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**The Transformation of Environmental Values and Behavior in  
Post-Communist Europe**

**Special issue**

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# The Environmental Sociology of Central and Eastern Europe: Its Contribution to the Social Sciences<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

One of the driving principles of environmental sociology is the understanding that human activity always takes place in and interacts with the natural world, and thus that a full understanding of societal change must also include society's relationship with the environment. By focusing on issues like values and behaviors towards nature, inequalities in environmental risks, and food culture, sociologists not only offer ways of understanding societal impacts to the natural world, but also how environmental problems are ultimately also social ones. Compared to natural scientists, environmental sociologists provide different, though just as important, perspectives to some of the most profound issues of modern civilization, from global warming to energy conservation, from sustainable agriculture to water security.

Despite the global importance of these issues, environmental sociologists often work at the margins of various academic disciplines, even at the margins of sociology itself. That is particularly the case in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), where academic departments in *environmental studies* based on a humanities or social science research orientation have only brief institutional histories, often overshadowed by longer-standing *environmental science* departments with strong technological and natural-scientific research agendas. This special issue of the *Czech Sociological Review* thus brings new research by environmental sociologists focusing on the CEE region into center stage.

When we bring this research agenda into focus, we observe that in fact society's relationship to nature has also played a fundamental role in many of the key episodes of social and political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe over the last several decades. Public protest against environmental problems played an important role in undermining the legitimacy of state socialism, whether in terms of the public outcry to the Chernobyl disaster (Petryna 2002), protests against the Gabčíkovo-Nagymáros Dam in Hungary (Vari, Tamas 1993), or the rise of the Ecoglasnost movement in Bulgaria (Petrova 2004). A wide range of social scientists have mapped on the environmental consequences of economic transition and privatization (e.g. Pavlínek, Pickles 2000), changing household behavior (Stenning et al. 2010), EU enlargement (Carmin, VanDeveer 2005) as well as the contours of environmental movements (Fagan, Carmin 2011), value change and environmental risks, and green parties. Far from the margins of sociology, the works of environmental sociologists focusing on the CEE region speak to many of the fundamental research questions and agendas of the discipline.

This special issue is coming out at an important juncture in environmental-sociological research of the CEE region. As the literature above indicates, the environmental study of post-communist societies has been predominated by qualitative research methods, not only due to the need to analyze ecological movements and trends in a highly textured way, but also because social survey data covering environmental

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topics have been in short supply. With the release of the cross-national file of the 2010 ISSP (International Social Survey Programme) Environment survey, following the 1993 and 2000 surveys, and the increasing number of rounds of the European Social Survey that have been completed, environmental sociologists now have at their disposal an unprecedented breadth and depth of social survey data mapping environmentally significant trends across CEE.

The articles in this special issue thus represent both the macro-quantitative and the micro-qualitative approaches common in the subfield. While it may seem at first glance that these two types of studies speak different languages, at closer inspection they are in fact in mutual dialogue. Macro-quantitative analyses are useful for weighing the importance of social background on commitments to environmental values or the role of various beliefs and risks on decisions to act pro-environmentally, but are often unable to identify the specific causal mechanisms through which these effects take place. Micro-qualitative studies, by contrast, often examine societal trends at the level of individual families, organizations and communities, and can provide thick descriptions of processes of change, but struggle to generalize their findings beyond those case studies. Macro-quantitative studies can assess, for example, the relevance of people's concerns about the environment on a range of important behaviors, while micro-qualitative studies are best suited for explaining why exactly those concerns are indeed relevant. Special issues of the type presented here can in fact contribute to the long-standing dialogue between these two dimensions of the subfield.

While the studies in the special issue are diverse, they address a number of common themes and questions. Four themes in particular cut across these studies:

- The salience of environmental values in Central and Eastern Europe;
- The multiplicity and transformation of environmental behaviors;
- The presence of environmental risks and their unequal distribution across society;
- The importance of food production and consumption as environmental behaviors.

### **Salience of environmental values**

Pioneers in macro-quantitative environmental sociology, such as Riley Dunlap and Paul Stern (e.g. Dunlap, Van Liere 1978; Jones, Dunlap 1992; Stern, Dietz 1994; Stern 2000; Dunlap, York 2008), have shown that peoples' environmentally significant actions and plans, such as whether they are or would be willing to reduce their car use, are closely linked to their value commitments. In the parlance used here, values are not merely personal opinions that may change from one day to the next, but are rather deep cognitive structures that refer to desirable goals (e.g. personal freedom, social justice, a clean environment), that guide human action in a multitude of contexts and often serve as standards or criteria through which people make judgments about the world around them (Schwartz 2006). Since people hold many values, which are sometimes at odds, the relative importance of values to them matter in terms of the way values influence judgments and actions. While it may seem obvious that values shape behavior, it is less understood whether and why certain values are more salient in one society than another and which values are more important for environmentally significant behaviors. Three of the articles in this special issue directly address these questions.

Based on a survey using Schwartz' value scale in Hungary, Judith de Groot and her colleagues ask whether Schwartz' value theory would still hold when distinguishing

biospheric from altruistic values (unintended by Schwartz), and how egotistic, altruistic and “biospheric” values are linked to different norms towards environmental behaviors in the case of Hungary. Hungary is an important test case not only due to the distinctiveness of its national culture, but also because environmental controversies played such an important role in its pre- and post-1989 political development (Harper 2005, 2006). De Groot et al. find that despite this distinctiveness, the value structure of Hungarian society (at least in terms of the forms measured here) is quite similar to that of Western Europe, and that across different forms of environmental behavior, only biospheric values have a consistently strong effect. Thus, contrary to Schwartz (1994), the article points to the importance of distinguishing altruistic and biospheric values, as opposed to the common practice of subsuming the latter under the former.

While Judith de Groot et al. identify similarities in the structure of *environmental values* between Hungary and Western Europe, Sandra Marquart-Pyatt identifies key differences in *environmental concerns* between East and West. These views are not incompatible; while environmental or biospheric values indicate an individual’s normative relationship with the natural world as a whole, environmental concerns indicate an individual’s social-psychological responsiveness to a range of environmental issues common in the world today. Comparing over two dozen countries, Marquart-Pyatt finds that awareness of environmental threats is actually higher in Central Europe than in Western Europe, though in the CEE people are less willing to make sacrifices for the environment. Drawing on an “objective problems, subjective values” theory by Inglehart (1995), this may be due to the observation that environmental concerns in the CEE are strongly shaped by the relatively poor environmental conditions they are exposed to, but that CEE citizens are, for whatever reasons, unwilling to make various sacrifices to improve those conditions. She finds that income does not influence willingness to make sacrifices for the environment in most CEE countries studied (education plays a much larger role), while awareness of environmental threats are linked to age and place of residence. Thus, while de Groot found a similar value structure between East and West, Marquart-Pyatt finds similar social bases of environmental concern (compare to the results of Dietz, Stern, Guagnano [1998]), with the caveat that it is essential to differentiate the types of environmental concern under investigation.

### **Multiplicity and transformation of environmental behaviors**

Perhaps one of the greatest divisions within environmental sociology today is research on environmental behavior. While macro-quantitative sociologists often focus on behavior at the level of individuals, micro-qualitative sociological research typically examines environmental activism within civil society. These two perspectives are conceptually linked: environmental activism, in one way or another, draws on the set of pro-environmental values and behaviors that citizens express, while citizens may internalize various societal discourses and pressures (e.g. consumerism, localism), including those by environmental activists. Isn’t it time that we try to connect the empirical findings of these two different research traditions?

The contribution by Markus Hadler and Patrick Wohlkönig in this special issue examines the link between value commitments and individual environmental behavior in Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2010. Hadler and Wohlkönig broadly differentiate two kinds of pro-environmental behavior: those that we can see as

“public” behavior refer to an individual’s pro-environmental actions that are commonly related to or involving the environmental movement, such as protesting against various issues and petitioning for change. “Private” behavior, by contrast, refers to the choices one makes in his or her everyday life, such as purchasing environmentally friendly products or using public transportation. At first glance, public and private behaviors seem like they go lock-step: aren’t the people who engage in environmental activism the same people as those who buy environmentally friendly products? The message of Hadler and Wohlkönig is that we should be very cautious of such assumptions. In fact, they find that social values, such as pro-materialism and perceptions of environmental risk, play a particularly strong role in shaping one’s public behaviors relating to the environment, while socio-demographic characteristics, such as being single, older, and having time away from work – largely determine one’s chances of engaging in private pro-environmental behavior.

The findings of Hadler and Wohlkönig’s macro-quantitative analysis, especially the importance of values for environmental activism, coincide with some of the findings of qualitative research on the Czech environmental movement. Scholars of the latter have often emphasized the importance of common processes of socialization that environmental activists experienced under socialism – such as scouting, woodcraft and other outdoor youth activities (Sarre, Jehlička 2007) – which can contribute to common value orientations today, though not necessarily common socio-demographic characteristics. Hadler and Wohlkönig’s findings can also raise important questions for the study of CEE environmental movements, where many scholars have documented the importation of Western priorities and ways of understanding environmental problems – such as through the priorities of Western donors - to CEE environmental movements. So, how might the finding that environmentally active citizens in Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic share similar value commitments contribute to our understanding of East-West differences in environmental activism?

Edward Snajdr’s contribution to this special issue – an examination of the blogosphere of environmental activists in Slovakia – complicates the distinction between public and private environmental behavior in Hadler and Wohlkönig’s contribution. A blog can be the expression of the views of a single private individual, but if successful can also have profound consequences on public discourses of environmental problems. While blogging may seem to defy geographic space, Snajdr finds that the Slovak environmental blogosphere is dominated by activists in Bratislava, and that older activists, especially those who were involved in the environmental movement before 1989, attract more attention and commentary than younger activists. In the transition from “brigades” to “blogs,” East-West differences in Slovak environmentalism have increasingly blurred, with blogging and other forms of activism rooted in a common process of technological globalization, while Slovak blogger-activists continue to grapple with locally specific transitions and concerns. Given these trends, what remains of the distinctiveness of “post-socialist” environmental activism?

### **The importance of food production and consumption as environmental behaviors**

Another major theme of the special issue is the environmental dimension of food consumption. It is increasingly recognized that progress towards sustainability critically depends on the working of the food system. Ameliorating environmental impacts

associated with industrialized food production (water pollution, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, climate change) is one of the main challenges confronting developed societies. Certified organic food – produced without industrially made fertilizers, pesticides and antibiotics – has established itself as the most common variant of ‘alternative food networks’. While many of these alternatives (direct sales on farms, box schemes, farmers markets) constitute primarily a response to the ‘disembedding’ of food provision from local social relations, and address food-related environmental problems by emphasizing the localness of food production and consumption (or a ‘short food supply chain’), the environmental benefits of organic food lie primarily in the reduced impacts of chemicals. The content of chemical residues in organic food is approximately 30 per cent lower than in conventionally grown food (Lang, Heasman 2005).

Currently, the approach preferred by policy makers and the majority of researchers for transforming intensive industrialized agriculture to something more sustainable is by harnessing the power of the consumer. According to the mainstream ABC (attitude-behavior-choice) behavioral change model, positive changes in food production can be achieved when consumers act on information and choose food produced in a less environmentally harmful way. To that end, understanding the factors underpinning consumers’ decisions to purchase certified organic food is of critical importance. In their contribution to this issue, Jan Urban and his colleagues use the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to analyze the nascent market of organic food in the Czech Republic (as the authors point out, Czechs’ expenditure on organic food in 2008 was about 7 euros per person per year compared to well over 100 euros in countries like Austria and Denmark). The classic TPB model in the work of Ajzen (1991) explained behavioral intentions, such as the intention to purchase organic food, on the basis of attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms (the injunction or pressure from others to perform the behavior), and perceived behavioral control (e.g. the perceived ease or difficulty in performing the behavior). In their analysis of Czechs’ intentions of purchasing organic food, Urban et al. modify the TPB model by considering the role of descriptive norms – whether other people important to the respondent also buy organic food – and find that such norms have the strongest impact of the variables studied on the intention to buy organic food. Their modification of the TPB model is important because it points to the positive role that significant others – and the social trust and networks, as opposed to peer pressures, that exist between them and the respondent – can play in the formation of pro-environmental behavior. Further, this suggests that the public-private distinction discussed above can in fact be quite fluid: “private” pro-environmental behaviors are not only shaped by the socio-demographic conditions of the individual, but also by the social relationships that guide one’s actions.

### **Perceptions and realities of environmental risk**

Another cross-cutting theme of the special issue – also one that continues to differentiate Western from CEE societies – is the perception of environmental risk, which can be defined in terms of the degree to which people see various environmental issues, such as the depletion of the ozone layer or the future availability of fresh water, as threatening to one’s or society’s way of life. Again, Marquart-Pyatt found that the perception of a wide range of environmental risks – what she calls “environmental threat awareness” – is, across the board, higher in the CEE than in Western Europe. As we learn

from Hadler and Wohlkönig, such perceptions are important because they play a relatively strong and somewhat equal role in shaping both private and public environmental behaviors in Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic. Even if the *perception* of environmental risk is central to environmental activism, what do we know about the *societal distribution* of environmental risk in the CEE region?

The socio-economic distribution of environmental risks has been a major focus of social scientific research over the last two decades, beginning with the emergence of the environmental justice (EJ) movement in the United States. The fieldwork of Robert D. Bullard (1990) and others revealed that in many localities across the US, toxic waste and other environmental ‘bads’ were being disproportionately located in African-American, Hispanic and economically depressed neighborhoods. Such forms of unequal environmental exposures, or environmental injustices, can be due to a mix of confluent factors, such as the relative lack of influence of minority communities in decision-making processes, the lower cost of land in poor areas, and outright racism or ignorance of corporations and governments about the problem of environmental injustice.

Far from being another agenda imported from the West, scholars of environmental justice have found that in the CEE region, minorities, especially Roma, disproportionately suffer from exposure to environmental hazards like incinerators or toxic waste facilities, as well as are less likely to have access to environmental goods, such as clean water or green spaces (Steger, Filčák 2008; Harper, Steger, Filčák 2009). In his contribution to this special issue, Richard Filčák analyzed data from 30 villages with large Roma communities in Eastern Slovakia, finding that many Roma in those communities do not have adequate access to potable water, tend to live in areas exposed to floods, and are exposed to many other environmental threats. Further, alleviating the environmental injustices Roma face is particularly difficult given the complex ownership structure of the land on which many Roma live. Remedies to the situation must also confront the realities of racial segregation, since the political representatives and organized interests within the majority society, whether intentionally or not, push Roma settlements to the least desirable margins of villages. Besides the problems of segregation and discrimination, we can add that the majority society’s own “environmental threat awareness” may also lead to the misrecognition that they also contribute to the environmental threats and exposures of the most vulnerable.

### **Knowledge Production in the Environmental Sociology of the CEE**

Certainly Western concepts, theories and approaches have played a profound role on the environmental research in Central and Eastern Europe. But how can research in this region contribute to environmental sociology as a whole? We believe there are a number of important ways. The first contribution is the re-invigoration of the concepts of civil society and environmental citizenship. We started this Introduction by reflecting on the impetus of the revolutions of 1989 and their aftermath for rethinking the dynamic relationship between society and nature. One of the key expressions of those revolutions was that of environmental citizenship - practical steps citizens, as responsible individuals and members of social groups, can take to reduce society’s environmental impact. These ideas have found their influential manifestation in the concept of civil society, which is supposed to simultaneously provide a conduit for aggregating the individual interests of responsible citizens and empowering them to keep in check the environmentally harmful



projects of states and corporations. Drawing on the ideas of Václav Havel, János Kiss and other dissidents about anti-politics and civic autonomy, their reinvigorated vision of civil society was then adopted and adapted by powerful Western and international actors to whom its main attraction was its critique of the state and the promotion of active, responsible citizenship – qualities corresponding with and strengthening neoliberal ideology which was in ascendance in the 1990s (Pearce 1998). Its main manifestation in the environmental politics of the CEE was the rise of environmental NGOs nurtured by external funders, a topic that has received extensive attention within academia (e.g. Fagan 2005, Císař, 2010).

Another potential contribution could be made through the reorientation of environmental-sociological research on the region. Despite the fact that it was the revolutions of 1989 that led to the renewed academic interest in the concept of civil society, CEE environmental movements and NGOs have invariably been studied from a western perspective: CEE environmental movements as recipients and implementers of western ideas and organizational know-how; the “mono-directionality” and the unintended undemocratic consequence of which were highlighted in a recent article by Zsuzsa Gille (2010). Despite their affinity with the dominant neoliberal perspective on environmentalism, specific features of CEE environmentalism – such as nurturing pro-environmental attitudes and life-styles through children’s and young people’s hands-on outdoor experiences that nurture low-impact lifestyles and blend of romantic perspectives of nature with scientific knowledge (arguably an interesting variant of the dominant behavioral change model), have been largely overlooked as a source of knowledge production, and their transfer to and applicability outside the CEE context have rarely been considered.

The same point can be made about a host of environmentally low-impact everyday practices and policies typical for the CEE region up until 1989, many of which are still common today. At the personal level these included thrift, resource conservation and low-impact consumption practices manifested, among others, in the stigmatisation of waste, widespread food self-provisioning, and cycling and walking as common means of transport. Examples in the realm of public policy include the promotion of public transport, systems of returnable bottles and an understanding of waste management based on the idea of waste as a resource rather than an unwanted and dangerous matter that needs to be removed out of sight. Rather than seeing these phenomena as an expression of an alternative modernity and emphasizing their potential for general social scientific knowledge, social scientists (both locals as well as those from Western universities) have interpreted them along the lines of CEE backwardness and traditionality.

Part of the rationale for this special issue of *Czech Sociological Review* was to contribute to efforts to develop theoretical and general sociological and social scientific knowledge that would question the overall tendency in social sciences to perceive knowledge generated in western contexts as universally valid, and knowledge produced in other contexts, including the CEE region, to be only of local and limited importance. One of the editorial team’s ambitions for this special issue was to seek out region-specific contributions that could enrich major debates in environmental sociology and the social sciences more broadly (Domański 2004; Hörschelmann and Stenning 2008; Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008). The contributions selected for this special issue meet this expectation, by either comparing environmental behaviors across countries and

identifying fundamental similarities, or by testing and/or contesting the regional applicability of Western models. However welcome and important a step the studies in the special issue collectively take in this direction, the goal of overcoming the marginalization of CEE-generated knowledge in the social sciences remains a challenging and long-term project. This journal has always been and remains receptive to this kind of research and encourages and welcomes submissions promising to take this project forward, whether in environmental sociology or in social sciences more generally.

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