



## A Theoretical Approach to the Relationship between Humans and the Environment

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the evolution of sociological thought concerning the relationship between humans and the natural environment. While early social sciences largely neglected environmental issues in favor of social, economic, and political structures, the growing awareness of ecological crises has prompted a re-examination of the human-environment nexus. The study reviews major theoretical perspectives – from environmental determinism and possibilism to functionalist, ecological, and interactionist frameworks – to highlight how social systems interact with their biophysical surroundings. It argues for a holistic sociological paradigm that integrates environmental sustainability within social development models.*

**Keywords:** *Environmental sociology; Human-environment relations; Ecological theories; Functionalism; Sustainable development.*

## Une approche théorique de la relation entre les êtres humains et l'environnement

### **Résumé**

*Cet article explore l'évolution de la pensée sociologique concernant la relation entre les êtres humains et l'environnement naturel. Alors que les sciences sociales ont longtemps négligé les questions environnementales au profit des structures sociales, économiques et politiques, la prise de conscience croissante des crises écologiques a conduit à un réexamen du lien entre l'homme et l'environnement. L'étude passe en revue les principales perspectives théoriques – du déterminisme environnemental et du possibilisme aux cadres*

*fonctionnalistes, écologiques et interactionnistes – afin de mettre en évidence la manière dont les systèmes sociaux interagissent avec leur environnement biophysique. Elle plaide en faveur d'un paradigme sociologique holistique qui intègre la durabilité environnementale dans les modèles de développement social.*

**Mots clés :** *Sociologie environnementale ; Relations entre l'homme et l'environnement ; Théories écologiques ; Fonctionnalisme ; Développement durable.*



## Introduction

The relationship between society and its natural environment has long been debated across disciplines. Classical sociology, represented by thinkers such as Émile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, implicitly acknowledged the environmental dimension of social organization but rarely placed it at the core of theoretical inquiry (Catton & Dunlap, 1979). Today, growing ecological challenges—climate change, pollution, and resource depletion—demand a renewed sociological understanding of how human societies shape and are shaped by their environments.

### 2. From Environmental Determinism to Possibilism

Early thought, particularly during the 19th century, was dominated by **environmental determinism**, which viewed humans as passive agents molded by geographic and climatic conditions (Semple, 1911). This view was gradually challenged by **possibilism**, which emphasized human agency and cultural adaptability (Sauer, 1925). The shift marked a conceptual transition from nature as a determinant to nature as a field of human choice and transformation, paving the way for modern ecological sociology.

### 3. The Emergence of Environmental Sociology

Environmental sociology arose in the mid-20th century, particularly in the United States, under the influence of the **Chicago School** and **human ecology** (Hawley, 1950). Later, scholars such as **Dunlap and Catton (1979)** argued for the *New Ecological Paradigm (NEP)*, which challenged

anthropocentric assumptions embedded in traditional sociology. Environmental sociology thus redefined the discipline by integrating ecological limits into analyses of industrialization, consumption, and social change.

#### **4. Functionalist and Structural Perspectives**

The **functionalist approach**, led by **Talcott Parsons (1951)** and **Robert Merton (1968)**, interprets environmental problems as latent dysfunctions of industrial modernity. Economic growth, mass production, and technological expansion—while increasing living standards—also generate pollution and ecological imbalance. Functionalists propose that social systems must adapt by restructuring their norms, values, and institutions to restore equilibrium (Giddens, 1984). However, critics argue that minor reforms are insufficient to address systemic causes rooted in capitalist production (Schnaiberg, 1980).

#### **5. Economic and Demographic Dimensions**

Modern environmental economics challenges the classical notion of “utility maximization” by introducing the concept of **externalities**—unaccounted environmental costs of production (Pearce & Turner, 1990). Demographic studies similarly highlight the pressure of population growth on natural resources, particularly in developing countries (Ehrlich, 1968). These perspectives demonstrate that environmental degradation results from structural imbalances between population dynamics, resource distribution, and technological development.



## 6. Cultural and Interactionist Approaches

From a **symbolic interactionist** standpoint, environmental behavior is socially constructed through meanings, symbols, and shared practices (Blumer, 1969). Environmental problems thus reflect cultural orientations that privilege material progress over ecological harmony. As **Form (1995)** argues, culture provides adaptive mechanisms guiding human–environment interaction. Environmental education and socialization are therefore essential in fostering ecological awareness and reshaping values toward sustainability.

## 7. Contemporary Theoretical Directions

Recent decades have seen the integration of environmental concerns into theories of modernization and globalization. **Ecological modernization theory** (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000) posits that technological innovation and institutional reform can reconcile economic growth with environmental protection. Yet, **critical sociology** emphasizes that global capitalism remains structurally unsustainable (Foster, 2000). These debates highlight the necessity for a sociological synthesis that transcends deterministic and voluntarist dichotomies, recognizing the mutual interdependence between social systems and ecosystems.

## Conclusion

The historical trajectory of thought on human-environment relations reveals dialectic of domination and adaptation. Humanity's technological power has extended its influence over nature but also produced unprecedented ecological risks. The contemporary challenge lies in re-establishing a balanced interaction—moving from exploitation to co-evolution. As this study demonstrates, environmental sociology provides the theoretical tools to understand this transition by integrating ecological principles into the fabric of social theory and policy.

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**Soumission : 10/02/2025    Acceptation : 10/07/2025    Publication : 15/08/2025**

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