

Book Reviews

The Ecological Approach in Sociology

Sociological Human Ecology. Contemporary Issues and Applications. MICHAEL MICKLIN and HARVEY M. CHOLDIN, Eds. Westview, Boulder, Colo., 1984. xiv, 456 pp. \$30; paper, \$11.50. Based on a conference, Seattle, 1977.

The enterprise of human ecology in sociology has been described as the study of the ways in which human communities adapt collectively to their environment. The central problem of the field, according to a classical definition, is understanding the ecological complex, or the relationships among population, organization, environment, and technology. This collection of original papers by sociologists explores various issues associated with this program. After a prologue by Amos Hawley, by consensus the most influential theoretician of sociological human ecology, the book's first section addresses general conceptual and methodological issues. The papers in the second section review, and elaborate on, work on more specific concerns such as urban ecology, the structure of organizations, the ecology of neighborhoods, and the sustenance activities of large geographical regions. The editors have provided introduction, transitions, and conclusion.

Several themes run through the volume. One concerns the diversity of subject matter to which this "theoretical persuasion," as Hawley calls it in his prologue, has been applied. The paper by Avery Guest on the city reviews a long tradition of research on urban development first associated with the Chicago school in the 1920's. Guest concludes that early models, such as Burgess's hypothesis of the radial expansion of cities, according to which land use is regulated by ease of access to the central business district, need to be considerably overhauled in these days of cars, freeways, and suburban shopping malls. Two other papers, on neighborhoods and on regions, are also concerned with territorial units. It is fair to say that spatial

aspects of human settlement, particularly in the urban context, have appeared at times to constitute the only subject matter of human ecology. The complex paper by John Kasarda and Charles Bidwell represents a striking contrast to this traditional preoccupation. Kasarda and Bidwell use the ecological perspective to explain the internal structure of organizations such as firms, government agencies, or school systems. The subject matter here corresponds to the traditional concerns of organizational theorists in schools of business administration and other social science departments. The expansion of the scope of human ecology to include units of analysis, such as organizations, that do not have a straightforward spatial referent is rather novel in this discipline. In part for this reason, this paper has the character of a synthetic theoretical statement rather than a review of accumulated wisdom.

A second, related theme has to do with the identity of sociological human ecology within sociology and the other social sciences. These issues are discussed in the prologue by Hawley and a chapter by Michael Micklin. Within sociology, the potential applications of ecological thinking to a variety of central topics may well make it increasingly part of the core of sociological theory rather than a specialized field with more parochial concerns. Such a convergence with the mainstream may entail a dilution of the essential principles of the approach. For example, human ecology is arguably the most materialistic approach within sociology. Social phenomena are interpreted in terms of sustenance activities, flows of resources, emergence of new structures. Most of the volume is in that vein, but one feels the ever-present temptation to incorporate "softer" explanatory factors of a symbolic or ideological nature. Since such factors constitute the bread and butter of much of sociology, convergence might exacerbate the temptation. With respect to the other social sciences,

anthropologists such as Marvin Harris and geographers, among others, are also using ecological models of social organization. Ties of sociological human ecology with these allied fields are discussed, but in a somewhat inconclusive way.

A third theme also has to do with a problem of identity, but one on a more general scale, the place of human ecology within general (biological) ecology. The pioneers of the field in sociology borrowed notions from the general ecology of their time, such as succession, dominance, and adaptation. Are general ecological principles, including those developed in the last three decades, applicable as such to the human species, or do humans have to be treated differently because of their capacity for purposive action and symbolic manipulation? This is readily recognized as an old debate, and the answers of various authors differ. Even among those emphasizing the continuity between the biotic and the social two different arguments emerge. William Catton applies straight ecology to the predicament of industrial societies. Humans are capable, like other animals, of overshooting the long-term carrying capacity of their environment by using up nonrenewable resources, with catastrophic outcome. (This contribution is the only one in which "ecology" connotes "environmental concerns" as in current vernacular.) On the other hand, the lucid paper by Paul Siegel discusses the translation of the concepts and mechanisms of general ecology for human applications. The translation involves an increase in the levels of abstraction and generality. For example, adaptation is viewed as any process by which an aggregate modifies itself in response to external conditions. Learning, planning, evolution, and succession are adaptive mechanisms at different levels, with different response times. This broad view fits well with recent research in biology and anthropology on the coevolution of genes and culture.

The quality of the chapters is uneven, and there is a certain lack of coherence as authors of some seem to ignore relevant points made in others. One would have wished a more substantial representation of the recent research on the ecology of organizations. However, the volume illustrates well many of the current concerns of human ecology, even though the "contemporary issues" of the subtitle are far from resolved.

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