel analysis found in environmental sociology studies. Stuart is careful to acknowledge that this book focuses primarily on Global North examples with the caveat that these countries are the primary beneficiaries of environmental overconsumption and the greatest contributors of environmental harm to periphery and often economically marginalized nations found in the colloquial Global South (p.10).

The remaining chapters provide insight into societal framings of environmental degradation and potential solutions while connecting with different theoretical approaches. Stuart describes how power-politics heavily informs generalized frames of environmental issues and the science that validates or invalidates risk (p.19). In this way, what we under-

stand as scientifically safe, in terms of pollution and contamination is socially constructed, or, at a minimum socially informed. Stuart pulls predominantly from the works of Ulrich Beck (1992) to describe how risks have been manufactured over time to become unavoidable aspects of progress – necessitating an entire industry focused on risk management (p.23). Examples of such risk management vary from FDA determinates of “acceptable levels of chemical contamination” to dismissal and delay of fossil fuel impacts to prevent risks to profit (p.19). However, Stuart argues that resistance to scientific legitimacy and constructed risk management are not the primary causes of inadequate environmental action. Instead, ideological and systems-level issues centered on economic growth remain the major drivers of environmental harm. It is not possible to make *meaningful* structural or individual changes without drastically reframing normative discourses that shape how we relate to nature.

Stuart describes modern society as an anthropocentric consumer culture that subjects almost everything to market valuation. In particular, the trajectory of capitalist systems and the treadmill of production necessitate overconsumption (p.58). Stuart highlights how production-led demand requires advertising and public relations campaigns to encourage ‘consumption as identity’ to maintain profit accumulation. Drawing from Karl Polanyi (1944), Stuart suggests neoliberal economic rationalities have overridden other social values and now dictate our identities, our quality of life, and how we relate to one other (p.63). However, merely blaming individual consumer choices for the brunt of environmental harms is insufficient and inaccurate. Drawing upon the concept of the ecological footprint and environmental impact models (IPAT/STIRPAT), Stuart illustrates the complexity of system outcomes that contribute to environmental destruction. Despite findings that *affluent* populations have a greater ecological footprint and significantly contribute to higher emissions, Stuart takes care to discourage readers from buying into the Malthusian and increasingly re-popularized ecofascist narrative that suggests *overpopulation* is the main driver of climate change (see Satgar 2021). This simplistic causal theory can influence the displacement of environmental responsibility and often places blame onto developing countries, with harmful and divisive consequences (p.49).

Stuart notes that the enactment of environmental protections ultimately depends on *who* is affected by environmental harms (p.39). Global North countries have benefitted from a position of blissful ignorance – an “out of sight out of mind” conscience. Successful media and public relations portrayals of anthropocentric overconsumption and “green” innovation have mediated concerns surrounding ecological consequences. However, world systems theory and global unequal ex-

change have played major conceptual roles in environmental justice and environmental racism scholarship to describe the resulting inequities of our current global economic system (p.32). Stuart provides examples of hazardous sitings including toxic waste plants, extraction sites, and manufacturing complexes, which are placed predominately in the Global South but also local communities of colour, in particular those with large Black and Aboriginal populations (Martinez-Alier 2002; Mele 2016). While economic and political resources limit some communities' capacity to resist hazardous sitings, local and national governments can be complicit in permitting corporations to engage in these activities (see Auyero and Swistun 2009).

Despite the initial motivations of environmental sociologists to balance the human-nature relationship and respect the limits of ecological thresholds – Stuart is concerned about our continued tendency towards human exceptionalism. For this reason, Stuart pushes for the adoption of radical ideological changes and solutions. Rather than entertain potential high-risk innovations that maintain economic growth, as ecological modernization theorists offer (p.87), Stuart instead advocates for reflexive modernization which promotes self-critique and self-confrontation to increase social protections (p.84). Reflexive modernization can be viewed as broadly aligning with Stuart's larger promotion of environmental justice frameworks, balancing social and environmental protections.

The paradigm shifts Stuart advocates for promote degrowth (or at least, decentering growth as a major societal driver), bolstering linkages with labour rights (such as work time reduction (WTR) and low-emission leisure activities), and wealth redistribution (p.94). All of these considerations center on limiting overconsumption with an aim to reduce total ecological withdrawals (p.94). To begin this shift, Stuart notes how social movements can, and have, served as catalysts for socio-political system changes (p.109). In the fifth chapter, Stuart provides contemporary examples of active environmental movements in the United Kingdom and United States (p.117). Stuart's final chapter explores future trajectories of environmental sociology including examinations of emotional responses and resilience in the face of climate change and further research on environmental justice to ensure global equity in changes and solutions (p.123).

Diana Stuart's book provides a practical refresher on environmental sociological theory. However, in recognizing that this book was intended for undergraduate students and perhaps interested readers unfamiliar with environmental sociology, Stuart's presentation of core environmental sociological theories could prove daunting to such readers. This

is an unfortunate flaw for a book crafted with public sociology in mind. Throughout the book the introduction of concepts and theories felt disorganized at times or lacked a clear overview, minimizing the value of these contributions. Despite these drawbacks, Stuart threads descriptive environmental justice and environmental racism case studies with public sociology throughout to illustrate actionable environmental protection and research effectively. Overall, Stuart does a great job describing the urgency of shifting how we relate to nature and how crucial this period is for taking actions to prevent further environmental harm.

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