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World Society and Social Change

Efforts to address environmental problems have grown tremendously over the past several decades. Environmental concerns now encompass the breadth of human relationships with nature – from air and water pollution, to habitat loss and biodiversity, to climate change. The international community has established a broad array of environmental treaties covering many domains. Countries around the world have enacted environmental laws and created environmental ministries. Innumerable citizen groups have mobilized to address local, national, and planetary environmental issues.

It is easy to take these social changes for granted, as a necessary and obvious response to the environmental disasters around us. Yet the growth of pro-environmental concern and activity was by no means foreordained. A basic sociological insight is that social problems, however egregious, do not necessarily prompt effective solutions. The oppressed too rarely rise up against their oppressors. Likewise, environmental destruction can occur on a massive scale without a social response (Ponting 1991). Scholars have pointed out many obstacles to change, including powerful interests that may benefit from environmentally destructive practices and the complexities of developing effective environmental governance (Espeland 1998; Young 1989b).

World society theory[1] is a perspective that can be used to make sense of the massive expansion of environmentalism around the globe. World

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[1] World society theory is known by a variety of labels, including neo-institutional theory, world polity theory, sociological institutionalism or the Stanford school of institutionalism. This branch of theory is seen as distinct from economic institutionalism (North 1990), political institutionalism (Amenta 2006; Amenta and Caren 2004; Jenkins and

society theory argues that the behavior of nations, organizations, and individuals can be understood as deriving from a common global culture, often formally codified and institutionalized within international treaties and organizations. Cultural understandings are fundamental to social change, once they become widely accepted across the international community and incorporated into global and national governance. Governments around the world ultimately address environmental concerns as a result of growing attention to environmental issues in the international sphere and shared cultural understandings that have rendered environmental issues salient. This macro-cultural perspective provides an alternative to explanations of environmentalism that focus on the growing urgency of environmental threats, changes in the attitudes of individuals, or the dynamics of local or national politics.

Empirical research in the world society tradition observes that the emergence of pro-environmental organizations, treaties, and cultural meanings in the international sphere has encouraged governments to adopt a wide range of pro-environmental policies and laws (Hironaka and Schofer 2002; Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000a; Frank et al. 1999; J. Meyer et al. 1997b). However, scholars have questioned the impact of international pro-environmental policies and laws in actually improving environmental conditions on the ground (Buttel 2000). For instance, despite the fanfare surrounding the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, environmental damage continues at a rapid pace (Paterson 1996; Falkner 2008). In the language of organizational sociology, regulatory structures appear merely ceremonial and only loosely coupled from intended outcomes (J. Meyer and Rowan 1977).

In response, scholars in the world society tradition have increasingly turned their attention to empirical outcomes and practices in addition to policies (Cole and Ramirez 2013; Shorette 2012; Schofer and Hironaka 2005; Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). This emerging literature has several notable findings that set the stage for this book. First, a number of studies observe powerful effects of world society on actual social practices around the globe – including studies specifically looking at the global environmental regime (Shorette 2012; Hadler and Haller 2011;

Form 2005), and historical institutionalism (Skocpol 1992; Hicks 1999). See Amenta and Ramsey (2010) for more detailed discussion. For recent reviews see J. Meyer 2010; Schofer et al. 2012. World society theory is also distinct from world-systems theory, which is a global perspective that focuses principally on economic processes (Wallerstein 1999; Chirot 1986).

Shandra, Leckband, and London 2009a; Shandra et al. 2009b; Shandra, Shor, and London 2008; Jorgenson 2007, 2006, 2003; Schofer and Hironaka 2005). States that are embedded in world society tend to show improvement in environmental conditions such as deforestation, greenhouse gas production, chlorofluorocarbon production, and pesticide use. International treaties and regimes tend to be more consequential as they become increasingly elaborated over time (Cole and Ramirez 2013; Shorette 2012; Schofer and Hironaka 2005). However, these processes do not always go smoothly, and improvements are rarely as substantial as hoped (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Shorette 2012). Global efforts have slowed the accelerating pace of environmental damage in many cases, but environmental problems are far from solved. In general, however, empirical studies have shown that global regimes can have an ameliorating impact on outcomes on the ground. These findings are briefly reprised in the Appendix.

This book explores how and when international institutions generate effective social change, with a focus on improvements in environmental conditions. Drawing on cases and historical examples, the world society account of social change is unpacked. World society scholarship is best known for quantitative studies that focus on large-scale correlations. This book spells out the processes and mechanisms underlying these correlations to explain how world society can simultaneously give rise to loose coupling and also yield long-term social change.

To foreshadow the argument, international institutions – and the cultural meanings they relay – powerfully enable social change but not necessarily in a direct or tightly coupled way. Institutions define new social problems and cultural meanings, create workspaces in which actors can address those problems, and empower individual or organizational "agents" who work toward addressing environmental issues. This perspective counters the conventional view that environmentalism is a natural and inevitable reaction to severe environmental problems within Western countries in the late 1960s (Brenton 1994; Rowland 1973). At the same time, world society theory is a counterpoint to materialist theories that see no possibility for social change in a capitalist world economy.

World society theory is a form of institutional analysis that focuses on both cultural and organizational processes. International regimes coevolve with foundational cultural shifts in meaning. Accepted social understandings and cultural frames regarding the environment have changed radically over the past century, with profound implications

for society. The environment is increasingly characterized as interrelated interactions of planetary scope that humans can disrupt or protect, and this view has become embedded in social discourses and practices. At the same time, pro-environmental meanings have proliferated in a broad array of national and local contexts. These cultural changes are neither inevitable nor unopposed. Alternative institutional structures and cultural frames provide the basis for resistance and opposition. Nevertheless, rapidly expanding global activity around environmental issues has proven surprisingly consequential, and resistance in many cases has been swamped by the broader sea change in cultural meanings and institutional activity.

This book develops the world society approach to environment protection, fleshing out the argument and mechanisms and extending the perspective in several ways. The book takes on four major issues, each explored through a brief case study. First, the book examines the origin of the global environmental regime. World society theory has most often been employed to explain patterns of global diffusion. The question of institutional origins – where international institutions come from – has been given less attention (Schneiberg and Clemens 2006, but see Cole 2011). Chapter 2 addresses the emergence of the environmental regime, focusing on the events surrounding the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm in 1972 and the formation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Second, the book explores the effects of institutional structures on concrete outcomes – actual changes in environmental pollution and degradation. World society theory is very good at explaining policy diffusion, with the caveat that policies are sometimes disconnected from actual social change on the ground. Chapter 3 considers when and how institutional structures prompt substantive change, focusing on the global regime on ozone-depleting substances in the 1970s and 1980s.

Third, the book explores the concept of "agents," an alternative to the more conventional term "actor." World society theory is an aggressively structural approach that de-emphasizes conventional notions of social actors and agency. Chapter 4 explores the role of organizational agents for environmental protection, including international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and social movements, with an examination of the case of hazardous waste in the United States and elsewhere from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Finally, the book explores the role of cultural meaning and evolving patterns of conflict in world society theory. World society theory, more

than other institutional perspectives, stresses the importance of culture, ideas, and meaning. Chapter 5 examines evolving cultural meanings, and their implications for contestation and conflict, focusing on efforts to create a global regime to address climate change from 1992 to the present.

The rest of this introductory chapter articulates a world society model of social change that explains how the seemingly weak influences of international institutions and global culture can nevertheless generate dramatic changes in activity around the globe. This approach focuses on myriad loosely coupled factors rather than treating behavior as a direct and proximate consequence of specific treaties or policies and their implementation. Next, the chapter contrasts the world society perspective with dominant explanations of social change in the literature, including modernization theories and social movement arguments. The chapter concludes by outlining the overall structure of the book.

World Society and Social Change: The Strength of Weak Mechanisms

A conundrum for scholars seeking to explain major historical transformations is that social change appears to be halting, contested, and partial when closely scrutinized. Consider the topics of democratization and gender equality. Close analyses of any democratic society are likely to find failures of effective democracy beneath the facade. Likewise, ongoing gender discrimination can be uncovered even in the most egalitarian societies. Yet when one looks at the forest rather than the trees, tremendous social change has occurred. The past century has seen multiple waves of democratization and huge increases in the social status of women across much of the globe (C. Beck 2011; Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997). World society theory provides imageries and arguments that explain how seemingly fragmentary and halting efforts to address environmental concerns may nevertheless reflect a broader sea change that is dramatic when placed in historical context. The concept of "loose coupling," adopted from organizational theory, helps characterize the uneven patterns of emergent global change. The loose coupling between policies and outcomes does not imply that change never occurs. Instead, loose coupling suggests that change is not the result of tightly coordinated organizational actions.

Much research implicitly adopts what might be dubbed the Smoking Gun model of social change. Scholars strive to identify tight sequences

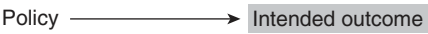Policy ——————————→ Intended outcome

FIGURE 1.1. The Smoking Gun: A tightly coupled model of social change.

of cause and effect, linking specific environmental policies or pro-environmental groups to improved environmental conditions. Such studies turn their analytical lens toward a specific path of social change, such as the link between treaty ratification and environmental improvements on the ground. In order to formulate a tractable research question, complex combinatorial dynamics – for instance, where myriad weak factors combine to affect a given outcome – are set aside in favor of relatively parsimonious models. Figure 1.1 outlines the causal reasoning of the Smoking Gun model.

Following the Smoking Gun model, environmental scholars have sought to trace the influence of particular policies or organizations on their intended environmental outcomes. In many cases, the direct effect of policy or organization turns out to be negligible. For instance, international treaties and national legislation often fail to promote improved environmental practices (Susskind 1994; Keohane and Levy 1996; Hurrell and Kingsbury 1992; Glennon and Stewart 1998). Governmental environmental agencies and ministries are frequently ineffective at fulfilling their legislative mandates (Mazmanian and Nienaber 1979; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; R. Andrews 2006). And only on rare occasions do social movement groups influence environmental outcomes (Szasz 1994; Giugni 2004). Thus many studies dourly conclude that many environmental laws, treaties, and policies are failures. This empirical literature is discussed further in Chapter 3.

Even when overall improvements in environmental conditions are observed, it can be quite difficult to demonstrate the importance of a specific treaty, policy, organization, or social movement. In the case of deforestation, for instance, studies have demonstrated that organizations and social movements affected forestry policies in a single locale, but cannot conclusively establish systematic effects on deforestation at the national level (Gellert 2010). Given the magnitude of planetary environmental problems, such local efforts appear insignificant. As one scholar morosely observed, "Nobody can know for sure that their advice was the turning point over some issue, so the impression of having an influence is never confirmed" (Barratt 1996, 9).
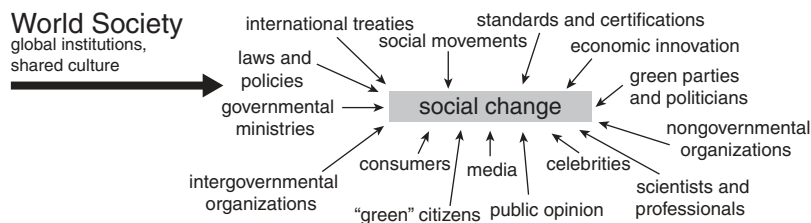
FIGURE 1.2. The Bee Swarm: A loosely coupled model of social change.

This book outlines an alternative model of social change resulting from numerous factors operating at multiple levels of analysis – none of which may be necessary or sufficient. This approach draws on the concept of loose coupling from the organizational literature. In a loosely coupled world, widespread social change may result from the aggregation of many disparate mechanisms. These weak factors might be thought of as akin to a swarm of bees. A single bee sting may be a minor irritant, but the effects of a bee swarm can be deadly. In a Bee Swarm model of social change, a dense network of causal factors shapes outcomes, even if most individual causal factors prove weak or inconsequential. By the same token, the weakness of any particular causal factor does not necessarily mean that environmental conditions will fail to improve. In other words, social change is due to the aggregation of causal factors pushing in the same direction.[2] Figure 1.2 outlines the weak causal forces of the Bee Swarm model.

This Bee Swarm model is inspired by the organizational concept of loose coupling (Bromley and Powell 2012; March 1981; J. Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weick 1976). Loose coupling should not be interpreted as a total disconnection between policy and outcome. Instead, the concept of loose coupling broadly refers to weak connections or control across an organization or social system. Loosely coupled systems may evolve in a disorganized fashion but can also undergo systematic change, for instance when a common external influence comes to bear on many parts of the system (J. Meyer and Rowan 1977; Schofer and Hironaka 2005).

Loose coupling occurs when organizations face a heterogeneous environment composed of multiple or overlapping regulatory structures, organizations, interests, and actors that are inconsistent or even contradictory.

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[2] Thanks are directed to John Boli for suggesting the Bee Swarm imagery.

Various subunits of the organization respond to the hodgepodge of external demands in disparate and conflicting ways. For example, a corporation might face pressure to comply with environmental regulations yet may also face contradictory pressures to please stockholders, maintain a trendy image with the public and decrease workforce turnover. Under such conditions, the enactment of environmental regulations may have diverse effects throughout a single organization.

However, if pro-environmental cultural meanings become institutionalized in society, organizations may face increasingly consistent demands for environmental protection, from a variety of audiences. The hodgepodge of external pressures may coalesce into a more uniform chorus pushing in a common direction. Eventually the aggregated pressures may lead to improvement in environmental practices even if no single factor is decisive. Under these circumstances, change may occur despite weak internal linkages in a social system. Sometimes practices change before policies; other times change follows policy reform. Even in the latter case, one should be wary of assuming a tight linkage, as changed practices may be the product of broad external pressures rather than a response to formal policies or rules. This type of loosely coupled systemic shift has been termed *institutional drift* (J. Meyer and Rowan 1977; Schofer and Hironaka 2005; see also Mahoney and Thelen 2010). The power of the institutional context is not in a particular formal policy but in the cumulative effects of multiple indirect and loosely coordinated influences. As environmentalism becomes deeply institutionalized in the culture of global and national societies, pro-environmental activity becomes routine.

Culture is central to world society arguments, and often plays a critical role in animating and directing Bee Swarms in a manner that generates widespread social change. Cultural meanings orient members of society toward common issues or social problems. In the case of the environment, the cultural meaningfulness of environmental protection is no longer limited to scientific experts or particular issues, but has broadly diffused across the globe (Dunlap and Mertig 1992). People in all walks of life now perceive the meaningfulness and relevance of environmental issues. The sustainability of environmental practices in Brazil or New Zealand can call up fervent debates in North American grocery stores. This broad expansion of the cultural meaning of the environment provides a uniform orientation for the Bee Swarm, increasing the impact of each weak influence.

The Bee Swarm imagery is oversimplified in that it implies that the effects of bees are simply cumulative. In fact, they often reinforce or

amplify one another. Pro-environmental laws, for instance, may prove more consequential when accompanied by environmental advocacy groups, and vice versa. And both laws and environmental groups are likely to have more traction in historical periods when pro-environmental meanings and principles are institutionalized in international treaties and organizations. The broad orientation of the Bee Swarm has greater impact than the efforts of any single bee.

These two differing models of social change motivate different empirical approaches. Scholarship drawing on the Smoking Gun imagery of change focuses on identifying proximate factors, such as a specific treaty, law, or social movement, that have strong causal impacts on a particular environmental outcome. In contrast, world society theory shifts attention toward the broad social context – the changing cultural and institutional environment that animates the Bee Swarm. Any single law, organization, or pro-environmental organization may prove inconsequential for predicting a given outcome. Moreover, it is usually impossible to enumerate and measure all of the possible mechanisms. The historical emergence and institutionalization of the global environmental regime in world society is the starting point for understanding the growing Bee Swarm of mechanisms ultimately leading toward social change.

Explaining Global Environmentalism

As recently as fifty years ago, most nations had no significant rules regarding what substances might be dumped in the ocean. Few attempts were made to control smoke and pollutants that were put into the air, despite the infamous fogs and smogs in London and Los Angeles (Brimblecombe 1987; Hironaka 2003). In the United States, federal laws regulating basic issues of air pollution, water pollution, and waste disposal were minimal or absent until around 1970 (R. Andrews 2006). By contrast, we now live in a world in which environmental regulation has become routine. These regulations may still be far from the ideal proposed by environmentalists, but it is a different world compared to the days when cities and corporations thought nothing of dumping untreated waste into waterways and people casually tossed trash out the windows of their cars.

What caused this shift toward greater environmental protection? The following section discusses three theoretical traditions in the scholarly literature: (1) modernization theory, (2) social movements, as a potential counterbalance to capitalist interests, and (3) world society arguments.

environmental problem → policy → implementation and enforcement → environmental improvement
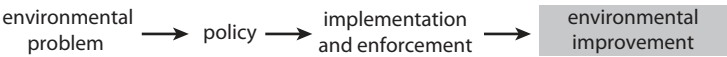
FIGURE 1.3. The modernization model of environmental change.

Modernization Theory

Ecological modernization theory, which derives from classical modernization theory, offers a hopeful viewpoint regarding environmental change (York, Rosa, and Dietz 2003; Mol 2001; U. Beck 1999; Inglehart 1977; Weidner and Jänicke 2002; Fisher and Freudenburg 2002; Fisher and Freudenburg 2001; Jänicke and Weidner 1996; Jänicke and Weidner 1995; Sonnenfeld 2000; Spaargaren and Mol 1992). Ecological modernization theorists argue that advanced capitalism provides the resources and technologies to combat environmental problems while the sophisticated institutional infrastructures of capitalist democracies support effective policies and regulation that reduce environmental destruction. This work dovetails with the post-materialist tradition (Inglehart 1977), which attends to value changes associated with economic modernization. Specifically, affluence allows people to transcend immediate economic concerns and shift toward "post-materialist" values that include greater support protecting the environment. Figure 1.3 provides a causal model of the processes outlined by ecological modernization theory.

In ecological modernization theory, social change is a response to environmental threats that are either apparent to all or are identified by scientists and experts. Affluence is an important mediating factor. Poor societies lack the resources to effectively address environmental issues, and individuals are more concerned with economic survival than with pro-environmental initiatives. Once sufficient levels of wealth are achieved, however, societal values shift in favor of environmental protection. Citizens vote for pro-environmental politicians and are willing to alter consumption habits. In the end, pro-environmental shifts in social values translate into improved environmental protection.

Science plays a major role in the identification of objective environmental problems and the development of solutions. As scientific knowledge accrues, an "epistemic community" is developed in which scientific experts build improved understandings of environmental issues (P. Haas 1992; E. Haas, Williams, and Babai 1977; Litfin 1994; Caldwell 1990). For instance, scientists initially discovered the deleterious effects of chemicals such as DDT and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and theorized the potentially catastrophic effects of the buildup of greenhouse gas emissions. As