Environment *and Society*

THE ENDURING CONFLICT

ALLAN SCHNAIBERG
KENNETH ALAN GOULD

ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIETY

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ALLAN SCHNAIBERG
Northwestern University

KENNETH ALAN GOULD
St. Lawrence University

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Chico Mendez, Karen Silkwood, and Cesar Chavez,
ordinary people who rose to the challenge
of extraordinary circumstance.

Their struggles continue.

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Project editor: Suzanne Holt
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Preface

Environment and Society emphatically rejects these environmental myths:

- Environmental problems are being solved.
- Economic growth is compatible with protecting our environment.
- Recycling is the key to solving environmental problems.
- Everyone is concerned with ensuring a safe environment.
- Global problems can be addressed by local solutions.
- Better science will solve our environmental crises.
- We should educate our leaders, rather than politically confronting them.

We decided to write this book precisely because so many of our students have entered our classes believing these myths and because so many of our social scientific colleagues have left these myths unchallenged. This work has integrated our analytic skills and our social concerns, with regard both to the domestic and global inequalities in the hazards arising from ecological degradation and to the worldwide quality of daily life.

All industrial societies are built on a central belief that they can progress by conquering nature and expanding production. We accept this idea as a genuine social belief, but we challenge its premise, from both an environmental and a social perspective. Social tenacity in clinging to this belief in economic growth has permitted a particular form of political-economic system to emerge in modern industrial societies, especially the United States. In recent decades this modern system, which we view as a *treadmill of production,* has continued to erode environmental systems and to impoverish increasingly larger numbers of people. Indeed, in this book we argue that the inherent logic of this political-economic system is in fundamental and enduring conflict with the realities of both the global environment and social justice within and between societies.

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At an early stage in the modern United States concern with environmental pollution and depletion, many scientists thought that a new environmental science would lead to a modern form of environmental enlightenment. They predicted (or at least fondly hoped) that this knowledge would introduce a new era of environmental stewardship in which nature would be preserved for the utility of human and other species. Despite the creation of environmental protection legislation in the three decades of modern environmental concern, however, many processes of natural destruction have actually accelerated. This is true despite the United Nations environmental conferences in Stockholm in 1972 and Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and despite the rise in both capitalist and formerly socialist countries of an expanded environmental movement, challenging both governments and industries to stop this destruction.

At this writing, industrial organizations have simultaneously created global environmental problems and new global poverty. Ozone depletion, which permits increased ultraviolet radiation on earth, and probably a global warming, which will affect our climate, agricultural production, and the habitability of coastal settlements, have emerged despite scientific anticipation and warnings about these problems. Although some preventative steps have been taken, they have been timid and inadequate to deal with these global problems. Other national and regional problems such as desertification and human-induced water shortages have already created international social poverty, death, and despair in the intervening decades. Especially in the 1980s, poverty, disease, and disillusionment have increased dramatically among the poor, working classes and even among large elements of the middle class in both industrial and less developed societies, while the treadmill has redistributed its benefits upward in the social hierarchy.

This book seeks to explain why the treadmill of production generates an *enduring conflict* with the natural environment. We trace the core logic of industrial systems, ranging from the logic of the firm to the logic of global capital markets, which continue to dismiss most environmental concerns. Equally important, however, we show that our institutional and individual commitments to this treadmill are quite widespread.

In effect, our argument challenges the widely diffused environmental action mantra of modern movements, *"Think globally and act locally."* The treadmill of production, we argue, is neither a global nor a local institution; rather, it is a network of regional, national, and, increasingly, multinational economic organizations. These organizations are coupled to regional and national government agencies, providing them with economic resources and cultural approval. Finally, this network impacts directly on regional, national, and international ecological systems as well

as on human populations and social classes, all of which are acted upon by these treadmill institutions and have the potential to react to them.

This book, then, is first an analysis of the enduring conflict between environment and society. It examines how the economic institutions of the treadmill of production were formed, protected, and supported within our societies. We note that, in general, those social interest groups that derive the greatest economic benefits from the treadmill are able to pass on the environmental hazards and other costs to less powerful groups, both within and across nations.

From this perspective, it is clear that no environmental consciousness-raising effort can in itself alter the treadmill. Instead, we offer a range of options for challenging the treadmill, all of which require us to engage in social and political conflicts with the logic of the interests that are most supportive of this economic system. Included in this discussion are our internal conflicts between our desires to obtain more of the material goods and services that the treadmill offers and our desires to avoid the environmental and antisocial damages that this system produces.

Through this perspective we refute other analyses that suggest that human nature or Western culture has endangered our planet's systems. In contrast, we point to a historical crafting of the modern treadmill, which has emerged from coordinated social, political, and economic decisions. We explore the ways in which these decisions *may* be changed and the ways in which they ideally *must* be changed, if our social systems are to preserve some modicum of social justice. As pervasive as the modern treadmill is, we argue that it is a product of social decisions. As such it may be changed through the purposive mobilization of the disempowered, who must be prepared to engage in political conflicts and confrontations with established social, economic, and political hierarchies. Although the outcomes of these conflicts are by no means assured, the result of the failure to engage in them is clear. Failure to challenge the treadmill of production will most assuredly produce ever-increasing ecological destruction and social inequality.

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This shared endeavor is a product of our many years of intellectual interaction. Each of us has had important intellectual and socioemotional support from our colleagues and families during our creative and bureaucratic adventures with this manuscript. Our insights have benefited from sustained interactions with our colleagues in the Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association, although not all

share our particular reading of the evidence for the enduring nature of environmental protection conflicts.

This book also grew out of our teaching experiences and the frustrations both of us have experienced in finding materials that our undergraduate students could assimilate. From these students at St. Lawrence University and Northwestern University, we have learned that even painful truths can be incorporated if they are presented clearly and cogently. We hope that their feedback to us over our years of teaching has resulted in a clearer and more persuasive argument in this book.

At St. Martin's Press, Louise Waller has been a strong and supportive shepherd of this project. Suzanne Holt has been patient, highly competent, and good-humored as project editor dealing with impatient scholars.

Finally, we acknowledge the enduring contributions of our friend, colleague, and student—Adam S. Weinberg—whose caring and critical commentary throughout the process of generating this manuscript has been a vital intellectual and emotional resource to both of us. His generous giving of his time and thought have been invaluable, and we look forward to an even more active engagement with him in future work.

Allan Schnaiberg
Kenneth A. Gould

"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding."

—Proverbs 3:13, King James Bible.

"And should they see a fragment of the heaven falling down, they would say, 'It is only a dense cloud'."

—The Koran [XLIV] Sura LII–The Mountain, verse 44.

"For in much wisdom is grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."

—Ecclesiastes 1:18, King James Bible.

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Part I

Why Should We Be Concerned?

1. *Social and Environmental Health: Risks and Vulnerabilities of Global Pollution and Depletion*

ENVIRONMENTAL UNSUSTAINABILITY: WITHDRAWALS AND ADDITIONS

In recent years, the idea of sustainable development has emerged on the world's policy stage. Essentially, this model argues that countries need to integrate the interdependency of social and natural systems into the planning of their economies. We can regard the two faces of this interdependency as the *ecological sustainability issue* and the *economic developmental issue*. The interdependency of these two systems incorporates two assumptions:

1. Societal functioning requires us to maintain some features of environmental systems.
2. In order to preserve these features, environmental functioning requires us to restrict some of our social uses of these systems.

In many ways, these elegantly simple principles provide a central focus for this chapter and for this book. As we will point out, however, certain social factors make it unlikely that either our own society or the global society will readily adopt these principles in the future.

Sustained development is a goal, and in many ways it is a utopian one inasmuch as it implies a congruence between ecological and economic goals. Interestingly, this concept has been proposed in a number of earlier historical periods, ranging from the turn of the century with the rise of the utilitarian-conservation movements to 1973, when E. F. Schumacher presented his intermediate technology proposals (see Chapters 6 and 7). In each historical period, some temporary coalescence of social interests around this type of goal was almost immediately overwhelmed by other social interests with different economic goals. Typically, the sustained development principle was found to pose obstacles to powerful interest groups.

Thus espousing sustained development as a goal is insufficient to

set in motion the societal processes that will lead to its dominance over competing goals. Even the globalism of the modern concept of sustained development is not new. Schumacher's "Buddhist economics" goal for intermediate technology was "to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption" (1973: 61). He first delineated this strategy in 1973 and his message was reinforced by the energy crisis of the later 1970s. It, too, had an initial following, but it met the resistance of powerful economic interests in both the underdeveloped and developed countries. Although Schumacher's strategy led to important rethinking about sustainability and to new social movement organizations and even some applied projects in a number of countries, at no point in its history did it dominate the economic agenda of any society.

The social resistance is captured in the phrases "Buddhist economics" and "energy crisis." These phrases direct our attention to two distinct types of issues that have dominated environmental conflicts over the past several decades:

1. What parts of the natural systems do "we" have to maintain?
2. Who among us has to act?

These dual conflicts have raged across the intellectual, political, and moral planes of modern industrial societies and were among the most contentious issues raised at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992. In this chapter, we begin to answer the first question. Although it is primarily an ecological question, we address it from a societal perspective. (Chapter 2 moves on to the second question.) Essentially, these two questions can be phrased more specifically as:

- Why do we have to sustain parts of environmental systems?
- How do we decide on which parts to sustain?

Global environmental degradation presents a major challenge, but it is subject to many conflicting and competing interpretations, even within the natural and social scientific community. These conflicting perspectives increase in number and in intensity as we move from basic sciences to their application in political and economic institutions devoted to making and implementing economic development policies (see Chapters 3–5).

Let us start out with a brief ecological primer, which at its broadest level encompasses the following generally accepted scientific principles about ecosystems and society's role in disrupting them. Two sets of initial organizational principles affect every part of the global environment. The first set of these principles is stated by the first law of thermodynamics, which affirms that matter cannot be created or destroyed: essentially,

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