

Sociology and Sustainable Development: Making the Connections

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ABSTRACT

The topic of sustainable development has been largely absent from the discipline of sociology. Sociology, however, is arguably the academic discipline that most thoroughly incorporates the central themes of sustainable development in its work. Sociology examines the role of social institutions in defining citizens 'life chances' (access to education, health, housing, safety, meaningful work, etc.), how those institutions distribute life chances unequally (on the basis of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.), and the possibilities that exist to make this distribution more equal. In addition, at the core of sociology is the idea that, because individuals exist within social contexts, individual behavior must be understood within a context of social costs and benefits. Finally, as C. Wright Mills argues, sociology is the most activist-oriented social science; 'activist' here does not necessarily mean social movement activism (although this is very relevant for sustainable development), but rather a commitment to social progress built into the discipline. While most sociologists can be expected to cover issues related to sustainable development in their courses, they are not explicitly defined as such. In this paper I intend to examine the features of the discipline that limit awareness of the centrality of sustainable development to its mission, as well as how those limits might be overcome.

The data for this paper will be textbooks used in Introduction to Sociology courses as well as syllabi sets published by the American Sociological Association. I use Intro textbooks to provide a picture of what is considered the core material of sociology. Course syllabi will provide information about the extent to which the themes of sustainable development are incorporated into upper-level classes. My preliminary hypothesis is that the relatively fragmented, issue-oriented format characteristic of most sociology courses works against making sustainable development a more explicit concern of sociology. If this week the subject is the economy, next week politics, the week after that social inequality, and so on, the holistic nature of sustainable development is easily lost. In order for sociology to address sustainable development more completely, sociologists will have to restructure the organization of their classes.