

Part III

People and Environments



Open-cast coal mine, near Leipzig, Germany, 2007. Photo and © by Jonas Bylund.

Pollution, genetically modified organisms, global warming, extreme weather, quality of life, environmental crisis. These are just a few of the many environment-related issues that loom large in the public sphere and popular press, at least in Europe and North America since the late 1960s. Despite the long-standing centrality of human-environment interactions in geography (see Chapter 2), critical geography arrived relatively late to this debate, only by the end of the 1970s, as Ben Wisner laments in Chapter 21. The chapters in Part III illustrate how environmental problems are inextricable from issues of social justice.

In contrast to conventional views blaming environmental problems on population growth or local resource mismanagement, critical geographers have striven to understand the social conditions that cause people to treat environments in increasingly destructive ways (see Neumann, 2005; Robbins, 2004). Early forays into analyzing environmental problems critically came from Marxist geographers. They saw the environmental crisis, such as famines, not as the result of ‘natural’ forces but as product of the “free market” principle of capitalism. These early investigations are represented in the chapters by Ben Wisner, Richard A. Walker, and Michael Watts (see also Harvey, 1974).

In more recent times, an increasing number of studies have connected people’s social situations to how they perceive and treat the environment. Gender plays an important role in this respect (see Chapter 15; Rocheleau et al., 1996; Schroeder, 1999). The chapter by Judith Carney, for example, illustrates how environmental impact on ecosystems and wetlands, such as in The Gambia in West-Africa, is linked to gender roles. However, the causes of environmental degradation are not limited to local circumstances; they involve international pressures to change local agricultural practices. In an effort to address social relations at the world scale, Joni Seager has paid special attention to the global environmental problems that result from patriarchal institutions and ideologies that are global in reach.

Critical geographers have further explored how taken-for-granted social relations, such as patriarchy, class structure and global inequality, guide and reinforce the ways in which people think about and act towards the physical world. Soil erosion, for instance, may not be considered a problem until it threatens profitability or groups that possess the power to define it as a problem. Locals may not think of soil erosion as problematic and may deal with it in an ecologically sustainable manner, and yet they may have to face limitations on land use that are dictated by national governments, international environmental agencies and other forces from outside of their area (Blaikie, 1985; see also Castree, 1997). Such problematic social and spatial relations are addressed in the chapter by Melissa Leach and Robin Mearns, who expose how neo-colonial institutions and national governments have used mythologies about African environments to expropriate resources and dictate environmental policies.

Even the very idea of Nature is deeply embroiled in sustaining prevailing capitalist and colonial ideologies and practices. Neil Smith’s chapter, for example, shows how Nature is produced socially and, under capitalism, reduced to a series of marketable commodities (see also Heynen and Robbins, 2005; Castree, 2005). Kay Anderson, in her chapter on animal domestication, has further elaborated on the Eurocentric cultural trappings of conceptions of Nature (see also Braun, 1997). The very notion of domestication could be used in the nineteenth century not only used to treat humans as separate from animals but also to justify the racism and sexism of the time. Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel support a related point in their chapter: Nonhuman animals are treated as objects that can be used and abused at will, like any commodity; yet, depending on the species, they can become cherished life

companions, similar to blood relatives. Humans can experience ironic twists when they attempt to put ideology into practice, especially when other organisms respond to human action in an unexpected manner (see also Fitzsimmons, 1989). Paul Robbins, for example, shows in his chapter how attempts to impose an ideologically ordered “modern” landscape in Rajasthan, India, have actually achieved almost the opposite and created unexpected and undesirable vegetation patterns.

Critical geographers have not limited themselves to understanding the social basis of environmental degradation. They have also concentrated on socially uneven effects of environmental degradation (see also Chapter 32 on the effects of warfare). Environmental problems and so-called natural hazards are not experienced by all people to the same extent or in the same way (Hewitt, 1983; Wisner et al., 2004). The severity and expansion of famine, as Michael Watts shows in his chapter, has a lot to do with the integration of affected places into a capitalist world economy, not just the occurrence of drought. Social status and residential location make a substantial difference to the exposure of environmental risk. The chapter by Laura Pulido illustrates how practices associated with white privilege and racism (see Chapter 20) expose communities unevenly to human-made toxic hazards.

As the chapters in Part III attest, critical perspectives on people and environments require an in-depth understanding of both human practices and biophysical processes. Research that focuses only on the biophysical world, without a critical understanding of how this world is shaped by humans and ideologically constructed by the human subject, risks following Geography’s long path of serving political agendas of domination (see Chapter 13). Since the 1980s, physical geographers – best positioned to investigate and understand biophysical processes – have increasingly recognized this risk and developed critical perspectives on environments and people (see, for instance, London Group of the Union of Socialist Geographers, 1983; O’Keefe et al., 1976; Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003).

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