

Sociological Understanding of the Environment

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the relationship between society and the environment, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Capitalist Society and the Environment
2. Global Warming
3. Environmental Racism
4. Biodiversity
5. Ecological Sustainable Culture

1. CAPITALIST SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The environment is intimately connected to capitalist society, and in the 21st century, critique of the capitalist system is often articulated in environmental terms. There has been a growing awareness that the existing system has effects on the environment which can be negative. The environment has been brought into economic circles as a way to connect capitalism with the natural world. It follows that you can critique the system by pointing to negative effects of the system on the environment.

2. GLOBAL WARMING

The first wave of awareness of how connected the economic system is to the environment came with a growing awareness of global warming. **Global warming** is the continued rise in global average surface temperatures. Many attribute it to human activity--to putting pollutants into the atmosphere--through industrial production.

The Industrial Revolution, the argument goes, is intimately linked with rising global temperatures, because never before in the history of the world had that much carbon been put into the environment, because of the factories' output. There's currently a push for clean energy, to try to combat global warming.



TERM TO KNOW

Global Warming

The rise in average temperature of the Earth's surface and atmosphere since the late 19th century.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

Another critique of the existing system by environmentalists is environmental racism. **Environmental racism** is an interesting topic, because it blends together many different trends in society. Environmental racism is an institutionalized form of racism that results in minority groups disproportionately and unfairly suffering from environmental problems.



THINK ABOUT IT

Where are the 'bad things' of society put--the garbage dumps, the coal plants, the paper mills? Researchers found that these things get located in areas where minority groups or low-income people live. They lack the resources to fight the installation of these things in their backyard. Richer people, however, can say, "Not in my backyard." Therefore, a disproportionate share of environmental risks and dangers are being borne by minority groups, which is environmental racism.



TERM TO KNOW

Environmental Racism

An institutionalized form of racism that results in minority groups suffering disproportionately from environmental dangers.

4. BIODIVERSITY

Biodiversity is simply the diversity of biological life within the environment. Humans are causing diminished biodiversity to occur. People are cutting down the rainforests at an unprecedented rate, which is causing biodiversity to diminish, and can cause major problems down the road. Therefore, there is a movement to protect biodiversity.



TERM TO KNOW

Biodiversity

The diversity of biological life within an environment.

5. ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABLE CULTURE

If you factor in all these negative effects as critiques of the system, what might happen as a reaction? Society is developing an ecological sustainable culture as a reaction, in some areas of the world. An **ecological sustainable culture** is a culture that allows for a healthy, long-term, and continued human interaction with the environment.

IN CONTEXT

In American society, the local food movement is an example of an ecological sustainable culture. The food movement consists of people who want to eat locally and know where their produce comes from--they want to meet the farmer who grows their crops. They don't want their crops to be transported from all over the world to get to their plate, a process that produces environmental harm.

People are discovering the joys of seasonal eating, of eating locally, and of eating organic. It is a wealthy phenomenon, though, because it's expensive, but nonetheless, it's an ecological sustainable culture in reaction to environmental problems associated with the existing system.



TERM TO KNOW

Ecological Sustainable Culture

A culture that allows for a healthy, long-term, and continued human interaction with the environment.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the relationship between **capitalist society and the environment**, and the negative effects of the system on the environment, such as **global warming**, **environmental racism**, and diminishing **biodiversity**. You also learned about current society's reaction to these negative effects, in the movement towards an **ecological sustainable culture**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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