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978-0-521-55521-0 - Local Environmental Struggles: Citizen Activism in the Treadmill of Production

Kenneth A. Gould, Allan Schnaiberg and Adam S. Weingerg

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Local Environmental Struggles

In recent years, environmentalism in the United States has increasingly emerged at the community level, focusing on local ecological problems. Yet such local activism occurs within an economic and political structure, the treadmill of production, that is controlled more and more by national and transnational economic actors. The difficulties involved are explored in three field research settings – a suburban wetland protection project, water pollution in six Great Lakes towns and cities, and municipal curbside postconsumer waste recycling. To some extent, these cases reflect one recent U.S. environmental slogan: “Think globally, act locally.”

For each case study, the authors analyze the opportunities, constraints, and importance of local environmental action. While they raise doubts about the efficacy of acting only locally, they find that any successful attempt at environmental protection must have some local organization, at least to monitor local changes in production.

The final chapter explores alternative models of local mobilization. One involves the “franchising” of local movements by regional, national, and even transnational environmental organizations. A second proposes aggregating local citizen-worker groups into regional, national, and transnational networks and organizations.

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Local Environmental Struggles

*Citizen Activism in the Treadmill of
Production*

KENNETH A. GOULD

St. Lawrence University

ALLAN SCHNAIBERG

Northwestern University

ADAM S. WEINBERG

Colgate University



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*For Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight Nigerian colleagues,
martyrs to the transnational treadmill of production*

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Preface

This book originated as a series of informal discussions about the successes and failures of the environmental movement. Research on this topic first emerged in the early 1980s. Then, the debate was about the extent to which the environmental movement had been able to shape a new environmental consciousness, with a resulting social commitment that traversed major social groups (e.g., Buttel 1987; Morrison & Dunlap 1986).

Generally, these studies were descriptive surveys of individual respondents in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. They sought to measure the diffusion of environmental attitudes within larger publics. Environmental sociologists were divided in their assessments. Most argued that the movement had been incredibly successful; their empirical studies revealed that environmental ideas had spread across most major social groups (all classes, genders, and races). In contrast, another group argued that the movement had been a failure, that the primary locus of environmental concerns was among a small group of white college-educated elites.

It seemed to us that this discrepancy in research results could be traced to variations in what was being measured. If attitudes were measured, based on concerns voiced over the safety of natural resources needed for sustenance (drinking water, food supplies, and air) and the loss of local ecosystems (ones used for inexpensive recreation opportunities), then the movement was successful. However, if one measured the extent to which people were willing to act – to spend money, devote time, or change their lifestyles, then the movement was a failure. Rather than exploring the intersection of these issues, the researchers reacted defensively toward each other, becoming more narrow and dogmatic.

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A more recent debate has addressed the structural and institutional changes enacted since Earth Day 1970 (Dunlap & Mertig 1992; cf. Gould et al. 1993). Many of the participants were among those who took part in the earlier discussions about whether environmentalism was elitist. Once again, the debate has involved those, on the one hand, who argue that the environmental movement has been a resounding success, as evidenced by the growth in movement membership, the development of “green” businesses, and the enactment of an environmental regulatory apparatus, and those, on the other, who argue that the environmental movement has focused more on “feeling good” than on “doing good.” Evidence for the latter is the continuing loss of ecosystems, depletion of natural resources, and general commitment to economic growth rather than environmental protection (Gould et al. 1993). Research appearing in social science journals and presented at meetings continues to accumulate more facts about fewer dimensions of modern environmental conflicts and to produce one-dimensional perspectives on the nature of “the environmental movement.” Researchers either report, “The environmental movement has been a success, as indicated by X,” or claim, “The environmental movement has been a failure, as indicated by Y.”

In both cases, research designs use the conventional signs and symbols of the subdiscipline to make a statement about the environmental movement. Polarizing the findings about what the movement has accomplished offers little guidance to the movement itself, to government policy makers, or to our social science colleagues and students. Optimistic scenarios reify what those in the movement already believe. They merely encourage the movement to become less creative and more wedded to mainstream movement ideas. Critical commentaries, which reject the optimistic reports and emphasize the failures, tend to be narrowly focused, stressing the importance of embedding environmental strategies within macrostructural elements in the modern global economic system.

Movement leaders have no idea what to do with these critiques, even when they believe them. One movement activist asked us, “Where do you find the world economic system?” When social scientists only highlight past failures, movement leaders can ignore these findings, rationalizing that they are merely “yesterday’s news.” Likewise, political representatives and government agencies eschew these analyses, since they too can neither find nor change the “global system.” Finally, our students and colleagues claim that these dismal and overly abstract critical analyses discourage them from taking environmental action.

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Instead of engaging in this fruitless debate, we have chosen to present a sociological narrative about the driving logic and contradictions of the modern system of industrial production, which we label the “treadmill of production.” We trace how it has evolved from a national to a transnational system, within which there are flows of capital and power, as well as absorption of natural resources and human labor, in both the more industrialized nations of the North and the less industrialized ones of the South. Following this, we offer some detailed accounts of how various “environmentalists” have adapted to this change within their communities. We note a variety of responses to the transnationalization of capital and production in the treadmill:

- Some environmentalists have largely ignored it. They carry on their local and national mobilization much as they have done so during the past thirty years.
- Others have been overwhelmed by well-grounded fears of the futility of fighting global capitalism. These citizen-workers have redirected their efforts toward nonenvironmental pursuits within their communities.
- Another group has shifted into less conflictual areas of environmental protection. Noteworthy in their agenda is a new commitment to postconsumer waste recycling as the solution to local ecosystem problems.
- Some have become adherents of a new utopia, sustainable development. While its future is enthusiastically applauded by both economic and political leaders, the latter only argue the need for vague social and economic reforms, with few policies to implement the reforms.
- Some have attempted to resolve the ambiguities of the globalization of economic problems. They have become mobilized under the theme “Think globally, act locally.” Confusingly, their “globally” usually refers to ecological problems, and not to transnational economic reorganization as the cause of many of these problems.

Next we trace both the efforts of citizen-workers to protect their local ecosystems and the actions of forces opposing them within their communities. In doing so, we follow the processes by which such local groups succeed and fail, both on their own and occasionally in conjunction with national environmental movement organizations. Finally, we ask how and why citizen-workers begin to mobilize, and how they sustain their efforts, in the face of a variety of resistances and inducements. Our method here is one of “pragmatic narratives,” in which we try to encompass competing

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accounts of how the process of local activism has evolved in these environmental, social, and geographic arenas. This approach is built on the early epistemological work of the American philosopher William James, particularly his 1907 work, *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. We have developed the concept of a *sociological narrative* (Gould et al. 1993; Weinberg 1994b), applying James's pragmatism to analyzing environmental movements. This method incorporates a variety of traditional social scientific research techniques. It emphasizes the importance of acknowledging different perspectives on social life and tracing the consequences of these differences for the life experiences of various groups of actors.

Using this method, we have constructed our interpretations of three sets of local environmental conflicts, and suggested a more socially and politically grounded alternative to "Think globally, act locally." Our modest proposal is "Monitor locally, mobilize extralocally."

This book was produced by genuine collaboration. Each of us brought to the project a vital piece. Had any of us not been involved, the book would not have been written. We offer the usual caveat about each of us having prime responsibility for any errors in each of Chapters 2 to 4. Because there were three of us, the manuscript was strengthened by a larger pool of good ideas. But we also acknowledge the pleasure of our interaction. The authors each played equal, instrumental interdependent roles.

We would like to thank our colleagues at St. Lawrence University, Colgate University, and Northwestern University. We greatly appreciate Colgate University's Research Council for providing editing and indexing support. Special thanks go to Elizabeth Neal and two anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press. We are grateful to Rosanna Hertz for giving us the editorial support in 1993 to express our original, semi-formed ideas on environmental movements in *Qualitative Sociology*. To our colleague Maria Kousis, in Crete, we acknowledge the stimulus and support she offered, especially during the 1994 University of Crete conference on the politics of sustainable development.

We also owe a large debt of gratitude to our invisible college. Included therein are Tom Rudel, Lee Freese, Maria Kousis, Fred Buttel, Loren Lutzenheiser, and the rest of the Environment and Technology Section of the American Sociological Association. Most important, we acknowledge our backstage collaborator, David N. Pellow, whose ideas are strewn throughout this book.

For policy makers and environmental movement members, we hope our

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sociological narrative will keep political discourses from becoming stale and/or oppressive. Our socioenvironmental analysis is intended to spark the creation of new plans for social options and social processes to implement them, which we hope will lead to a wiser use of natural resources.

To students who read this book, we offer a word of advice. Like most of our work, this book will probably generate debate about whether we are overly pessimistic or merely encouraging you to think more deeply about environmental problems and solutions. We recommend that you listen to one another, and absorb the book. We offer a set of tools, some information, and an invitation for you to enter into a creative democratic discourse about the world that your generation will both inherit and help shape. We challenge you to reconsider the role of economic markets, political processes, social lives, and the fates of ecosystems.

Finally, to the activists and community groups that we have fought with, argued for, and listened to – to the extent that this book leaves us more enlightened, thoughtful, and compassionate, we owe a great debt to you. Our hope is that this book will translate what you have taught us into future victories that redress past wrongs and validation of your citizen-worker efforts.