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Transnational Structures and the Limits of Local
 Resistance

TRANSNATIONAL VERSUS GLOBAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

In this volume, we outline the driving logic and contradictions of modern industrial production as it constrains and shapes the ability of the environmental movement to protect ecosystems. We ask how and why community-based frameworks for environmental issues have evolved. In addition, we explore the way in which these frameworks could be expanded to empower a broader social–environmental coalition. We believe that this can occur only if the tensions within the political economy of modern production are made more overt to citizen-workers, analysts, and policy makers, instead of being politically and economically trivialized. Thus, the focus of our study is on local community organizing, but our intent is to demonstrate the importance of the changing political economy.

Broadly, the growth of the environmental movement in the 1980s occurred along three different trajectories, each of which had its own constituencies, issues, and ideologies. One branch of the movement consisted of old-line conservationists and preservationists. These groups tended to congregate in and around the Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, and other traditional movement organizations. They also existed locally in education centers and land conservancies. This branch of the movement appealed mainly to older, more highly educated and wealthier Americans concerned with preserving ecosystem elements for the aesthetic and recreational enjoyment of future generations. It has been appropriately captured by the label “the cult of the wilderness.”

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Almost at the other end of the social status spectrum there emerged in the 1980s an environmental justice movement, composed of urban activists and groups from communities of color. Headed by Dr. Benjamin Chavis, the environmental justice movement grew out of the civil rights community, recognizing the connection between ecosystem destruction and racism. Many of the participants were low-income residents of these communities led by indigenous or external organizers, who were drawn from among more highly educated activists of color.

In contrast to these two branches, we are interested here primarily in a third group of activists, which we will refer to as “citizen-worker groups.” In some ways, this branch falls between the other two. It is composed of white, working- to middle-class individuals most of whom have had little or no prior involvement in political movements. In urban areas, they tend to be located in suburban communities, on the verge of urban sprawl. In rural areas, they are often located in towns that have lost their industrial base and are fighting to preserve some decent standard of living. Often a single environmental issue mobilizes them. Some groups are formed to protest newly discovered toxic wastes that are products of a local industry’s history, as we depict in Chapter 3. Examples include Love Canal, New York; Port Hope, Ontario; and Woburn, Massachusetts. Other groups want to protest the location of new, or the expansion of existing, locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) in their community. One example of such concern is the problem of local landfills, which helped stimulate local curbside recycling programs, outlined in Chapter 4. Another is the destruction of local wetlands, which we detail in Chapter 2.

Like the environmental justice groups, citizen-worker groups are concerned about the health and safety of their communities. In contrast, however, many citizen-worker groups avoid proposing the reduction of ongoing toxic emissions and/or waste streams or the disbanding of local development ventures. These practices provide economic bases for their communities, however unsustainable they may ultimately be (Brown & Mikkelsen 1990).¹ Instead such groups talk about “good neighbor agreements” and other tools for maintaining current forms of production and local development in more “socially responsible” ways. Like the preservationists, they are concerned about the quality-of-life aspects of ecosystem protection. But their motivation is not primarily aesthetic. Their local

¹ We have discussed this more generally elsewhere; see Gould (1991a,b); Gould et al. (1993); Schnaiberg (1992a); Weinberg (1994a,b).

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environment often provides them with inexpensive recreational opportunities. Furthermore, local economic use of the local environment is intimately tied up with their property values and thus influences their personal assets. In this book, we concentrate on citizen-worker groups, because they are the largest and least understood segment of the environmental movement. The preservationists and conservationists have been already examined (see Hays 1969, 1987; Worster 1985). Likewise, there appear to be a growing number of works on the environmental justice movement (Bryant & Mohai 1992; Bullard 1990, 1993, 1994; Gottlieb 1993; Krauss 1993; Pellow 1994).

We use the label “citizen-worker” in marked contrast to other designations that appear in both the popular press and academic literatures, which often distort the motives and actions of these groups. Many critics have labeled these local movements NIMBY (not in my back yard) movements, attacking them as undemocratic. The NIMBY label implies that local activists are selfish, materialistic, and often naive and uncosmopolitan. Community values are portrayed as irrelevant for meeting national needs, since these local groups accept the various production organizations that increase local and national environmental risks. Local groups are often perceived as simple-minded defenders of the status quo, as opposed to the supposedly progressive advocates of economic opportunity. Our view of such attacks is that they blame the victims. Just as the concept of political correctness demeans the political objectives of those who want to defend social and political victims of discriminatory behavior by gross caricatures, so too does the label “NIMBY” negate the strategies, tactics, and contexts of local citizens struggling to protect their citizen and worker rights.

Paradoxically, advocates for such local movements seem to take for granted citizen-workers’ vital role. They use the label “grass roots” to denote an essentially democratic, locally based protest. Three decades ago, Gunnar Myrdal (1967: app. 1) warned us that our views of the South, or Third World, were distorted over time by ungrounded semantic changes in their economic development status. In like manner, the rise of local environmental movements has led to an obfuscating set of terms (Worster 1985, 1993). For example, in recent works focusing on “ecopopulism” (Szasz 1994), “popular epidemiology” (Brown & Mikkelsen 1990), or “grass-roots solutions” (Cable & Cable 1995), the term “grass roots” links such movements into a populist history, pitting local Davids

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against corporate Goliaths. They invariably conjure up visions of workers and farmers fighting major corporate entities.

Among those who fight, however, are sometimes investors in or employees of these entities. Moreover, we fight them only when they threaten our residential and/or recreational amenities. And even then, analysts such as Brown and Mikkelsen (1990) and Gould (1991a, 1992a, 1993) have noted how often local citizens are split by emerging environmental protests within their own communities. Some fear the clear and present threat to their livelihoods more than murky and less tangible possible health impacts. This is often sufficient to fracture local social and political groups, despite class, gender, or racial commonalities (Schnaiberg 1992a, 1994a,b).

From our perspective, these groups are attempting to exercise their rights as citizens. They seek to have some say in the local development of their communities, in order to ensure that the quality of their lives will be protected. As Chapters 2 to 4 will outline, there are both democratic and undemocratic elements within a single movement organization and across a range of organizations.

Our central task in this volume is to explore the potentials and limits of these local citizen-worker movements. Often, we add the term “local” to “citizen-worker” to refer to a sophisticated strategy adopted by most of these groups that we will shortly explain as “Think globally, act locally.” We argue that this strategy is not sufficient in a political economy that is increasingly neither local nor global, but is rather transnational. We attempt to empower such local movements in new ways, by reframing their options for effective social and political mobilization. While our analysis finds many limits to localism, we are sympathetic to the needs and contexts of these local citizen-worker groups. We share the concerns as well as many of the personal histories of their members.

In the rest of this chapter, we outline the logic and contradictions involved in modern industrial societies. We then trace their implications for contemporary political processes, particularly at the nation-state level. In addition, we outline the rise of social and political movements in reaction to the problems imposed by national economic policies, emphasizing the recent upsurge in local movement organizations. The remainder of the chapter explores the power and limits of both the modern nation-state and local movements within a more realistic framework of rising transnational flows of liquid capital, commodities, and corporate services.

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THE LOGIC OF MODERN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION: THE
TREADMILL OF PRODUCTION AS THE TERRAIN OF
ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS

Environmental conflicts are fundamentally struggles over the different capacities of social groups to meet their needs by gaining access to natural resources.² One of the dilemmas in managing ecological scarcity in a liberal industrial society is the need to satisfy both the demands of private capital and public agencies for economic growth and the demands of citizens for maintaining public health, as well as the recreational and aesthetic amenities of their natural habitats. This problem emerges from the sharply delineated differences between the economic logic of expanding industrial production and the ecological principles of sustaining natural systems.

The modern industrial revolutions have helped create a new political-economic system that we earlier labeled the “treadmill of production” (Schnaiberg 1980b; Schnaiberg & Gould 1994). The economic component of this political-economic system has the publicly stated goal of expanding industrial production and economic development, as well as increasing consumption.³ The political component involves public confluence of private capital, labor, and governments in promoting this goal. This confluence of interests is based upon the increasingly widespread social belief that advances in public welfare are achieved primarily through economic growth. Such interests are manifest in private investments in fixed capital, in public institutions developed by the state to facilitate economic growth, and in the orientation of organized (and non-organized) labor toward these investments and institutions.

The gains accruing from economic growth have been relatively clear to private capital interests during most of the twentieth century, especially since World War II. In the “Fordist” (Harrison 1994; Lipietz 1987) or “economic nationalist” model (Reich 1991), expansion was viewed as increasing the profits for corporate managers and their investors – including both elites who controlled liquid and physical capital and those who controlled less portable land resources. The benefits that workers derived from such economic growth were somewhat less clear. However,

² Some of the ideas that we discuss in this section have been presented elsewhere; see especially Gould et al. (1993); Schnaiberg (1980); Schnaiberg and Gould (1994).

³ In the rest of this volume we use the term “production” to encompass industrial production, land development, and consumer consumption.

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workers strongly believed that increased production created new employment opportunities both in direct industrial production and, more indirectly, in the construction and service sectors. The service sector was thought to grow most rapidly due to the economic multiplier of having more workers with higher wages living and spending within a community. Finally, states and their government apparatus became convinced that economic expansion increased the taxation capacity of the state, allowing it to distribute compensatory benefits to displaced workers and dependent citizens. States believed that tax revenues would rise more rapidly than citizen demands, and thus state officials and agencies increasingly shared a stake in the economic expansion of the private sector.

As a result of these interests and beliefs, all three groups tended to support policies aimed at fostering economic growth. The confluence of private capital, labor, and state interests therefore represented a powerful political force, promoting the constant acceleration of the treadmill of industrial production. Some modest gains in economic growth were also achieved in the service sector, with lower levels of natural resource extraction and relatively low levels of waste production. But the primary basis of economic expansion remained industrial production and land development. Both industrial production and land development required the withdrawal of ecosystem elements for raw material inputs and the addition of wastes to ecosystems as the by-products of outputs. Accelerated production therefore usually implied at least sustained ecosystem withdrawals and additions, which disrupt natural systems. Following the economic pressures caused by rising energy costs in the late 1970s, some decreases in energy per unit production were achieved by re-engineering. Similarly, under the recent influence of waste reduction programs, some producers have created products with less disposable wastes per unit, sometimes by using recycled materials. However, even in many of these cases of the “greening” of production, withdrawals and additions were accelerated over time, as ever more units of production were produced and sold, or more homes and buildings per year were built.⁴

⁴We are well aware of contrary examples of places where growth occurs alongside lower aggregate levels of withdrawals. For example, there has been an increase in energy efficiency since 1970 in the United States, and computers have become smaller over time, using fewer natural resources. Our general point is more historical. Since economic development is usually operationalized as displacing labor and increasing capital (even when managers and owners do not make the connection between these two actions), it tends to create more ecological destruction. Thus, building a home in 1994 was more ecologically destructive than it was in 1904. This point is made more clearly in Chapter 2.

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Thus, the support of private capital, labor, and the state for economic growth implied conscious or unconscious support for ecological disruption and environmental degradation. This was true even when those social actors claimed an awareness of and concern for such negative impacts. Often, actors who supported environmental protection measures did so only after the national economy was prospering. Yet that very prosperity required accelerated production, and thus continuous or accelerated ecological disruptions. Ironically, then, support for environmental protection measures was often predicated on an implicit agreement to ignore the creation of more pernicious environmental problems. Ecological problems were thus often exacerbated as continuing withdrawals and additions multiplied and interacted with each other or as the withdrawals and additions increased in scope or severity in local and extralocal ecosystems.

Beyond ecological problems, this Fordist or national economic treadmill of production created some social distributive problems. Growth was usually seen by elites, including those based on both land and on fiscal and physical capital, to come about through capital intensification of production, which tended to result in greater unemployment in extractive and manufacturing sectors. Thus, while national economic growth might have been achieved in many ways (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 1993), it was most often operationalized, due to these social beliefs, through processes that actually eroded many earlier gains to workers accruing from previous treadmill expansion. That treadmill acceleration had been projected to lead to the improvement of social welfare. But the state's response to the failure of economic expansion to produce the social benefits expected by workers was generally to increase the development and implementation of policies which would further expand treadmill production. Set in place, then, was a cyclical structure. Economic growth was to be accelerated in response to the failure of earlier cycles of economic expansion to produce the desired social welfare benefits. Hence, the "treadmill of production" refers to the constant acceleration of production required to produce marginal social welfare benefits or simply to maintain the social welfare status quo. Such expansion typically requires continuous ecosystem disorganization, at minimum through the destruction of land habitats and, more typically, involving further pollution and depletion of natural resources. Thus, private capital, labor, and the state have become somewhat ambivalently committed to the acceleration of environmental degradation.

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THE TREADMILL OF PRODUCTION

In recent decades, the treadmill has shifted in important ways. While there continue to be national commitments to economic expansion and national competitiveness, the treadmill has moved into a more transnational arena. The continuity between the older form and the newer form of the treadmill is twofold:

- The driving force is the private sector's economic search for profitability, which has been expanded to a global quest for markets and a recruitment of labor forces in the world that can generate still-higher profits per unit production.
- The nation-state and the national labor forces of both industrial and developing countries have actually increased their political commitment to the treadmill, despite the fact that the social distributional gains from the expansion of production have become truncated for many citizens of industrial states.

In sharp contrast, the discontinuity between the older national forms and newer transnational forms of the treadmill lies primarily in the following:

- The increasing domination of transnational treadmill market actors over national institutions of the nation-state, and its society (including both its population and its labor force).

These three aspects of the contemporary treadmill can be visualized as an increase in the "tilt" of the political-economic treadmill in recent decades. When a treadmill is tilted to a greater degree, the user must expend more physical energy merely to sustain her or his initial velocity. We will refer to this process as an "acceleration" of the treadmill, produced in large part by the globalization of markets. Harrison's (1994) analysis of contemporary modes of production is remarkably similar to ours:

Even the orthodox contemporaries of Keynes understood the inherent instability of an economic system in which every current expression of demand by businesses, in the form of investment in new plant and equipment, expands the economy's productive capacity, thereby *requiring still greater increments in final demand to contain unemployment* and maximize efficient utilization of that capacity. (31; emphasis ours)

What has produced this tilt, this increase in the influence of market actors over political actors (Lindblom 1977)? Why did it occur so rapidly

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in recent decades, rather than earlier in the twentieth century? Following Barnet and Cavanagh (1994), Reich (1991), and Harrison (1994), we discern three factors:

1. The political influence of successful treadmill firms and coalitions in the promotion of new forms of “free trade.” Essentially this lowered the barriers to investing outside the nation-state of origin of these corporations. It reduced tariff barriers to entry of foreign-made goods and the legal barriers to removing profits from their country of origin and transferring them to another country, as well as the threats of “exorbitant” tax rates in the country of origin and/or the country of repatriation of such profits.
2. A further reduction in political barriers to transnationalization of production and trade through the removal of fixed schedules of exchange rates between major national currencies, as well as the removal of legal barriers to transferring currencies across countries.
3. The creation and dissemination of ever more efficient computerized and other electronic means of information transfer across nations (faxes especially), which were used to increase the rapidity and security of transferring investments, profits, and currencies between branches of transnational corporations (Barnet & Cavanaugh 1994: part 4). In addition, there was the creation of global means of transferring technical production and marketing information across transnational branches, which permitted greater geographic separation between central management and production managers abroad. This new technology rapidly diffused across production organizations, and even more rapidly across institutions involved in transnational finance: banks, stock markets, and commodity markets.

These new realities tilt the treadmill of production in contradictory ways. As Reich (1991) dramatically states:

Proposals for improving the profitability of American corporations are now legion, as are more general panaceas for what ails American industry. . . . They assume as their subject an American economy centered upon core American corporations and compromising major American industries – in other words, the American economy at midcentury, which easily dominated what limited world commerce there was [i.e., the older national treadmill]. . . . But . . . this image bears only the faintest resemblance to the global economy at the end of the century [i.e., the newer transnational treadmill], in which money and information move almost effortlessly through global webs of enterprise. . . .

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This new reality has already dawned upon officials charged with managing the fiscal and monetary policies of nations from such outposts as Washington, Tokyo, and Bonn. They have learned that macroeconomic policy cannot be invoked unilaterally without taking account of the savings that will slosh in or out of the nation as a result. (243–244)

This is one framework that we adopt in analyzing the degrees of freedom of local environmental movements in the United States to alter the environmental impacts of the newer globally tilted treadmill. A somewhat more empowering perspective is offered by Barnet and Cavanagh (1994) on controlling the transnational flow of investment dollars:

Governments can no longer keep money from fleeing the country, nor can they keep foreign money out, even when they try. But they can set standards and create incentives to encourage capital to flow where it is needed by changing some of the rules of the game, . . . especially the power to tax. (415)

After all, banks are still instruments of the political communities from which they derive their legal powers and to which they look to guarantee the underlying credibility of the credit system. (418)

A frequent criticism of our older national treadmill model, as well as of our newer transnational model, is that managers have considerable social and political discretion in how they manage enterprises. We have argued elsewhere (Schnaiberg & Gould 1994: ch. 3) that this is highly exaggerated. Indeed, our recent review of the literature indicates that managers are more constrained in the transnational treadmill. On the one hand, the competition for markets that managers face has become global, with many transnational enterprises looking for ways to expand their markets in other nations. On the other hand, because of the liquid capital that Reich notes is “sloshing” through the “global web,” managers face a variety of new global investors who are prepared to absorb their corporations and replace them in their managerial roles by those from the “home” or “core” office of the transnational corporation involved in the buyout (Harrison 1994). Ironically, managers continue to lose their jobs because their contributions to shareholder value are too small (the classic problem of being underproductive). But in the era of growing transnational liquid capital that is continuously seeking new outlets, managers may also lose their jobs by being overproductive and making their firms more attractive to other domestic or foreign investors as a “cash cow.” It is interesting that the standard critique of the treadmill model contrasts this with the Berle and Means argument, published in 1932. This account predates the national treadmill, and certainly predates the transnational treadmill. A