

# ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY NEWS

Newsletter of the American Sociological Association's  
Section on Environmental Sociology

Fall 2024

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## SECTION CHAIR'S MESSAGE



Hello colleagues and friends,

I hope everyone's fall term is progressing well. Below, I reiterate and expand on prior announcements I've made in the official ASA section listserv

for those who may have missed them, and I give new updates on the development of noteworthy section initiatives.

It was great to see so many of you in Montreal for the ASA annual meeting. Our Treasurer,

Maricarmen Hernandez, did well in leading our collaborative and fun joint reception with the Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities. Our section day featured three excellent paper sessions that focused on intersectionality, environmental inequality and justice, and unequal risks and uncertainties in the climate crisis. We also had 17 roundtables with strong papers that touched on diverse areas of environmental-sociological inquiry. Please consult the [online meeting program](#) for more information about the participants and papers in those sessions.

At the annual meeting, I heard much enthusiasm about our section's revamped mentoring program. Our junior section members have really valued prior iterations of the program (see [Apollonya Porcelli's reflections in the fall 2019 newsletter](#)). Ian Carrillo, Committee on Racial Inclusion, Equity

and Justice Member and Publication Committee Chair, helped me reconstitute the mentoring program. Of the 75 section participants in the year-long program, 4 are full professors, 9 are associate professors, 26 are assistant professors, 4 are postdoctoral scholars, 31 are graduate students, and 1 is a prospective graduate student. In November, I plan to check in with program participants to see how meetings in their mentor-mentee groups are progressing. I will also send out an evaluation form sometime in May 2025 to ask participants for their reflections on the program and to solicit their suggestions for improvement to the program. I will share my evaluation results during and after the 2025 ASA annual meeting in Chicago.

I look forward to seeing our vibrant section in action at the Chicago annual meeting. Our Chair-Elect, Joshua Sbicca, is putting together a fantastic program that should be announced soon. In the meantime, the general call for submissions from the ASA is available [here](#).

There are several other noteworthy section initiatives in progress. First, we are working on a plan and set of strategies to expand our membership in inclusive ways from its current mark of 510 to 600 or more, which will enable us to have more opportunities to share our members' important work at the ASA annual meeting. We are also creating a channel for our members to share their own thoughts on growing a more inclusive section. Second, in consultation with the council and committee leadership, Past-Chair, Debra Davidson, and I have outlined a set of changes to our [bylaws](#) that we plan to place on the 2025 election ballot. Those changes will seek to align the start date of section leadership positions with ASA recommendations and preferences, remove gendered language in the bylaws, refer to the

Committee on Racial Inclusion, Equity and Justice as such (rather than by its prior names), shift full responsibility for the section's ASA annual meeting program from the Chair-Elect to a committee lead by the Chair-Elect, and institutionalize the revamped mentoring program.

In the 2025 section election, we will also have three vacancies to fill. Those vacancies are Chair-Elect (1-year term transitioning to Section Chair in year 2 and Past-Chair in year 3); Membership Committee Chair (2-year term); and Teaching, Training, and Practice Committee Chair (2-year term). To nominate yourself or a colleague for a position, send name(s), position titles and email address(es) to the Nominations Committee Chair, Margaret Walkover, by Friday, November 15th, 2024, at [walkover@hawaii.edu](mailto:walkover@hawaii.edu), using the subject line, "2025 ASA ES Council Nomination."

Further, I'd like to reiterate the call for additions to our [Climate Change Teaching Resources](#) webpage. Margaret Walkover, Andy Szasz (section member), Mike Lengefeld (section Webmaster), and Debra Davidson are building on the great prior work by our section's leaders and members to build out that webpage further. Please email any suggested website additions you may have to Michael Lengefeld through November 2024 at [m.lengefeld@northeastern.edu](mailto:m.lengefeld@northeastern.edu).

Best wishes to you all for a happy, healthy, and successful end of the fall,

Raoul Liévanos  
ASA Section on Environmental Sociology Chair  
Associate Professor & Director of Undergraduate Studies  
University of Oregon

## FEATURE ESSAYS

### Commodification and Countermovements to China's Entangled Food, Health, and Environmental Crises

Li Zhang

Assistant Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies

Amherst College

Environmental sociology in the US is rooted in studies of injustices in the disproportionate distribution of environmental harms among individuals of different races, ethnicities, genders, and socio-economic status, and the socio-ecological contradictions that emerge from capitalism. While not always prominent in the literature, food production and consumption are critical themes for sociological research on socio-economic inequality. In US social movements and environmental sociology, this work usually builds upon frameworks of environmental justice to discuss and promote food justice. In the Global South, concerns usually shift from unjust distribution to power relations in food production and its ecological conditions, such as land, water, and seeds, that is, food sovereignty. Such critical food studies have fruitfully expanded the scope of environmental sociology and built bridges with other fields, such as development, medical, and economic sociology, and even across various disciplines. My scholarship on food safety, governance, and what I call “quiet social movements” for food sovereignty in China contributes to these efforts.

In my decade-long ethnographic work, I emphasize the agency of peasants and women in cultivating safe organic foods and develop alternative food networks (AFNs) that connect urban consumers concerned about their health with rural producers using agroecological methods. I situate them in the local political ecology of agrarian change in China and the global political economy of food governance, and even trace these connections in a political ecology of the origins of COVID-19. I draw upon the political ecology of food, health, and environment and development sociology to examine how people in China attempt to defy what I call *slow death* due to the interconnected crisis of food safety, chronic illness (such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer), and environmental contamination. The intractable food safety crisis that entangles these problems exploded in 2008 when hundreds of babies died due to contaminated infant formula. This incident galvanized the Chinese state and society and became a turning point in food safety governance and social mobilization. Stricter laws were written, new regulatory institutions were created, and health-conscious civil society created AFNs to procure healthier food for themselves. Yet food safety incidents continue to generate scandals year after year. Trust in food safety, governance, markets, and science erode. Food, health, and the environment have become increasingly “sensitive” and politicized. And people continue to die slowly from unsafe food, chronic illnesses, and environmental contamination. What causes this food safety crisis, why does it persist, and what are the roles of the state, science, and civil society in addressing this?

In my book manuscript in progress, *Defying Slow Death: Unsafe Food, Governance, and Quiet Social Movements in China*, I interrogate the orthodoxies that China's intractable food safety crisis results from poor governance, corruption, a supposedly “backward” agri-food production system, and the decline in morality among Chinese people. The prioritization of “quantity over quality” in food production reflects a centuries-old state concern for food security, and a more recent modernist vision of science-driven productivism consolidated during the Republican and Maoist eras. Food safety incidents in these earlier times were sporadic and resulted from unhygienic practices. However, the contemporary crisis is structural, persistent, and characterized less by unhygienic practices and more by the unintentional

contamination of food with agrochemicals and the intentional adulteration of food during processing. To explain this phenomenon, I draw on Karl Polanyi to show how the commodification of food articulates with state-led and science-driven productivism to shape this contemporary crisis. This entanglement of state-making, scientism, and commodification, and the crisis that ensues, also triggers countermovements for self-protection, including top-down efforts by the state and bottom-up efforts by civil society.

For the state, food industry, and many scientists, this entails new laws and more scientific and technological regulatory practices to improve food safety governance and market signals, while still prioritizing profits and food security for the nation-state. Such top-down action focuses on preventing food safety incidents that can immediately lead to deaths and major scandals. Yet people in China have a much deeper concern about the continuous, gradual, but almost imperceptible decline in health due to the consumption of unsafe food and exposure to a contaminated environment, a *slow death* that the state tries to render governable without scandal. Consequently, Chinese society also features bottom-up efforts for self-protection among individuals who do not trust the state and its manner of wielding science and policy for food safety governance. These are AFNs such as farm-to-table restaurants, farmers' markets, CSAs, more informal buyer groups, and procurement of healthier foods through various social networks and middlemen. Underlying this process are peasant households defying slow death themselves through the practice of "one family, two systems", in which peasants produce pesticide-drenched crops for the regular market but cultivate smaller gardens with organic food for themselves and their families. Despite their proliferation, AFNs remain a segmented market for those who are relatively privileged, while contributing to a "new inequality" expressed in terms of health, with peasants increasingly selling to AFNs the healthy foods they used to consume, purchasing cheaper and unsafe food for themselves instead, and continuing to suffer disproportionately from climate change and environmental contamination, chronic illnesses, and public health crises that characterize slow death. Thus, my book project examines not only how the interactions between the state, science, and civil society have failed to prevent food safety incidents, but also how the tensions between them even aggravate the crisis.

Transcending binary of orthodoxies that call for "better governance" on the one hand, or that simply celebrate AFNs as a differentiated market-led solution on the other, *Defying Slow Death* shows how the future of food safety, the environment, and public health in China depends upon the correlation of forces in the development of food sovereignty and agroecology as a countermovement to the commodification of life itself in post-socialist China. This quiet social movement is not as confrontational against the state and capital as social movements elsewhere in the world, and many at its helm intentionally make it appear as "apolitical", adopting and adapting the discourses of the state and its policies for everyday life resistance. Thus, my research contributes to the sociological study of social movements under authoritarianism and illustrates how the revival of Polanyian political economy in sociological theory – most prominent in economic, development, and feminist sociology – contributes to the environmental sociology tradition of critically examining the socio-ecological contradictions of capitalism. Moreover, insights that emerge from China's entangled food, health, and environmental crises matter not just for China, but also for many other developing countries and even places in the Global North, particularly the US, where slow death also remains an intractable problem against which we must struggle in defiance.

## PUBLICATIONS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

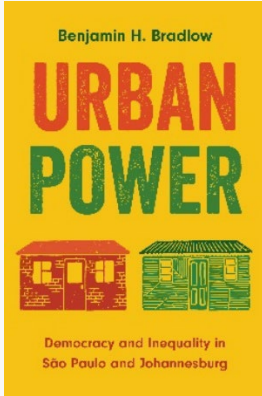
### Books

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#### [Urban Power: Democracy and Inequality in São Paulo and Johannesburg](#)

Ben Bradlow

Princeton University



For the first time in history, most people live in cities. One in seven are living in slums, the most excluded parts of cities, in which the basics of urban life—including adequate housing, accessible sanitation, and reliable transportation—are largely unavailable. Why are some cities more successful than others in reducing inequalities in the built environment? In *Urban Power*, Benjamin Bradlow explores this question, examining the effectiveness of urban governance in two “megacities” in young democracies: São Paulo, Brazil, and Johannesburg, South Africa. Both cities came out of periods of authoritarian rule with similarly high inequalities and similar policy priorities to lower them. And yet São Paulo has been far more successful than Johannesburg in improving access to basic urban goods.

Bradlow examines the relationships between local government bureaucracies and urban social movements that have shaped these outcomes. Drawing on sixteen months of fieldwork in both cities, including interviews with informants from government agencies, political leadership, social movements, private developers, bus companies, and water and sanitation companies, Bradlow details the political and professional conflicts between and within movements, governments, private corporations, and political parties. He proposes a bold theoretical approach for a new global urban sociology that focuses on variations in the coordination of local governing power, arguing that the concepts of “embeddedness” and “cohesion” explain processes of change that bridge external social mobilization and the internal coordinating capacity of local government to implement policy changes.

**Ben Bradlow** is an assistant professor of sociology and international affairs at Princeton University.

#### [Feeling Climate Change: How Emotions Govern Our Responses to the Climate Emergency](#)

Debra Davidson

University of Alberta



The main premise of this book is this: Our emotionality features prominently in our navigation of the mounting impacts of climate change, and in our collective attempts to avert further climate catastrophe. Better understanding of our emotionality and its role in individual behavior, collective action, and ultimately in social change can offer researchers, policymakers and citizens important insights to inform our personal and collective responses to the climate emergency. Social pathways through the climate emergency are highly unlikely to depart from the mechanisms that have guided social change throughout human history. Intelligent and innovative as we are, neither individuals, nor institutions, are blank slates; our actions are governed by a complex of rules, norms and predispositions, central among which operates our emotionality. In this book readers will take a deep dive into emotionality, to see if we

can get a better handle on just what those pathways from emotions to social change look like, and how

they work, so we can recognize and perhaps even navigate them, rather than march blindly forward as if they do not exist. In this volume, Davidson applies our best understanding of human emotionality to assess observed individual and collective responses to the climate crisis. This emotionality lens will then be applied to a critical, constructive analysis of our prospects for confronting the climate emergency in manners that minimize the damage, and perhaps even enhance our prospects for meaningful collective living.

**Debra Davidson** is a professor of environmental sociology at the University of Alberta.

### [Aiming for Net Zero: Costa Rica's Green Elite and the Struggle to Mitigate Climate Change](#)

Julia Flagg  
Connecticut College



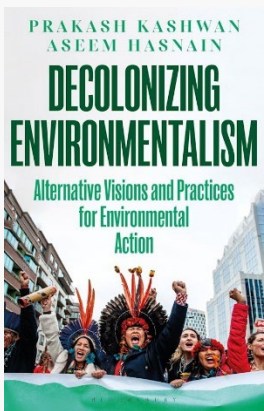
As atmospheric greenhouse gases continue their steep ascent, the world has never been more in need of policies designed to reduce emissions. Among those few nations that have committed to ambitious emission reduction plans is the small Central American country of Costa Rica, whose pioneering policies include a Payments for Environmental Services program, a carbon neutrality pledge, and a goal of decarbonizing the economy. This book explores why Costa Rican leaders have adopted more climate mitigation policies than leaders of other nations and how these leaders have introduced and developed these policies. Drawing on archival evidence and interviews conducted between 2013 and 2021 with three dozen people who have contributed to climate policy in Costa Rica, *Aiming for Net Zero* tells the story of Costa Rica's climate mitigation policy development. Costa Rica's historically egalitarian class structure and interconnected, green-minded urban elite prioritized investment in public welfare as the means to enhance the national level of development, leading to the advancement of climate mitigation policies during four historical moments: the late 1980s, the mid-1990s, the mid-2000s, and the late 2010s.

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**Julia A. Flagg** is Associate Professor of Sociology and Environmental Studies at Connecticut College.

### [Decolonizing Environmentalism: Alternative Visions and Practices of Environmental Action](#)

Prakash Kashwan and Aseem Hasnain  
Brandeis University, Waltham and California State University, Fresno



The current moment is rife with mixed emotions-existential anxieties about catastrophic climate change, presumptuous confidence in planet-hacking geoengineering technologies, and hope about youth climate activism. *Decolonizing Environmentalism* helps navigate these emotions and reimagine environmental stewardship.

The authors cast a critical eye on wealthy and influential environmental groups that committed to anti-racist strategies in the wake of the racial awakening of 2020. Yet, they continue to embrace false solutions like carbon markets and biodiversity offsets, which carry deeply racialized consequences. Tracing the roots of these misplaced priorities to modernity steeped in colonialism and capitalism, the authors call for transformational changes in human-nature relationships. They distil lessons from



the divestment movement, which has questioned the fossil fuel industry's moral standing, and food sovereignty activists, who have mobilized global civil society to hold agribusiness corporations accountable.

Amidst calls for "apocalyptic optimism," Kashwan and Hasnain offer a radical vision grounded in intersectional ecofeminism, Indigenous sovereignty, and strategies honed in the trenches of transnational environmentalism. *Decolonizing Environmentalism* invites readers to embark on a transformative journey to embrace anti-racist, emancipatory, and regenerative approaches to environmentalism.

**Prakash Kashwan** is Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and an affiliated faculty at the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University, Waltham.

**Aseem Hasnain** is a sociologist at California State University, Fresno.

## Journal Articles and Book Chapters

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## **Public Sociology and Community Engagement**

**Azmal Hossain** organized a workshop entitled  
Decolonizing Climate Change Adaptation for the  
[Annual Water and Climate Conference of the Great  
Plains Tribal Water Alliance](#).

**Alana Haynes Stein** and **Catherine Brinkley**  
wrote the [policy brief](#) "Food-Bank Donors  
Motivated by Social Responsibility and Financial  
Benefits" for the Center for Poverty and Inequality  
Research at UC Davis.

## **Transitions and Honors**

**Loka Ashwood** is a 2024 fellow of the [MacArthur  
Foundation](#).

**Annabel Ipsen** is a 2024 fellow of the [American  
Association of University Women](#).

## Section Officers (2024-2025)

### Chair

Raoul S. Liévanos  
University of Oregon

### Chair-Elect

Joshua Sbicca  
Colorado State University

### Past-Chair

Debra Davidson  
University of Alberta

### Secretary

Michael Haedicke  
University of Maine

### Treasurer

Maricarmen Hernandez  
Columbia University

### Council

#### Chair of Nominations Committee

Margaret Walkover  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

#### Chair of Policy and Research Committee

Caleb Scoville  
Tufts University

#### Chair of Publications Committee

Ian Carrillo  
University of Oklahoma

#### Chair of Membership Committee

Jennifer Givens  
Utah State University

#### Committee on Racial Inclusion, Equity, and Justice Chair (CRIEJ)

Michael Warren Murphy  
Occidental College

#### Chair of Teaching, Training, and Practice Committee

Alan Rudy

Central Michigan University

### Co-Chair of Digital Communications Committee

Angeline Letourneau  
University of Alberta

Mike Lengefeld

Northeastern University

### Council Member at-Large

Ethan Raker  
The University of British Columbia

### Student Representative

Archana Ramanujam  
Brown University

### Award Committees Chairs

#### Outstanding Publication Award

#### Student Paper Award

Nikhil Deb  
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

#### Distinguished Contribution Award

Norah MacKendrick  
Rutgers University

#### Teaching and Mentorship Award

#### Practice and Outreach Award

Alissa Cordner  
Whitman College

### Communications

**Newsletter Editor:** Ian Carrillo

**Website Manager:** Michael Lengefeld

**Listserv Manager:** Apoorva Pal-Rathod

**Social Media:** Christina Ergas

#### Section Website:

<http://www.envirosoc.org/wordpress/>

**Section Listserv:** [envirosoc@listserv.neu.edu](mailto:envirosoc@listserv.neu.edu)

**Grad Listserv:** [envirograds@listserv.neu.edu](mailto:envirograds@listserv.neu.edu)

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/EnviroSocASA/](https://www.facebook.com/EnviroSocASA/)

**Twitter:** @EnviroSocASA & @envirogra