WHERE IS SOCIAL SCIENCE ON ANTIENVIRONMENTALISM?
PROPOSING A MODEL FOR THEORIZING CORPORATE BACKLASH

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on anti-environmentalism and explores both mainstream and radical political sociological approaches that might potentially apply to a study of anti-environmentalism. Both the body of current scholarship and the political sociological approaches are determined to be inadequate. Offered as an alternative to the paucity of empirical research and theoretical innovation is a model of political analysis based on the work of Antonio Gramsci, especially his construct of the “organic intellectual.” A Gramscian model is favored because it incorporates and transcends instrumentalist and structuralist modes of political analysis, thus avoiding state-centrism and simplistic base-superstructure logic. No systematic theory is presented in this paper, although some possible directions for future research are sketched.
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Anti-environmentalism is an assemblage of ideologies and political practices designed to advance capitalist accumulation and manage discontents stemming from industrial production and mass consumption. A constellation of corporations, politicians, lobbies, think tanks, science mills, grassroots groups, and public relations firms coordinates anti-environmental activities. Despite its occasional populist appearances, anti-environmentalism has a definite political-economic character: major corporations establish the network’s principal components with the objective of securing the capitalist mode of production against extensive environmental reforms.

Capitalism threatens the environment in two major ways that motivate anti-environmental thought and activities. First, the imperative of accumulation is to expand commodity production and commercial markets (Douthwaite 1999). “From an economic point of view, sustainable capitalism must of necessity be an expanding capitalism,” O’Connor observes; moreover, the goal of capitalist production, profit, is not only an incentive to expand production, but is the means for expansion (O’Connor 1994: 159). An ideology of growth accompanies this structural requirement, what Schmookler sees as a “cult of growth”: “If there is anything approaching dogma in our national belief system, it is the idea that economic growth is the key to solving all our problems, the sine qua non of our individual and national well-being” (Schmookler 1993: 210). Yet expanding production and consumption depletes resources, presenting problems for environmental conservation and protection (Schnaiberg and Gould 1994). Those who benefit from environmental destruction are compelled to design anti-environmental propaganda to allay
actual and potential public concern over resource depletion. They are pushed by the presence of popular resistance to manufacture illusions about the state of nature and the limits of industrial and commercial impact—that nature is a cornucopia. And whatever impact human beings may have, technological innovation will transcend limitations caused by depletion (Hoffman 1997; Schmookler 1993).

Second, the structure of profit maximization requires the maximum externalization of production costs, which results in environmental destruction (O’Connor 1994; Schnaiberg and Gould 1994). Compounding this is the fact that the inequalities of capitalism unfairly distribute negative externalities. Disadvantaged and racialized groups disproportionately bear industrial production’s costs (March 1997; Szasz and Meuser 1997; Mohai and Bryant 1995; Szasz 1994; Bailey, Faupel, and Gundlach 1993; Walsh, Warland, and Smith 1993; Alston 1992). Externalization costs and the unfair burden industrial production places on certain groups create in corporations the need to prevent public sentiment and sympathetic government agencies from demanding corporate accountability (Barnett 1994; Edelstein 1988. To protect their interests, corporations develop strategies intended to keep the public from demanding capital absorb environmental costs of production. Polluters appeal to the necessity of unregulated production, calling for the privileging growth over sustainability and public safety. They manufacture an illusion here, as well—that the earth is a bottomless garbage can (Chomsky 1994).

Environmental sociologists’ interest in social movements and collective behavior suggests we might find one or more in-depth studies of anti-environmentalism in the literature. Wide-ranging surveys of the field, however, only hint at an awareness of anti-environmentalism. Given the level of intensity of anti-environmentalism reported by environmental activists at the grassroots, social science should be aggressively theorizing the matter. This essay criticizes the
academic field and suggests an appropriate model and some research questions that need to be answered.

The structure of the essay is as follows. First, I define anti-environmentalism. Second, the environmental sociological literature on this subject is reviewed and found to be lacking. Third, I expose the inadequacies of various mainstream and radical sociological theories of state and class power. Fourth, I recommend adopting an approach based on the work of Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci (2000). Fifth, I propose several research questions based on the Gramscian approach. Finally, I conclude with a statement about the importance of using historical materialist approaches to the study of social problems.

STATE OF THE ART IN ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGY

One early appraisal focuses on the environmental movement, environmental attitudes, and societal effects on the environment (see Dunlap and Catton 1979). There is no reference to the anti-environmental countermovement underway at the time the review was published. The authors’ neglect may be attributable to the relatively recent emergence of the new rightwing movement. Yet in a comprehensive assessment almost a decade later (see Buttel 1987), when the Reagan Administration’s policies had clearly attracted environmentalists’ attention, there is scant mention of anti-environmental activities.

In suggesting several promising directions in environmental sociology, a more recent review (Gramling and Freudenburg 1996) notes some anti-environmental themes, such as corporate mobilization and co-optation of environmental symbols (e.g., Buttel 1992), and studies of ideologies and techniques used to justify resource exploitation (e.g., Freudenburg and Gramling 1994; Freudenburg 1991; Clarke 1988). Except for citing studies concerned with formal political processes and regulatory machinery, however, there are no comprehensive
accounts of how corporations concretely pursue their interests, especially their operations in civil society. What is more, the authors do not include theorizing anti-environmentalism in their list of promising directions for environmental sociology.

In contrast to environmental sociology, numerous descriptive analyses of anti-environmentalism have been produced in progressive political magazines (e.g., *Z Magazine* and *Mother Jones*), journals (such as *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, see e.g., Athanasiou 1996), and books (e.g., Tokar 1997; Helvarg 1997; Rowell 1996; Stauber and Rampton 1995), and by watchdog groups (e.g., Environmental Working Group and Environmental Research Foundation). However, while these analyses provide empirical pieces of the puzzle, they do not build a theory of anti-environmentalism or supply a method of building such a theory. Furthermore, descriptive analyses of politics and ideology atheoretically emphasize human agency, relying implicitly on motivational subjectivist models to explain collective action.

Adopting a political economy viewpoint ameliorates problems of atheoreticity and motivational subjectivism. Exemplary models in mainstream environmental studies are works by Barnett (1994), Schnaiberg and Gould (1994), and Schnaiberg (1980). According to these models, material interests and structural imperatives generate and condition motives and behaviors that contradict environmentally sound economic activity. Notwithstanding this insight, the state of the art in political economy of the environment is inadequate for studying anti-environmentalism for two main reasons. First, these models degrade political economy’s analytical utility by narrowly imagining the political region as legislative decisions and the actions of regulatory bodies. Political economy so conceived tends towards state-centrism, where scholars define the political region as what goes on in the state. Overemphasizing formal aspects of political regimes blinds analysts to diverse political activities shaping public policy in liberal
republics, actions (maybe) mostly occurring in politicized domains of civil society. This explains why these scholars fail to adequately address anti-environmentalism: the region wherein this political activity occurs lies beyond the boundaries of their theoretical field of vision. Second, the main theoretical contributors to political economy of the environment--Schnaiberg and Gould (1994)--abstract industrialism from capitalist social relations. Among the many theoretical and methodological difficulties this procedure raises, perhaps the most serious one is the diminished centrality of the capitalist class in anti-environmental activities (cf. Mandel 1975; Commoner 1972).

Sociologists need a critical-theoretical method capable of integrating knowledge accumulating about the political terrain with a sociological understanding of society’s structural levels. The materialist conception of history affords the best method. Historical materialists underscore the analytical necessity of distinguishing between material transformations in the social conditions of production and the political and ideological forms over which people consciously struggle. At the same time, they emphasize theoretically joining the two conceptual levels to reflect their unity in concrete totalities (Marx 1993, 1976). Adopting a critical realist standpoint on matters of interests and relations (Balbus 1970), scholars working in this tradition generate empirically rich historiographies of social systems (e.g., Robinson 1996; Gill 1995, 1994; Baran and Sweezy 1966). Because they emphasize political praxis, historical materialists are unhindered by the neutrality doctrine that precludes attainment of maximal objectivity in mainstream social science (Harding 1992). For these reasons, historical materialism is the starting point for objective social scientific theorizing.

Gramsci (2000) develops a political-historiographical method that synthesizes historical materialism with elements of Italian political science. Gramsci’s model thus bridges the gap
between two powerful analytical traditions: *historical materialism*, focused on larger societal-historical structures, relations, and dynamics; and critical interpretations of *elite theory* (e.g., Domhoff 1990; Dye 1986; Mills 1956), focused more on instrumental linkages and actions. Gramsci’ work therefore permits the integration of structural and behavioral-practical levels of analysis (Robinson 1996). Before turning to a discussion of this method, I first examine standard and radical approaches to political sociology. […]

**CONCLUSION**

Since transformations in public administration are contingent on economic relations and political struggles occurring largely in civil society, a theoretical model premised on the “materialist conception of history” is the appropriate basic model to choose (Marx and Engels 1998; Marx 1993). Marxists’ understand the dynamic interplay of social *formation* and historical *conjuncture* in a manner that situates human agency and permits the development of theories that more fully explain political motive and action. The materialist premise focuses us on the objective needs for control structures and processes to guide exploited and subjected populations, as well as competitors, towards certain ends. The Marxian standpoint provides the intellectual foundation for this paper. Gramsci provides several components for understanding how elites realize capitalist imperatives consistent with the larger historical materialist project. With his conception of political process and ideological-cultural formation as my central heuristic, in combination with Marxian and power elitist approaches, we can examine intentionality in policymaking occurring in capitalist society’s political-economic structures, imperatives, and contradictions. […]
WORKS CITED


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