

ENVIRONMENTALISM. This essay highlights the conceptual foundations, traces new developments, and highlights new directions in the relationship between environmentalism and politics. Current developments in the environmental domain will likely pave the way for further adjustments in this relationship as the international community begins to develop a more fully integrated view of interactions between natural and social systems and between social relations and life-supporting properties. As we begin the first decade of the twenty-first century, not only are the traditional ideas and practices built on the separation of social and natural systems increasingly challenged, but earlier conceptions of environmentalism are also being revised significantly. This essay reviews the recent thinking and attendant consequences on environmental politics for the international community of the twenty-first century.

As originally conceived, environmentalism assumed three meanings, buttressed by three views, each with different sources, content, and consequences. They all share a view of humanity as integral to nature, of nature as empowering humans, and of the relationship between both as uneasy at best, if not threatening to the integrity and viability of nature and hence of humans. The essence of this shared view is the need for restoring a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature which, by necessity, requires fundamental alterations in human behavior and in the characteristics of social life. The first definition of environmentalism is one of *conceptual* orientation: ideas of nature, ecological balances, and ecological growth as central to the survival of the human species. The second definition of environmentalism is one of *process* which stresses how humans influence and alter nature and, in the domain of the economic and the political, how this influence is detrimental to social relations, both national and international. The third definition of environmentalism is a *political* program, ideology, and plan of action at all levels of social aggregation.

Each of these definitions of environmentalism invokes powerful contentions and differences of views, which illuminate the underlying strains between humans and their natural habitats but have also impeded the development of a sufficiently cohesive shared understanding such that effective political action can be identified, pursued, and implemented.

These contentions are in turn shaped and driven by the power and motivation of different actors and groups with both direct and indirect interests in the outcomes of deliberations over the definition of environmentalism. A sort of expanded and enhanced political participation on environmental issues is emerging across the world involving interactions among individuals, including scientists, public officials, conservationists, and industrialists, organized groups, cross-boundary entities, international organizations, and supranational interests. The environmental cliché of the 1990s—"think local, act global"—reflects both the scale and scope of emerging contentions. At issue is both national and international control over environmental ideas, objectives, and policies in the twenty-first century.

The essence of environmentalism as a concept is a view of

humans as part of nature, not as separate from it, a view of humans as symbiotic with nature, not as adversaries. This concept has important analytical implications: it calls for an integrated conception of life on earth that addresses the coherence of environmental and social processes. It seeks an explanation of the interdependence among all elements necessary for life. It addresses the vulnerabilities and susceptibilities of life-sustaining properties as humans press their claims on nature. From these, two premises are generated: one, the activity and reality of ecological balance in contrast to the inertness and passivity of "nature"; and two, the integrationist and planetary view of the human/nature interaction where micro/macro linkages, feedback effects, delays, uncertainties, resiliences, and surprises operate to shape eventual outcomes at all levels and in different time frames.

From these views and premises there emerge two boundary conditions: the "smallest" unit of action and the "largest" entity. In the context of this interpretive essay, from a social science perspective, we posit the bounds at one end to be set by individuals in their natural environments and at the other by planetary properties and characteristics. For conceptual purposes, the bounding issue then forces a delineation of the properties of the "smallest" and "largest" entity and of indicators, measures, and linkages.

Among the properties of the "smallest" unit, the individual in a household, environmentalism suggests that human beings are trapped in a fundamental paradox: (1) every implementation of knowledge and skills results in a degradation of resource(s) from a "more usable" to a "less usable" form with consequent production of (sometimes toxic) wastes; (2) technology itself requires resources—energy of some kind and other materials; the more "modern" the knowledge and skills, moreover, the greater has been the amount and range of energy and other resources required; and also (3) the more "advanced" the technology, the greater has been the amount and range of resources that people have believed they needed above and beyond the basic necessities to which they were accustomed. This means that overall environmental degradation increases with population growth and is further multiplied by technological advancement but that outcomes vary through time according to the relative and usually changing levels of the three master variables. The underlying premise is that, combined with existing levels and growth rates of population, however, each new increment of technological development has tended to multiply the production of carbon dioxide and other agents of environmental degradation. The ultimate challenge is to find ways of decoupling the connection between economic activity and environmental degradation.

Key properties at the planetary level remain significant in the evolving understandings of environmentalism. First, while the basic biogeochemical characteristics of environmental change are generally understood, there remain major uncertainties about the feedback effects on both the physical and social processes. Second, environmental as well as social processes operate along multiple, unequal, and sometimes overlapping time horizons. Variability in time increments compli-

cates assessments of the underlying processes. Fundamentally the long lead times in both social and environmental processes—and the separation of “cause” and “consequences”—themselves amount to major sources of uncertainty. Third, there are a host of related uncertainties associated with these intertemporal effects. In particular, there are crucial intergenerational impacts of environmental change whereby future generations incur the environmental costs of the actions of past and present generations, which reflect the complexities associated with long lead times. Fourth are the irreversibilities. It may well be that some patterns of environmental alterations cannot be “undone,” nor can the underlying sources be eliminated either wholly or in part at least not within the frame of historical rather than geological time. Finally, unevenness in both the sources of environmental disturbances as well as in the consequences raise concerns for about international equity. Not all countries contribute the same way to the global balances, nor are they affected uniformly, which further constrains the development of international responses to environmental problems.

These features characterize some crucial uncertainties associated with global environmental change. Because human activities are incremental in historical time and therefore minuscule in geological time, they confound analytical assessments of complex feedback, time horizon, and differentials in sources and in consequences. Together these factors bear on the political issues concerning the environment and on the policy responses of the international community to them. Central to all three meanings are evolving understandings about processes interconnecting humans and social systems.

In retrospect, we now appreciate that the initial understanding of environmentalism discussed above represented a nascent perceptive, one that increasingly took shape in the latter decades of the twentieth century. This initial view can be referred to as “old” environmentalism, in contrast to the “new” environmentalism that takes account of recent specifications adjustments, and modification.

In substantive terms, new environmentalism is defined by three interacting sets of emergent features. The first relates to the impact of *globalization on environmentalism, and the globalization of environmentalism itself. These are distinctive processes, but their interactions reinforce their pervasiveness. The second pertains to the changing status of environmentalism in the context of policy priorities, nationally and internationally. This involves a shift is from lesser to greater legitimization, and from less to more common resort to legal instruments for framing and enforcing environmental norms and values. Jointly these represent the legitimization of environmentalism and its increasing relevance to policy domains. The third feature characterizing the new environmentalism derives from the other two, namely, its institutionalization. Closely connected to legitimization, the institutionalization represents the behavioral aspects and the society-wide manifestations of environmental considerations. It also refers to the routinization of ways in which environmentalism is incorporated in a variety of social interactions.

The globalization of environmentalism is clearly a matter

of *scale*, keeping in mind the implied linkages across levels, from the local to the global, and between terrestrial and atmospheric domains. Legitimization is a matter of *status*. Ideas and behaviors that are not legitimized are, for all practical purposes, beyond the pale of public policy. For effective action—in theory or in practice—legitimacy is always a necessary, and sometimes even a sufficient, precursor. The growing legitimacy of environmentalism reflects new awareness of the sanctity of life supporting properties and the salience of ecological resilience for social viability. Institutionalization can be regarded as reflecting the *scope* of social penetration. By institutionalizing responses to environmental considerations, a society enhances prospects for sustained responses. In the best case, institutionalization guarantees routinization and hence a form of permanence. In fact, weaknesses in the institutionalization and its supporting capacities are all factors that account for the discrepancy between principle and practice in environmentalism.

Central to the new environmentalism is recognition of the dependence of social systems on the “health” of natural systems and the growing intersection between environmental issues and *sustainable development. This recognition is evidenced in both policy and popular circles, and to varying degrees and extent, in the scientific community. It has also led to a serious reconsideration of boundary conditions differentiating the two types of systems, and the environmental versus the sustainability domains. At the same time, it has become apparent in some academic quarters that the traditional modes of analyzing economic performance and political objectives—in both theoretical and empirical terms—continue to be profoundly flawed in their explicit exclusion of both environmental and sustainability considerations.

The new environmentalism, building on the old conceptions, appears to be generating a record of efforts toward adjustments extending beyond basic attention to environmental matters. There are several bases for this inference. These include (1) the impact of national and international learning as reflected in increasing attention to reporting, methods of accounting, and formulation of socioeconomic models encompassing both environmental and developmental features; (2) apparent institutional developments at both global and national levels designed to transform concepts into action, most notably in international environmental agreements, evolving international law on sustainable development, and new attention to sanctions in response to environmental damage; (3) continued politicization of environmental issues at all levels; and (4) the impact of new actors and agencies in the environmental domain, along with the paradox of power potentials due to weakness.

None of these alone is definitive, and none is without inherent problems and contradictions, But jointly they provide evidence for the new environmentalism, which reinforces a growing appreciation worldwide of the interdependence of humans and nature, and the connectivities among communities, ecological zones, and political jurisdictions.

The evolution of environmental problem solving may be construed as a process of learning. International and national

decision makers have gradually come to accept a broader, interdependent, symbiotic, and holistic conception of the environmental system for their pollution control efforts and have adapted their policies accordingly. Still, most arrangements remained remedial rather than preventative, coordinating policies to regulate emissions rather than addressing the underlying conditions (sources) that give rise to emissions. In this connection, international directives to ensure national reporting of environmental measures may generate transparency effects that themselves create pressures for action.

All of this is buttressed by the changing characteristics of international agreement over the past decade and the gradual evolution of international environmental law and international law pertaining to sustainable development. By the end of the twentieth century, more than 140 multilateral environmental treaties had been concluded. In this process, precedents were being set in place to shape a new treaty-making process. The establishment of framework agreements has provided the basis for consensus on more specific and more binding efforts. Binding agreements are now in place with respect to marine pollution, acid rain, a regional seas program, and, of course, the ozone layer. This type of treaty making is quite different from formal agreements in other areas salient to the international community, such as arms control, where great attention to detail defines the general approach from the outset. This mode of treaty making also creates a political constituency for environmentalism. It is more flexible and allows for agreement on more effective results. Equally important is the fact that environmental treaties have accomplished two contradictory goals: a reaffirmation of sovereign national rights and a reaffirmation of international constraints on national activities.

At both the national and the global levels, there is an emergent awareness of the security dilemma inherent in the fact that actions usually considered normal and legitimate could be detrimental to the environment or harbor environmentally threatening consequences. Policies and behaviors are, to some extent, increasingly being scrutinized for the implicit environmental costs. And even national environmental institutions, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), are beginning to connect environmental factors to matters of national security, and security agencies are considering the threats due to environmental degradation.

The proliferation of new actors in world politics—including environmental actors—and new forms of cross-border, transnational linkages have as an underlying cause the transnational networks sharing a modicum of technical consensus about environmental degradation. The consequence of these trends includes a notable diffusion of responsibility for dealing with environmental issues. This process has created an emerging constituency for global environmental protection at the international level. Some organizations are located in the state; others transcend territorial boundaries; still others have supranational status. Moreover, when individuals affiliated with such groups are in the government, their primary attachment tends to be their scientific causal beliefs rather than their role positions, and in turn they are likely to use their political power to promote their environmental concerns.

Environmental rationality in international decision making may alter the significance of power differentials between actors. This change may benefit the weaker parties, such as non-governmental organizations, as it gives them greater influence over decision making and an enhanced ability to add issues that concern them to international negotiations. Though the form of policy making for environmental protection is being transformed, but structure of international relations from which such environmental problems originate remains basically unchanged. There are major differences, even contradictions, in the imperatives or priorities of decision-making and governance at the national, international, and global levels. From the perspective of national decision-making, the problem is managing internal pressures and transformations due to changes in population, resources, and technology. Policy-making procedures are gradually being set in place by many nations in response to the challenges posed by environmental changes. For example, domestic ecological conditions are gradually being incorporated into the decision-making process, and economic, strategic, and domestic policies may no longer easily be pursued without regard for cross-border and global environmental ramifications. In other words, states appear to recognize the practical bounds of sovereignty when it comes to environmental matters.

From the perspective of the international system, the global management of national environmental changes may generate dislocating effects or create costs to be borne by others. The pattern of organized international institutional responses to national environmental issues often influences the range of acceptable policies domestically. Involvement by nation-states with international organizations generally entails explicit demands from those organizations for state adjustments and policy changes. When states are confronted with resource scarcity and pressure for making resource allocation decisions, they sometimes use force internally to constrain domestic demand and limit political dissent. If resource bases and environmental conditions continue to deteriorate, countries may respond in ways that could adversely affect not only the internal population/resource balances but also relations with neighbors and with the international community. In the years ahead, considerations such as these may render sustainable development a core premise of evolving international law. In sum, the "new" environmentalism incorporates the principles of legitimacy, universality, equity, and participation.

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