RILEY E. DUNLAP and DUANE A. GILL
Oklahoma State University, USA

William R. Freudenburg was one of the world’s leading environmental sociologists, who also made major contributions to community, disasters, risk, and rural sociology. He was born in Norfolk, Nebraska and received his BA from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, then his PhD at Yale under the mentorship of Kai Erikson. He joined the Departments of Sociology and Rural Sociology at Washington State University in 1978, moved to the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and finally to the Environmental Studies Program at UC, Santa Barbara, where he was Dehlsen Professor.

Freudenburg’s dissertation research focused on impacts of rapid growth in “energy boom-towns” in the western United States and yielded a number of foundational articles on the negative consequences of such growth. It also led to his involvement in social impact assessment (SIA) after federal mandates required environmental impact assessments to consider social impacts, and another series of crucial articles that helped strengthen sociological contributions to SIAs. These interests evolved into work on extractive economies, and Freudenburg wrote pathbreaking analyses of how rural communities dependent on resource-extractive industries often suffer a range of maladies including boom-and-bust economies.

A deep concern with the policy relevance of sociological research led Freudenburg to accept an American Sociological Association Congressional Fellow appointment early in his career, and the experience deepened his commitment to understanding the policy process. Besides his early work on SIA, this commitment showed up in research on nuclear power, environmental management, risk analysis, use of science in court cases, and the misuse of science in environmental controversies. His expertise led to appointments on several National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council Panels, as well as advisory committees for the US Departments of Energy and Interior.

Freudenburg’s empirical research was marked by a creative synthesis of qualitative and quantitative methods, solidly grounded in sociological theory, often with an eye toward policy relevance. He also made numerous contributions to “middle-range” theorizing about human societies, technology, and the biophysical environment that provided new theoretical and conceptual lenses.

For example, Freudenburg brought environmental sociology to the study of disasters by distinguishing between natural and technological disasters, arguing that, due to their typically ambiguous causes and consequences, technological disasters produce “corrosive” communities. Characterized by disruptions in social relationships, amplified conflict, and self-isolation, such communities differ from “therapeutic” communities marked by solidarity and mutual support that typically emerge after natural disasters.

Hurricane Katrina challenged the distinction between natural and technological disasters, and Freudenburg and colleagues responded by conceptualizing disasters as products of broader historical, sociocultural, economic, and political processes. Catastrophe in the Making: The Engineering of Katrina and the Disasters of Tomorrow (Freudenburg et al., 2009) examines the history of “growth machine politics” that created a setting that dramatically increased the adverse impacts of Katrina the storm. Similarly, his 2011 book with long term collaborator Robert Gramling, Blowout in the Gulf: The BP Oil Spill and the Future of Energy in America, traced the history of petroleum politics and offshore oil and gas development that laid the foundation for this devastating accident.

Freudenburg made significant contributions to the study of risk, arguing that social science can help explain public responses to risk and identify biases in risk assessment techniques. His early work proposed that “real” and “perceived” risks were less different than assumed, and

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greater focus was required on risk consequences (Freudenburg, 1988). A 1993 article, "Risk and Recreancy: Weber, the Division of Labor, and the Rationality of Risk Perceptions," provided a theoretical approach for understanding factors influencing public perceptions of risk. "Recreancy" refers to patterns of organizational negligence and irresponsibility – corporate and governmental – that violate the public trust that risks are being appropriately managed. Public perceptions of recreancy focus on "responsible parties" and attributing blame, which challenge the legitimacy of the social order.

Freudenburg (2005) introduced "disproportionality" and "double diversion" to focus on socially structured sources of adverse environmental impacts. Disproportionality describes unequal patterns of privileged access to environmental rights and resources in which a small minority enjoy the benefits from this arrangement. This diversion of rights, resources, and benefits is accompanied by a second diversion of attention that justifies these structural arrangements as necessary for the common good. Disproportionality also reveals that a large proportion of pollution and other environmental damage is often produced by a small portion of industrial interests, a pattern that is being increasingly replicated (Jorgenson, Longhofer, and Grant, 2016).

With Robert Gramling, Freudenburg made vital methodological contributions to environmental sociology, developing unique historical-comparative studies that yielded innovative analyses of societal–environmental relations – the core of the field. *Oil in Troubled Waters* (1994) is an exemplar of such work, and a precursor to contemporary CHANS (coupled human and natural systems) research. This was yet another example of Freudenburg's creativity, a trademark ensuring long-lasting impacts of his scholarly contributions.

SEE ALSO: Disasters; Ecological Problems; Environment, Sociology of the; Environmental Problems; Risk, Risk Society, Risk Behavior, and Social Problems

References


Further Readings