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Energy-defined broadly in physics as the ability to perform work-is an indispensable element of all human activities. Because everything we do, individually and collectively, utilizes energy in some way, it would appear to be a fundamental sociological variable that links the social sciences with the physical and biological sciences. But with the exception of Fred Cot-trell's (1955) seminal work, energy was largely ignored by sociology until the 1970s, when energy supply crises prompted sociologists to begin to explore the role of energy in social life. Since that time, social science interest in energy has tended to fluctuate with societal concerns about energy-related problems. The energy shortages of the 1970s spurred a variety of scientific and policy initiatives that faded as energy prices fell during the 1980s. A renewed interest in energy occurred in the early 1990s, as some regional energy systems pursued energy efficiency rather than new sources of energy supply, and as international concern grew about global environmental changes resulting from energy use. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, energy systems face additional changes as deregulated energy markets stimulate a revival of power plant building and a vacillating interest in conservation activities.

This chapter explores these developments and their relationship to the growth of sociological knowledge about the role of energy in the environment-society dynamic. It is divided into six major sections. The first considers the treatment of energy

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