Tribute to William Freudenburg

William R. Freudenburg: An Intellectual and Professional Biography
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The world lost one of its most productive, creative and influential environmental/natural resource sociologists and rural sociology lost one of its intellectual leaders when William R. Freudenburg passed away on December 28, 2010. Bill, who had just turned 59 the month before, finally lost his battle with cancer, having well-exceeded the expectations of his doctors after the original diagnosis of bile-duct cancer in summer of 2009. He remained highly active until the end, finishing teaching his Fall course and managing to complete a book on the 2010 BP oil spill with his long-term collaborator Robert Gramling, Blowout in the Gulf: The BP Oil Spill Disaster and the Future of Energy in America, that came out shortly before his untimely death. While it is impossible to do full justice to the depth and scope of Bill’s rich legacy of scholarly contributions and professional accomplishments in a short amount of space, we sketch out broad themes and highlight major trends and achievements in his remarkable career.

After completing his undergraduate degree in his home-state at the University of Nebraska, Bill moved to Yale University in 1974 for graduate work in sociology where his advisor was Kai Erikson. Perhaps it was his small-town background that led him to focus on “energy boomtowns” in Colorado, small communities that were undergoing rapid and disruptive growth as a result of oil shale development pushed by the Carter Administration in reaction to the 1973-74 “energy crisis.” This work led to Bill being offered a joint position in the Departments of Sociology and Rural Sociology at Washington State University, whose faculty he joined in Fall of 1978 before completing his dissertation and receiving his PhD the following year. The joint appointment in Rural Sociology stimulated Bill to join RSS, and he developed a strong commitment to the organization and rural sociology more generally.

Bill quickly made a name for himself with a series of articles and chapters that provided highly insightful and theoretically grounded analyses of these communities (e.g., Freudenburg 1981; 1982), earning the nickname “Boomtown Bill” in the process. This work typically involved a creative synthesis of qualitative and quantitative evidence, solidly grounded in sociological theory, and often cast with an eye toward policy relevance—qualities that would become distinguishing characteristics of Bill’s scholarship. Probably the most influential were those he managed to get published in the premier sociology journals, *ASR* (Freudenburg, 1984) and *AJS* (Freudenburg 1986a). Both required multiple submissions and numerous revisions, and Bill recently noted that they needed “to be presented as an analysis of something else ... rather than an analysis of a community going through environmentally related disruptions” (Freudenburg 2008:451). Yet, these analyses of the differential impact of rapid growth on adolescents versus adults and the “density of acquaintanceship” represent the first appearance of work by a modern-era environmental/natural resource sociologist in these elite journals, one of many breakthroughs by Bill.

As an aside, these two early pieces also laid the groundwork for Bill’s superb record of placing environmentally relevant research in elite journals, demonstrating his ability to frame his empirical research in ways that engaged theoretically significant issues. Most sociologists regard *ASR, AJS* and *Social Forces* as the top three disciplinary journals, and Bill managed to publish two articles and a long comment in *ASR*, four articles in *AJS* and six in *SF*. He also published nine articles in RSS’s flagship journal, *Rural Sociology*. This is an unparalleled record for an environmental/natural resource sociologist, and made an enormous contribution to legitimizing environmental research within the larger disciplines of sociology and rural sociology.
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Social science interest in energy boomtowns stemmed in part from the fact that “social impact assessment” was rapidly growing as a field of inquiry, due to legal decisions mandating that environmental impact assessments include “SIAs.” This momentum stimulated creation of an Ad Hoc Committee within the American Sociological Association charged with drawing up guidelines for the conduct of SIAs, and Bill quickly became a leading contributor to the work initiated by the short-lived committee—including that of a subsequent committee involving a number of representatives from government agencies that produced a report providing such guidelines (Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment 1993). Bill’s efforts led to a number of articles on social impact assessment (e.g., Freudenburg and Keating 1982; 1985), emphasizing the need for strong sociological contributions—methodologically rigorous and theoretically grounded—to SIAs, most notably an agenda-setting review piece in the Annual Review of Sociology (Freudenburg 1986b) that both signified and solidified Bill’s leadership in the field.

As reflected in his choice of a dissertation topic, from the outset Bill had a strong desire to focus his intellectual efforts on important societal phenomena, and this evolved into a strong and continuing interest in the policy process. When the ASA developed a Congressional Fellow program Bill applied, and worked with the Committee on Energy and Commerce in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1983-84. This experience, described in Freudenburg (1986c), heightened Bill’s interest in the policy domain. One can see the impact of this interest not only in his work on SIA (e.g., Freudenburg and Keating 1985) but throughout his career, especially notable in pieces on nuclear power (Freudenburg and Jones 1991), agency failure (Freudenburg and Gramling 1994a; Freudenburg and Youn 1999), social science contributions to environmental management (Freudenburg 1989), social science input into policy-making (Freudenburg and Gramling 2002), the use of science in court cases (Freudenburg 2005a), and the misuse of science in environmental controversies (Freudenburg, Gramling, and Davidson 2008).

Coming back to chronological order, another important development in Bill’s career occurred while he was at WSU. Likely due to Pullman’s proximity to the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Bill became interested in nuclear power and waste. This led to a co-edited book with Eugene Rosa (Freudenburg and Rosa 1984) and a long-term focus on nuclear issues (Freudenburg and Baxter 1984; 1985; Freudenburg and Jones 1991; Freudenburg 2004; Freudenburg and Davidson 2007; Alario and Freudenburg 2007), as well as a growing interest in environmental and technological risk in general and risk assessment writ large. This line of work led to numerous articles and chapters dealing with risk, including a landmark contribution in Science (Freudenburg 1988), that continued to appear up until his death. The work on risk is especially rich theoretically, as exemplified by several articles: Freudenburg and Pastor (1992), Freudenburg (1993); Davidson and Freudenburg (1996); and Alario and Freudenburg (2003; 2007; 2010). In addition to introducing his well-known concept of “recreancy,” Bill, along with his colleagues, has offered insightful comparisons of American middle-range and European grand theorizing on risk, especially in terms of their relative degrees of empirical support.

After spending a 1984-85 sabbatical at the University of Denver, placing him close to the energy boomtowns he continued to follow, Bill moved to the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin in 1986, where he again helped strengthen a leading environmental sociology program. Building upon his earlier interests, at Wisconsin Bill used his boomtown work as a basis for contributing broader insights about extractive economies in general. He developed a highly productive and influential research program on the topic which, on the whole, offered irrefutable counter-evidence to the general assumption that natural resource development is an attractive option for rural communities, pointing to multiple maladies that coincide with such economies (Freudenburg and Jones 1991b; Freudenburg 1992; Freudenburg and Gramling 1992; Freudenburg and Gramling 1994b; Freudenburg and Frickel 1994; Frickel and Freudenburg 1996; Freudenburg and Gramling 1998; Freudenburg, Gramling and Schurman 1999; Freudenburg and Wilson 2002). In addition to several graduate students studying at Wisconsin, Bill’s work on extractive communities was done with Robert Gramling, with whom he began to collaborate after the two met on an advisory panel on offshore oil-drilling sponsored by the U.S. Minerals Management Service. This chance encounter launched one of the most productive partnerships in environmental/natural resource sociology—resulting in three important books, seven magazine articles and technical reports, and over 20 peer-reviewed articles.
By the 1990s, with the help of Gramling, Bill began to turn more of his efforts toward one of his long-standing priorities—enhancing the academic position of the still-youthful field of environmental sociology. Focusing explicitly on the vexing issue of theorization of socio-environmental relations, this attention—as with his other pursuits—led to several landmark contributions with his collaborators (e.g., Freudenburg, Frickel and Gramling 1995; Gramling and Freudenburg 1996a). Bill and colleagues reported the results of creative studies that took an historical and comparative approach to analyses of societal-environmental interactions, enabling them to compare varying environmental conditions and differ societal conditions over time, documenting the dialectic and socially contingent nature of environmental outcomes, always exemplifying in resounding terms the fact that “Nature does matter.”

The archetypes of this work are his and Gramling’s comparisons of the enthusiastic support for oil production in Louisiana to the equally enthusiastic opposition to it in both California and Florida, research that is groundbreaking in both findings and as contribution to sociological methodology (Freudenburg and Gramling 1993; 1994c; Gramling and Freudenburg 1996b). These studies provide exemplars of sophisticated, non-quantitative comparative methodology that offer current and future students invaluable tools for studying the relationships between social and physical phenomena, and offer superb illustrations of the fruits of strong environmental sociological research.

Around the same time period Bill’s risk scholarship began to showcase inquiries into disasters and corrosive communities in particular, beginning with a case study of the Exxon Valdez spill (Gramling and Freudenburg 1992) and ending with several articles and a book chronicling the social determinants of the catastrophe that was Hurricane Katrina (Freudenburg et al. 2008; 2009a; 2009b; Gramling et al. 2011), in all cases emphasizing the societal factors that help construct natural and technological disasters alike.

It was perhaps this accumulating record of case study material on disasters and corrosive communities that highlighted for Bill the enduring inequities associated with the distribution of environmental benefits and harms. His latest and arguably most compelling work was devoted explicitly to this issue, as represented in his groundbreaking research on disproportionalities and the double diversion tactics that serve to maintain them (Freudenburg 2005b; 2006), as well as an article and volume co-edited with Robert Wilkinson (Freudenburg and Wilkinson 2008, Wilkinson and Freudenburg 2008) and work with long-time collaborator Margarita Alario (Alario and Freudenburg 2010). His attention to equity simultaneously illustrated his continued enthusiasm for interdisciplinary work, and was one of the key topics of engagement with his natural science colleagues (e.g. Haberl et al. 2006).

More generally, Bill seems to have been motivated by a concern with “under-dogs” from the outset of his career—when he focused on residents of the small (and powerless) energy boomtowns in his dissertation research—to its premature end. As Bob Gramling put it in a message to us:

Bill was the true intellectual and scholar, but he also was passionate about injustice from the level of recreancy by large federal agencies to the level of individual discrimination, and that passion drove much of his work. Particularly troubling to Bill were situations that involved the relationships between rural communities and the environments they exist in and depend upon and large corporate or agency interests that exploit or regulate those environments. Manipulation or incompetence in these relationships drove him nuts! A good bit of the motivation behind Catastrophe (Freudenburg et al. 2009c), Blowout (Freudenburg and Gramling 2011), Oil in Troubled Waters (Freudenburg and Gramling 2010) and our other work was our perception that greedy growth machines, corporations, or incompetent agencies were screwing communities.

It is little wonder, then, that Bill found rural communities such a fitting place for his research.

Bill’s scholarly contributions were recognized via a wide range of awards, beginning with the 1992 “Award of Merit” from RSS’s Natural Resources Research Group (an award that Bill initiated when he Chaired the NRRG) and the
1996 “Distinguished Contribution to Environmental Sociology” Award from the ASA’s Section on Environment and Technology. He also won “outstanding article” awards from the Pacific Sociological Association (for Freudenburg, Wilson and O’Leary, 1998), from ASA’s Section on Political Sociology (for Molotch, Freudenburg and Paulsen, 2000) and from RSS (for Freudenburg, 2005b). The latter was the inaugural Frederick H. Buttel Award, and having it named for his close friend made it particularly rewarding to Bill. Then, just last year, Bill received the Excellence in Research/Theory Award from RSS, and received a standing ovation at the awards luncheon. Finally, he was elected a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1998.

Bill was a leader not only on the basis of his intellectual achievements, but professionally through the numerous offices he held throughout his career. This was especially the case for RSS, where he served as Secretary (1980-81) and then Chair (1982-83) of the Natural Resources Research Group, and then as Vice President (1993-94), Council Member (2000-02) and ultimately President (2004-05) of RSS. He also served as Secretary (1986-1993) and Chair (1996-97) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science’s Section on Social, Economic and Political Sciences (Section K) and as a Council Member (1980-83) and Chair (1989-1991) of the American Sociological Association’s Section on Environment and Technology. At the time of his death, he was President-Elect of the newly-established Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences, an organization which he helped found. Bill also compiled an exemplary record of service on prestigious advisory panels and boards, serving on several National Academy of Sciences/National Research Council Panels as well as Advisory Committees for the U.S. Department of Energy and Department of Interior. He was an outstanding spokesperson for environmental social science in these advisory roles.

From his early years at Washington State University Bill made a habit of collaborating with grad students, and this tendency was strengthened during his time at Wisconsin and continued when he joined the Environmental Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara as Dehse Professor of Environment and Society in 2002. Numerous graduate students learned how to do research and get it into print under Bill’s tutelage, and several have gone on to develop very successful careers of their own. While mentoring grad students came naturally to Bill, at UCSB he took on a new challenge—teaching a large introductory course in Environmental Studies. He fulfilled the task brilliantly, developing one of the most popular courses on campus and regularly receiving standing applause from classes exceeding 400 students. In 2006-07 he received an “Outstanding Professor Award” from UCSB’s Residence Halls Association and Office of Residential Life.

The respect, admiration and affection for Bill felt by his students, both current and past, and colleagues was on display at “Freudenfest,” a symposium held last November at UCSB to honor Bill and his many contributions. It was a joyous occasion, and one that touched Bill profoundly. A few days afterwards Bill sent out an email thanking participants in which he ended by referring to something he often said to his son Max: “In the long run, people get the kinds of friends they deserve. After Saturday night [when the symposium dinner was followed by personal tributes], though, I need to modify that. In certain rare cases, a fortunate few are honored by having better friends that they deserve. Thanks to you, I am one of those fortunate few.” Of course, all of us, and many more who could not be there, feel Bill more than deserved our friendship, support and appreciation.

The two of us are pleased to note that papers highlighting Bill’s scholarly contributions evolving from presentations at Freudenfest will be published in a symposium we are editing for the new Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences, the Journal of the Association of Environmental Studies and Sciences. In addition, two sessions that focus on Bill’s work, organized by Tom Beckley, are being held in June at the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management in Madison. It is hoped that these will result in symposium in Society and Natural Resources.

Despite the sadly premature ending of his exceptional career, Bill left us with a rich legacy. For example, throughout the years he developed numerous theoretically derived concepts that have become valuable tools in social science
analyses of environmental/resource issues and are instantly associated with his name, including the "density of acquaintanceship," "diversionary reframing," "recreancy," "corrosive communités," "disproportionality," "double diversion" and "SCAMs (for "Scientific Uncertainty Argumentation Methods"). The continued fruitful use of these concepts by others will ensure that Bill's legacy continues, and their importance was best captured by fellow environmental sociologist Steve Kroll-Smith in a January 1, 2001 post on the ENVIRSOC listserv paying tribute to Bill: "I came to know some time ago that the greatest among us create vocabularies that become the way the rest of us speak or write the world into existence. Please accept my thanks for the words, the ideas and the subtleties of thought that pushed my work and me forward."

REFERENCES


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