Sociological theorizing as meaning making: the case of ecological modernization theory¹

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose a novel way to consider sociological theorizing. I argue that the structural analysis method first developed by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss provides a powerful tool to deconstruct and critique sociological theories. I propose that this method can be used to redefine certain theories not as sets of proposals from which testable hypotheses are to be derived, but rather as different versions of foundational narratives of Western society. Viewed in this way, sociological theorizing contributes to construct the Western cosmology – the body of tales and narratives that explain the creation of the social world, its relationship with nature, and its future direction.

As a case in point, I argue that the narrative of ecological modernization can thus be analyzed and deconstructed using the same tools Lévi-Strauss uses to make sense of native American cosmologies. Doing so, I find that the narrative of ecological modernization developed as a mirror image of older tales of modernization, closely associated with the myth of progress – according to which Western society emerged from a state of nature in which no rational division of labour and no private property existed. This inversion transforms the myth of creation at the heart of the modern Western cosmology into a utopian narrative that finds considerable political traction with a certain part of the business elite and associated organic intellectuals, interested in maintaining existing relations of production and power.

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Introduction

In this paper, I propose a novel way to consider sociological theorizing. I argue that the structural analysis method first developed by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955, 1966, 1983) provides a powerful tool to deconstruct and critique sociological theories. This method allow me to develop a new understanding of certain theories not as sets of proposals from which testable hypotheses are to be derived, but rather as different versions of the foundational narratives of Western society, often referred to as “myths” in non-Western contexts. Viewed in this way, some strains of sociological theorizing contribute to constructing the Western cosmology – the body of tales and narratives that explain the creation of the social world, its relationship to the cosmos, and its future evolution. As such, these theories are useful in creating meaning for members of the society so as to orient ethical action and political thinking. However, when it comes to furthering rigorous understanding of social relations and institutions, I argue that the mode of thinking that founds them constitutes what Gaston Bachelard calls an “epistemological obstacle”, a conceptual impediment to the formulation of new knowledge (Bachelard 2002).

To illustrate this argument, I develop an analysis of ecological modernization theory, widely used in the sub-field of environmental sociology. Ecological modernization theory has first been voiced as a sociological theory in Germany by Joseph Huber (1985) and Martin Jänicke (1986), and brought to an English-speaking audience by Gert Spaargaren and Arthur Mol (1992). Its conceptual apparatus is also close to the work of Beck on second modernity (Beck 2000) and reflexive modernization (Beck 2003). Broadly, as I explain in further detail below, it asserts that through well designed governmental and corporate policies, industrial societies can gradually internalize environmental externalities in response to technological development, shifting market forces, policy decisions and pressures from social movements (Mol et al. 2014; Mol and Jänicke 2009; Mol and Spaargaren 2004; Sonnenfeld 2002). In this way, it is closely linked to its lay version alternatively referred to as the green economy or green capitalism (e.g., Hawken et al. 1999; ICC 2012; OECD 2001; UNEP 2011).

Many devastating theoretical and empirical critiques of ecological modernization have been voiced since its inception, as detailed below. One of the main critiques addresses the attention ecological modernization theorists put on state and corporate policy without regard for the actual outcomes of such policy (York and Rosa 2003). The theory has also been critiqued for its emphasis on case studies, and for leaving aside the broader findings allowed by quantitative approaches (Ewing 2017). Foster (2012) finds that ecological modernization theory rests on a human exemptionalist paradigm, drawing strongly from earlier modernization theory, and which exalts the capacity of technological innovation in the capitalist economy to improve the human condition (see McLaughlin 2012). Ewing’s (2017) recent contribution argues that the fact that ecological modernization theory presupposes the capitalist world-system undermines its concept of ecological rationality as it fails to consider capitalism’s growth and profit imperatives and the differentials in power relations between regions of the world system. In addition to these theoretical critiques, empirical evidence lends little support to claims that effective ecological modernization is taking place. The ecological crisis can only be seen as deepening (e.g., IPCC 2014; Steffen et al. 2015; World Wildlife Fund 2016), and environmental movements are barely keeping

their ground in the face of anti-ecological and denialist movements (McCright and Dunlap 2010; Young and Coutinho 2013). However, despite the powerful critiques it faces, ecological modernization theory is still considered on par with other theories in environmental sociology, and it informs a large part of environmental scholarship inside and outside of sociology. Beyond the social sciences, popularized versions get an impressive amount of traction in business and policy circles (e.g., Hawken et al. 1999; Lovins and Cohen 2011; Wijkman and Rockström 2012). This begs the questions: Why does ecological modernization theory still prevails in environmental scholarship? How can such penetrating critiques simply be brushed off by its proponents (e.g., Mol et al. 2014)?

In response to these questions, I argue that even though it is portrayed as a sociological theory and engages into debates with other theories of society-environment relations, ecological modernization theory is best understood as a utopian narrative located within the particular cosmology characteristic of Western culture since the enlightenment. Such a shift in perspective will lead me to question the epistemological validity of ecological modernization as a theory, and recast it as one version of the foundational myth of Western culture. Building on this novel understanding, I will develop a brief reflection about the nature of theories and the purpose of theory-making in sociology and other social sciences. In what follows, I will first describe more extensively the method that allows me to make such claims, the structural analysis of myth as developed mainly by Claude Lévi-Strauss. I will then lay out the main tenets of ecological modernization theory, as well as the critiques it has received up to now. The next section will discuss the place the category of “nature” occupies in ecological modernization theory. I will then show how it is possible to use structural analysis to deconstruct the ecological modernization narrative by relating it to its predecessor tale, that of modernization that has pervaded Western thought since the enlightenment. This will serve to show that, because of the internal relations between its core elements, ecological modernization would be more productively approached not as a sociological theory but rather as a myth. Finally, I will provide suggestions to move away from the problematic formulations and categories identified in the paper, and particularly the category of “nature” at the heart of ecological modernization theory as well as most other approaches in environmental scholarship.

Ecological modernization theory

Ecological modernization theory has been recently defined thus:

The notion of ecological modernization may be defined as the social scientific interpretation of environmental reform processes at multiple scales in the contemporary world. [...] ecological modernization studies reflect on how various institutions and social actors attempt to integrate environmental concerns into their everyday functioning, development, and relations with others and the natural world (Mol et al. 2014:15).²

Hence, those working within that paradigm analyze the process by which ecological principles are integrated within governmental policy, corporate policy, consumption behaviours, in the general culture, and in the decisions that make up everyday life. The approach focuses on the reform of social institutions, so that gradually, the environmental externalities associated with capitalist production (see,

2 Except where indicated otherwise, the following discussion is based on Mol et al. (2014), Mol and Jänicke (2009), Mol and Spaargaren (2004), and Spaargaren and Mol (1992).

e.g., Bakan 2004; Foster 2002) become internalized within the existing system. Proponents of the theory believe that through well designed governmental and corporate policies, industrial societies can achieve a sustainable state within an “ecologically modernized” capitalist framework.

The general argument parallels Weber’s discussion of rationalization (1978): With the growing consciousness of ecological degradation that has been emerging since the 1960s, social, political and economic institutions have been gradually transforming to integrate a new form of “ecological rationality” in their functioning. We thus observe a phenomenon of “political modernization”, through which new norms of “environmental governance” are formulated to manage environmental change at all levels – municipal, state/provincial, national and global, as well. This modernized political rationality incorporates, among others, innovative economic ideas that support technological innovation aimed to increase the efficiency in the use of resources. These include market-based environmental governance, the integration of private corporate actors in governance arrangements, and corporate environmental management, among others.

Ecological modernization theorists support these claims with two types of empirical evidence. On the one hand, they point at the successive national and international level reports, meetings, regulations and agreements since the late 1970s. These include the creation of environment ministries, the publication of the Brundtland report on sustainable development (WCED 1987), the 1992 Rio Summit on sustainable development, the signature of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 and its enactment in 2005, and more recently the Paris Agreement on climate change signed in late 2015. They argue that these milestones show ecological rationality is gradually being incorporated in the political processes and policy-making at the global level and by many national governments.

On the other hand, they showcase a variety of case studies of states or sometimes corporations enacting environmentally conscious policies. These studies analyze, among others, how technologies that decrease environmental impact are incorporated in industrial production, how environmental policy is made nationally and globally, how markets are used in environmental policy, or how social movements play a key role in pushing governments and corporations to integrate this “ecological rationality” in their practices.

Ecological modernization theory was developed explicitly in contrast with on the one hand post-modernist or strong constructionist approaches (e.g., Haraway 1991; White et al. 2014), and on the other hand critical political economy and ecomarxist approaches (e.g., Foster 2000, 2002; Schnaiberg 1980). Against post-modernist approaches, ecological modernization positions itself as a realist theory that considers social institutions in and of themselves, in their functioning and interrelations. It does incorporate elements of social constructionism when it looks at the discourses underpinning institutional mechanisms (e.g., Hajer 1995) but generally does so within a realist framework. Like ecological political economy approaches, ecological modernization does also considers explicitly capitalist structures of production and consumption. However, its founders sought to develop a reformist approach that provides an alternative to ecological political economy’s conclusion that capitalism is unsustainable in and of itself (Mol et al. 2014).

Because it seeks reform of capitalist institutions, ecological modernization theory has an intrinsic normative and prescriptive aspect in addition to its analytic use: it seeks to make the changes it analyzes happen by informing policy-making and convincing politicians, bureaucrats and corporate heads to incorporate an ecological rationality within their institutions' policies and practices .

Critique of ecological modernization

Ecological modernization theory has been subjected to intense critique, mostly by eco-marxists and human ecologists like John Bellamy Foster, Richard York, and Patrick Bond, among others. These critiques raise many issues. First, ecological modernization analysis focuses strictly on the adoption of policy, and not on outcome (York et al. 2003; York and Rosa 2003). Tenants of the theory admit this readily: they are interested in how ecological rationality is incorporated in institutions (Mol et al. 2014). However, this poses the problem that policies can be nominally ecological, whereas their real environmental impact is nil or negative.

Second, critics argue that cases studies that support the theory can be readily found, but that attention needs to be paid to the general trend, which contradicts the theory (Ewing 2017). For example, Jorgenson's global level empirical studies (summarized in Jorgenson 2016) generally falsify the predictions of ecological modernization theory and instead support unequal ecological exchange theory. Third, ecological modernization is said to elevate technology fetishism and the belief that humans are somewhat exempt from material and ecological constraints to the status of theory (Foster 2012). Indeed, the emphasis of ecological modernization prescription on increasing energy and resource efficiency does not take into account the Jevons paradox according to which increased efficiency lowers consumer prices, which in turn leads to an increase in demand all things equal (York 2006, 2012). Hence, the application of ecological modernization's prescription may lead to the development of "green fixes" which give an ecological veneer to public policy though the actual impacts are in fact minimal (Holgersen and Malm 2015).

The critique I will now develop is of a different nature. Despite the devastating critiques summarized above, ecological modernization theory is alive and well. The dominant position it has come to occupy within environmental social analysis even gives it the privilege to ignore the critiques that are the most difficult to address (see, e.g., Mol et al. 2014). Why is this the case? The approach I take to this question does not aim at rebuking ecological modernization's claims. Instead, taking a sociological distance, I consider ecological modernization as an object of study in itself, and its related publications as a body of texts that can be brought to social scientific investigation. From this new vantage point, I will argue that ecological modernization is not a theory, because its internal structure corresponds to that of mythical thought and not that of rigorous social analysis, and thus that it is perhaps not so productive to engage it as a theory to be critiqued and debated.

The category of "nature" as an epistemological obstacle

In their early assessment of debates between ecological modernization theory and Marxist-inspired theories in environmental sociology, Fisher and Freudenberg (2001) find stark differences between the predictions of each theory. In what follows, I argue that these differences are due to the fact that the

fundamental axioms of ecological modernization form a narrative that takes the form of a myth, a story, for example similar to the body of indigenous literature analyzed by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his canonical studies. I understand myth in the anthropological sense, as a story, a tale told by a group of people and that is both a reflection of and contributes to constructing the cosmology shared by group members – the broad view they have of the place of the group within a broader set of relationships with humans and non-humans, the origins of human society and the world, and how the world is changing or should change. For Leavitt, “a myth is a story that is important for a community, so much that it preserved through time” (2005:45 my translation). In this sense, the question is not whether a myth is true or not, but rather how it *operates* (Vernant 2004). This means what is interesting about a myth is not whether the events it depicts have really taken place, or if the social relations represented in it truly correspond to those prevailing in the society in question. Rather, the structural approach to myths is interested, on the one hand, in understanding how the structures of opposition and transformations that occur in myths are part of a broader system of meaning, the study of which will reveal “meanings that are cannot be directly observed” (Leavitt 2005:45). On the other hand, it looks at how the structures of myths combine together to form a system by which humans give meaning to their world, a cosmology.

Viewed in that light, ecological modernization narratives belong to a different literary genre, which can be very useful to reflect on the human condition, but cannot found a rigorous understanding of the organization and transformation of societies. As such, they constitute what Gaston Bachelard calls “epistemological obstacles”, conceptual impediments to the formulation of new knowledge (Bachelard 2002). In other words, these narratives do not represent sociological theory but rather a mythical narrative whose purpose is to bridge between two symbolic domains constitutive of Western cosmology, those of “nature” and “society”.

Raymond Williams’ (1983) classic discussion of the word “nature” provides a useful framework. He finds that nature is used in three senses: (a) Nature as the essence of things; (b) Nature as the non-human realm, excluding humans; and (c) Nature as everything that exists. While the first meaning is non-problematic, the latter two are very much intertwined in environmental discourse which, as Williams explains, is the cause of great confusion. Hence, arguments erupt whether humans are part of nature or not, which cannot be resolved if nature can both refer to the non-human world exclusively and the totality of existence. Relatedly, the second definition relates to the “nature-culture” or “nature-society” binary that environmentalists and sociologists of various shades have been working hard to transcend (e.g., Castree 2013; Gellert 2005; Haraway 1991; Moore 2015; White 2006). This is a second and more crucial problem with “nature”, which is related to its polysemic character: it is a binary category.

Binary categories abound in popular discourse as well as in much social scientific scholarship. When they appear, they beg to be superseded. Hence, recent work has exposed the erroneous nature of binary gender categorizations. The same is true as to the category of race, as skin colour is a continuous characteristic of human beings rather than a dichotomous one. However, a large part of environmental scholarship has addressed the nature/society binary in a different way: instead of developing an empirical analytic approach, in most cases it sought to develop median terms such as “socionatures” (Swyngedouw

1996; White 2006), “cyborgs” (Haraway 1991), “monsters” (Lockie 2012) or “bundles of relations” (Moore 2015), that bridge between the binary terms. In what follows, I will draw on the French tradition of structuralist anthropology, and especially the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss on indigenous mythologies (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 1966, 1983), to analyze the narrative of ecological modernization as a myth, with special focus on how it addresses the symbolic problem of the nature/society binary as found in environmental scholarship. This analysis will bring out insights about how such an approach has become an epistemological obstacle for environmental sociology, as is apparent in the case of the ecological modernization narrative.

The myth of “nature”

When thinking about “nature”, most of the time, it is the second sense that comes to mind more or less automatically – just as much in the context of environmental sociology as in daily conversation – as our “savage mind” (Lévi-Strauss 1966) conjures up this ubiquitous nature-society binary. This binary poses two exclusive domains – nature and society – or in short, what is human as opposed to what is artificial. These domains are irreducible to each other; they form exclusive thought categories in that objects of the world must either belong to one or another. Such exclusive categories pose a symbolic contradiction: because the savage mind is also very empirical, it keeps “testing” its conceptualizations against the concrete world. Thus, we know well that humans are animals, and thus that we are “natural” as well, that we are part of nature and not opposed to it. It’s the third definition of nature, the empirical definition, which exists alongside the second one.

When such a contradiction emerges, two things can happen. Because binaries are strong symbolic elements, people usually try hard to solve the contradiction symbolically, by introducing mediating concepts. Alternatively, people can decide to abandon the problematic categories and use more relevant ones. There’s a symbolic struggle that takes place over whether the contradiction will be subsumed through mediation, or is abandoned altogether (see Bourdieu 1991). Symbolic production is oftentimes the domain of cultural specialists such as storytellers and shamans, or in present day societies, of filmmakers and writers (Moisseff 2005), and also of social scientists.

Social scientists have indeed attempted to mediate the contradiction in various ways (see Figure 1). For example, there has been much talk about the “Anthropocene”, which would be a new epoch in which “nature” has become subsumed within the human realm (Crutzen 2006; Steffen et al. 2007)³. A variety of terms such as “socionatures”, “hybrids”, “cyborgs” or “monsters” have all been proposed as a way to mean that the social and natural realms interpenetrate each other. Others talk about “actor-networks” (Murdoch 1997) or “bundles of relations” (Moore 2015) that unite elements of nature with social elements and thus allegedly mend the gap between domains.

3 This is not to deny the scientific validity of the anthropocene as a geological era marked by a measurable impact of human activities in the stratigraphic record (e.g., Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). I mean here the way it has been used as a symbol of an imagined subsumption of nature under society.

Figure 1. Nature-society mediations

However, the creation of mediating terms to supersede the contradiction only provides a symbolic resolution that, far from doing away with it simply makes it non-problematic (see Crépeau 2001; Meyer 1993). The mediation acts as a metaphor that alleviates the perceived tension (Meyer 1993). It obviates the fact that these categories are specific to Western thought, and at the same time implicitly reaffirms the incommensurability between the two domains: why would we otherwise need a mediation between them? Thus, though they explicitly seek to overcome the essentialism pervasive in social sciences, in the end these attempts essentialize the language categories of “nature” and “society” they purport to challenge.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on one of the stories that is popular in environmental sociology to perform the mediation, that of “ecological modernization”. Ecological modernization is more complex than the simple mediating terms described above, as it functions on multiple levels as I will explain. This is why I call it a story, or a myth – both in the sense of Lévi-Strauss’ “savage mind” and in the sense of a political myth (Bottici 2011), one that has implications for the decisions made regarding human impact on the biosphere.

Modernization and ecological modernization

Before going further, I will summarize the main elements of the “story”, of the myth of ecological modernization on which the analysis focuses.

- Ecological modernization is presented, by its own proponents, as a response to the perceived contradiction between on the one hand, capitalist or industrial processes of production, and on the other hand, the destructive effects of these processes on the biosphere;
- They qualify the view of environment and economic growth as being antithetical to one another as an old paradigm, and argue these need not be viewed as opposed. They explain that the new paradigm sees that economic processes can actually support environmental protection;
- However, for this to happen, an “environmental rationality” needs to be inserted into them;
- This environmental rationality will prompt innovations in both lower impact technologies and governance arrangements in various social spheres;
- Because of these innovations in the institutions of modern society, the need for radical social change will be avoided and we will be able to keep living our lives and “pursue happiness” more

or less as before – social relations that are currently threatened (by both the destruction of ecosystems and radical responses to this destruction) will be maintained.

The story of ecological modernization merges “ecology”, in the sense of non-human nature, with modernization, that describes the emergence of industrial capitalist relations of production. Going back to the earlier story, “modernization” describes the process of the separation of nature at the origin of so-called “modern” society. Hence, Western capitalist society grows out of a state of nature where, according to the different versions of the tale, division of labour did not exist (Durkheim), there was no “rational” organization of political relations (Weber), or there was no private property (Marx). This story uses a *temporal code*: it places the state of nature far away in time, in a past from which the society that exists now has detached itself (Figure 2). In this sense, the story of modernization is a myth of creation: it defines present society in terms of what it is not, in this case, by using the temporal code, as present day Western society is opposed to a past mythical state that’s its binary opposite. The savage mind at work here is essentialist and teleological: the present is described as the necessary outcome of the past, the past is described as a “present in becoming”.

Figure 2. The story of modernization

Joining “ecological” and “modernization” together creates a different story, which is actually an exact inversion of the initial “modernization” story. This new story describes an opposite process of reintegrating nature back into society (see Figure 3). Thus, the expression “ecological modernization” becomes a mediating concept that serves to overcome the perceived contradiction between nature and society. To perform the mediation, this story also uses a temporal code. Whereas in the story of modernization, the mediation uses the categories of past and present, in the ecological modernization story, it uses present and future: the divide will be overcome in the future, through the process of modernization. Hence, the same process that brought us to where we are now, modernization, which once detached us (society) from nature, will now take nature and insert it into society so that society becomes in harmony, once again, with nature. Thus, I argue that the story of “ecological modernization” is an exact mirror image of the older story of “modernization”.

Figure 3. The story of ecological modernization

Setting the theoretical foundations for a New Ecological Paradigm

It is certainly possible to use different categories to describe the place relationship of human beings to the world. These words already exist: the widely used categories of “ecosystem” and “biosphere” suggest a systemic approach to the elements of societies and the biophysical world and the flows between them. Going further, I would suggest reframing what’s seen as the relationship between humans and “nature” as the relationship between *human groups* and the *land*. On the one hand, *human groups* emphasize the variety of human societies that exist and have existed, and avoid lumping all of humanity into a single undifferentiated category (see Malm and Hornborg 2014). On the other hand, *land* readily designates the materiality of the ground on which we stand, the life forms that grow and exist onto it, and – very importantly – the socio-historical relationships that take place onto it. Just as human groups need to be distinguished from one another, places also have their distinct histories and characteristics. But more than that, places are different for different human groups: different technologies of production mean that groups will conceive of land very differently, for example either as a provider of animal and plant foods for those living on it over the long term, or as a reservoir of natural resources – fossil fuels, forest products, water, etc. – that can be extracted and sold on world markets for profit. Hence, such a distinctive approach opens up to considering conflicts between human groups as to the uses and conceptualization of their place in the world.

This simple shift in categories I suggest brings a very different focus to our thinking as sociologists. It brings the question of the land we exist on, which was occupied in many cases by the Coast Salish (Lekwungen, W̱SÁNEĆ, Songhees) First Nations, and the historical relationships that make possible our presence on it. These include, in terms of the economy:

- the material flows that constitute the built environment around us, the wood, bricks and concrete that make up buildings in which we live and work, namely the flows of oil, gas and electricity necessary to maintain their functioning and that come from distant lands;
- the human labour that transports these materials and puts them together to transform the land we live on;

- and the food needed for people to be able to perform that labour, where it comes from, and how it is produced.

This approach can be expanded to an associated set of questions regarding the realm of political relations, in which land becomes *territory*. These questions have to do with who decides what activities will take place on the land, what materials will flow and how these flows will be organized, or said otherwise, who controls the land, for the benefit of whom, and to the exclusion of whom. This brings a greater focus on the indigenous nations who occupied and controlled the territory that we conduct our lives on, and who had and still have a very different relationship with the land, who live on the land and use it very differently. Ultimately, this shift in categories from humanity and nature to human groups and land turns the focus on the fact that the material flows we depend on rely upon the expansion of capitalism and the colonization of indigenous lands.

So in sum, shifting our conceptualization from “nature” to “land” allows us to focus as sociologists on the main social relations – economic relations, political relations – that determine what comes out of the land, how it’s extracted, where and how it’s moved, what it’s used for, by whom and for whom. And by so doing we make away with utopian thinking according to which some disembodied processes of modernization and dematerialization will transform our societies and make them sustainable, and replace it with concrete thinking about social relations and how they change and are maintained. This also moves away from the popular *wholist* approaches (see Foster 2016) that see an undifferentiated humanity entering into relationship with an undifferentiated nature.

Conclusion

An operational environmental sociology needs to use operational categories (see Verdon 1991). It needs to tell a different story, and thus use different, non-essential categories. Many examples exist that have constructed analytic theories of nature (e.g., Downey 2015; Foster 2000; Foster et al. 2010; Schnaiberg 1980). Supporters of analytical approaches have nonetheless engaged into debates with and developed various critiques of ecological modernization. My argument is that the narrative of ecological modernization is of a different nature. Thus, it cannot be debated by means of theoretical and empirical demonstrations. It is instead situated in the realm of political myths. It is a utopian narrative that proposes a resolution of the perceived contradiction between symbolic opposites, nature and society. The resolution is thought to take place at some point in the future, through various means, but mostly involving technological mediation. Such a narrative is more or less impervious to scientific critique, because it draws on symbols rather than demonstrations. And thus it keeps existing in the imagination of Western scholars, businesspeople, and the informed public as a narrative proposing a solution to a perceived problem which is compatible with maintaining the world as it is. Environmental sociology will have to move beyond symbolic narratives to fully embrace the new ecological paradigm called for four decades ago by some of the founders of the discipline (Catton and Dunlap 1978, 1980).

More broadly, I argue that sociological theory can take multiple narrative forms. Some of these forms constitute epistemological obstacles, in the sense that they are presented by their proponents, and appear to most readers, as rigorous theories offering an abstract description of social relations, whereas

they in fact follow the structure of a mythical narrative. Such narratives, as I explained above, exist in the sphere of discourse, in which they typically mediate perceived contradictions expressed in binary terms, for example that between nature and society in the case of ecological modernization, or the individual-society binary in other cases. As mythical narratives, these discourses are not subject to argument based on empirical evidence as would be other sociological theories. For the advancement of sociology as a discipline, it is thus important to take stock of the variety of discourses that co-exist within its borders and the fact they may not allow for productive debate. More broadly, popular discourses related to sociological theory have profound real-world consequences. For one, ecological modernization provides a powerful academic justification to status quo environmental policy-making. The green economy discourse that parallels it in business and policy circles, at best based on an incremental approach and, more importantly, on the belief that environmental problems can be solved by accelerating economic growth (i.e. “modernization”) has now become hegemonic at the highest levels (Goodman and Salleh 2013; Salleh 2012; Sapinski 2015) – despite that it flies in the face of mounting empirical evidence to the contrary.

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