

THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT DEBATE: PARADOXES, POLEMICS AND PANACEAS

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Written from a sociological perspective, this article provides a critical appraisal of the environment and development debate that has unfolded over the past three decades in industrial societies. More specifically, it examines a fundamental paradox contained in this debate: whilst it has emerged specifically to deal with the ecological risks generated by the increased globalisation of the industrial mode of production, the debate has not prompted any significant structural change in the prevailing socio-economic order, but in fact has contributed to its maintenance and reproduction. The core contention of this article is that, through the environment and development debate, the socio-economic status quo is maintained and reproduced by means of four interrelated processes: the institutionalisation of environmentalism; the marginalisation of dissent; the political project of 'ecological modernisation'; and the 'political economy of truth'.

Introduction

In 1972, at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE), held in Stockholm, what has come to be referred to as the 'global environmental crisis' was officially recognised. As stated in the key proceeding of the Conference, the Stockholm Declaration:

We see around us growing evidence of man-made [sic] harm in many regions of the earth: dangerous levels of pollution in water, air, earth and living beings; major and undesirable disturbances to the ecological balance of the biosphere; destruction and depletion of irreplaceable resources; and gross deficiencies, harmful to the physical, mental and social health of man, in the man-made environment, particularly in the living and working environment.¹

Almost three decades after UNCHE, it seems that the ecological crisis persists unabated. As pointed out in the 1997 *Global State of the Environment Report*, released by UNEP's Global Environment Outlook (GEO), 'despite ...

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¹ <<http://www.gopher.law.cornell.edu:70/0/foreign/fletcher/STOCKHOLM-DECL.txt>> (24 January 1999)

progress on several fronts, from a global perspective the environment has continued to degrade during the past decade, and significant environmental problems remain deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of nations in all regions of the world'.² The Report further points out that the use of 'renewable resources' such as land, forest and water is still beyond their natural regeneration capacity; greenhouse gases are still being emitted at higher levels than the internationally agreed stabilisation target; natural areas and their biodiversity are still being depleted; the use of chemicals to fuel economic development is still pervasive and causing major environmental contamination and disposal problems; rapid, unplanned urbanisation is placing major stress on adjacent ecosystems; and the complex interactions among global biogeochemical cycles are leading to acidification, climate variability, changes in the hydrological cycles and the loss of biodiversity, biomass and 'bioproductivity'.³ Hence three decades of intensive and lengthy negotiations between environmentalists and developmentalists, several international conferences, voluminous legal instruments and persistent rhetoric of social change have not succeeded in addressing the global environmental crisis — or, more specifically, in changing the way our society produces and consumes its goods and services.

Written from a sociological perspective, this article provides a critical appraisal of the environment and development debate unfolding over the past three decades in industrial societies. More specifically, it examines a fundamental paradox contained in this debate: whilst it has emerged to deal with the ecological risks generated by the increased globalisation of the industrial mode of production, the debate has not prompted any significant structural change in the prevailing socio-economic order, but in fact has contributed to its maintenance and reproduction. The core contention of this article is that in the environment and development debate, the socio-economic *status quo* is maintained and reproduced through four interrelated processes: the institutionalisation of environmentalism; the marginalisation of dissent; the political project of 'ecological modernisation';⁴ and the 'political economy of truth'.⁵ These four processes provide the analytic axes for the discussions to be developed in this paper. In the analysis of the institutionalisation of environmentalism, particular emphasis is placed on the role of international environmental law in the form of legal instruments that have emerged from the environment and development debate since the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE). It is contended that, whilst environmental law has had a positive impact in the environmental and development debate in the sense that it legitimates environmental protection as

² <<http://www.unep.org/unep/eia/geol/exsum/ex2.htm>> (9 March 1999).

³ <<http://www.unep.org/unep/eia/geol/exsum/ex6.htm>> (16 March 1999).

⁴ M Hajer (1995) *The Politics of Environmental Discourse: Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process*, Clarendon Press.

⁵ M Foucault (1980 [1977]) 'Truth and Power', reprinted in Colin Gordon (ed) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Pantheon Books, pp. 109-33.

an undertaking to be taken seriously by governments around the world, it has not been effective in promoting significant social change.

The Broad Analytic Context

A sociological analysis must take into account the broader socio-historical, political and economic context within which phenomena unfold, which in this case is modern industrial society in the late-twentieth century and beyond. This historical formation is periodised here, borrowing from Anthony Giddens,⁶ as *high-modernity*. The key defining feature of high-modernity are, *inter alia*., increased globalisation of social, life; significant acceleration in the pace of socio-economic activity; rapid and continual technological innovation in communication and transportation systems, and globalisation of environmental risks and dangers.⁷ The latter characteristic provides the empirical backdrop for the analyses to be developed.

The globalisation of environmental risks and dangers characteristic of high modernity generates a growing concern over global environmental issues such as transnational air pollution; disposal of dangerous wastes; deforestation; loss of biodiversity; global warming and ozone depletion. It was a public conscientisation of these problems in the late 1960s and 1970s, via the mass media, that led to the mobilisation of the first environmental groups in industrialised nations. This, in turn, has deployed the environment and development debate which, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as a process of negotiations and compromises, coordinated by the state, between advocates of environmental protection through zero economic growth (*environmentalists*) and proponents of continual economic development (*developmentalists*).⁸ At the core of the environment and development debate, therefore, lies the fundamental — and seemingly unsolvable — contradiction between calls for environmental protection and prescriptions for continual economic growth.

The debate has a persistent rhetoric of social change — and indeed, much has been said and written by its key players about the need for the creation of a more democratic and ‘ecologically sustainable’ society. However, after almost three decades of intensive discussions and negotiations between environmentalists and developmentalists, the gap between rhetoric and reality

⁶ A Giddens (1991) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, p 3. According to Giddens, high modernity is a historical formation in which ‘the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalised and universalised than before’.

⁷ U Beck (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Sage Publications, p 13.

⁸ I use the phrase ‘environment and development debate’ in the singular form as a generic noun for a multitude of environmentally related conflicts currently unfolding between developmentalists and environmentalists in different parts of the world. The main focus here, nevertheless, is on the major debate unfolding since the 1970s between international environmental NGOs and specialised agencies of the United Nations, over global issues such as climate change, toxic waste disposal, air pollution, ozone layer depletion and deforestation in the tropics.

remains unbridged: environmental matters continue to be consistently overridden by economic concerns, and solutions to deal with environmental problems hitherto proposed have consisted mainly of 'soft' (i.e. non-legally binding) environmental legislation, technological 'fixes' and narrowly based environmental management programs. Whilst these measures have no doubt relieved the symptoms of the ecological crisis, they have nevertheless failed to address its root causes, which originate in the cycle of mass production and mass consumption that drives industrial society.

The sections below examine each of the four processes, operating in the environment and development debate, that contribute to sustain the socio-economic *status quo*.

The Debate Institutionalised

For the purpose of this analysis, institutionalisation is defined as a process through which a given social practice — in this case, environmentalism — is incorporated into the institutional apparatus of modern industrial society, becoming a routinised, and at times legally sanctioned, part of its structure. The new practices that emerge through institutionalisation play the dual role of *constituting* and *reproducing* the socio-economic system. Apart from generating new practices and discourses, the institutionalisation of environmentalism has led to the institutionalisation of the environment and development debate itself, which has become a coordinating process for the design and implementation of environmental law. The institutions generated in this process have become an integral part of modern industrial societies, thus playing a significant role in reproducing its core structures.

The first sign of institutionalisation of environmentalism was the incorporation of elements of the ecological discourse into the developmentalist discourse, notably in those forms deployed by the state. From this process, a hybrid type of discourse emerged, characterised by a combination of ecologically based concepts such as 'ecosystems', 'biodiversity' and 'the biosphere', with modernist notions such as 'efficient resource management', 'techno-scientific assessment' and 'procedural integration'. For the purpose of this article, this type of discourse is termed, borrowing from Maarten Hajer,⁹ 'eco-modernist' discourse. Underpinning this discourse is the assumption that environmental protection can be integrated with development, narrowly conceptualised as *economic growth*. As will be seen in the discussions that ensue, this assumption lies at the core of the instruments that have emerged hitherto from the environment and development debate. It prevents the debate from effecting any significant change in the structure of modern industrial society, as it reinforces and perpetuates the discourse of 'development-as-economic-growth', which has contributed to substantial environmental degradation in the post-World War II period.

Whilst it is not possible to pinpoint precisely when the institutionalisation of the environment and development began to take place, it is clear that

⁹ Hajer (1995) p 28.

UNCHE played a pivotal role in the process. The 'Stockholm Conference' set down the groundwork for several environmental legal instruments and a series of international events, convened by the United Nations over the past three decades. It also set the terms and parameters for negotiations between environmentalists and developmentalists, notably through its key instruments, the Declaration on the Human Environment ('Stockholm Declaration') and the Action Plan for the Human Environment.

The Stockholm Declaration is a seminal text of the environment and development debate, as it provided the basis for subsequent development of international environmental law in the form of bilateral and multilateral conventions and other legally binding documents. However, it has not offered the potential for significant structural change, as it is premised on the eco-modernist notion of integration of environmental protection with economic growth. Clause 4, for example, speculates that in 'developing' countries, most of the environmental problems are caused by 'under-development', and prescribes that these countries 'must direct their efforts to development, bearing in mind their priorities and the need to safeguard and improve the environment'.¹⁰ Here, the ideology of development is taken for granted as the ineluctable destiny of the whole of human society, overlooking the fact that some societies may not wish to engage in Western-style development.

The Action Plan comprises 109 recommendations that lay a conceptual framework, not for structural change, but for environmental *management*. In other words, these recommendations do not propose any radical rethinking of the way in which industrial society produces and consumes its goods, or disposes of wastes generated in the process. Couched in eco-modernist rhetoric, they consist mainly of reformist measures informed by concepts such as integrated management of natural resources, monitoring, planning and technological 'fixes' for environmental problems. Once more, the subtext is 'business-as-usual', which is particularly evident in Recommendation 103, which urges governments to ensure that the states participating in the UNCHE process 'agree not to invoke environmental concerns as a pretext for discriminatory trade policies or for reduced access to markets and recognize that the burdens of the environmental policies of the industrialized countries should not be transferred ... to developing countries'. Here, environmental concerns are constructed as impediments to development-as-economic-growth, a stance that lies at the core of developmentalist ideology.

The notion of integration of environmental protection with economic development also informs the discourse of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which was another important institutional outcome of UNCHE. This stance is clearly reflected in the assertion figuring in UNEP's publicity material that 'environment and development must be mutually supportive'.¹¹ UNEP is thus a typical example of an institution that constitutes and reproduces socio-economic status quo.

¹⁰ <<http://gopher.law.cornell.edu:70/0/foreign/fletcher/STOCKHOLM-DECL.txt>> (20 February 1999).

¹¹ <<http://www.unep.org/unep/about>> (19 January 1998).

A discussion of the institutionalisation of the environment and development debate is not complete without reference to three instruments that can be described as canons of institutionalised environmentalism. They are: the World Conservation Strategy (1980), World Environmental Charter (1982) and *Caring for the Earth* (1991).¹² These documents are more specific attempts to formulate general principles of conduct for states and individuals to protect the environment. However, their potential for significant social change is minimal, as they are also premised on the eco-modernist assumption that environmental protection is compatible with economic growth. For example, one of the stated aims of the World Conservation Strategy is to identify 'the action needed both to improve conservation efficiency and to integrate conservation and development' (1980: iv). In the same vein, the World Environmental Charter (published as a supplement to the World Conservation Strategy) promotes the idea of environmental management to guarantee future yields. It proclaims that 'Ecosystems and organisms, as well as the land, marine and atmospheric resources that are utilised by man (sic), shall be managed to achieve and maintain optimum sustainable productivity'.¹³ *Caring for the Earth*, the successor of the World Conservation Strategy, asserts that '[s]trategies for sustainability are a means to achieve a sustainable combination of development and conservation in an integrated fashion'.¹⁴ In these seminal texts of institutionalised environmentalism, the coexistence of environmental protection and economic growth is presented as unproblematic — and indeed desirable.

The institutionalisation of the environment and development debate is also reflected in the establishment of the World Commission for Environment and Development (WCED) in 1983. WCED's mandate was, *inter alia*, to 're-examine the critical environmental and development issues'; 'formulate realistic proposals to deal with them', and 'propose new forms of international cooperation on these issues'.¹⁵ These aims were further elaborated in a report coordinated by the Commission's chairperson Gro Harlem Brundtland (then the Prime Minister of Norway). *Our Common Future* — or the Brundtland Report — was released in 1987, containing recommendations for a 'global agenda for change'. However, the proposed changes are informed by the paradoxical assumption that environmental protection is compatible with economic growth. This is unambiguously proclaimed in the Report, which states one of its purposes as that of providing the 'framework for the integration of environment policies and development strategies'.¹⁶ It also recommends that the United Nations Conference on the Environment and

¹² These three texts are products of a collaborative effort among UNEP, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Conservation Union for Nature (IUCN).

¹³ <<http://www.tufts.edu/departments/fletcher/multi/texts/UNGARES37-7.txt>> (2 June 1998).

¹⁴ IUCN, UNEP and WWF (1991) *Caring for the Earth: A Strategy for Sustainable Living*, p 204.

¹⁵ WCED (1991 [1987]) *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, p 3.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

Development (UNCED) be convened, for the signing of international environmental instruments to guide the political actions of member-states with regard to environmental protection. The Brundtland Report has thus played a pivotal role in the institutionalisation of environmentalism through international environmental law.

UNCED: The Ritual Merging of 'Environment and Development'

Held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, UNCED was a transnational media event attended by more than a hundred heads of state from all over the world. It can be said to be a ritual expression of the institutionalisation of the environment and development debate. Borrowing from anthropologist Paul Little, UNCED was a 'global magic act'¹⁷ which ritualised the merging of the concepts of environment and development into a new eco-modernist concept, 'sustainable development'. As Little puts it, sustainable development provided the foundation 'for the construction of a new political cosmology that would resolve the contradictions and anomalies that have emerged within the old one'.¹⁸ As will be seen in the section which discusses ecological modernisation, sustainable development has become a pivotal discourse of the environment and development debate, having generated over the past few years its own institutions, practices, texts and speaking figures.

UNCED further institutionalised the environment and development debate through five key instruments: the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development; Agenda 21; the Convention on Biological Diversity; the Framework Convention on Climate Change; and the Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests (also known as the Statement of Forest Principles). Notwithstanding the strong rhetoric of environmental protection contained in these documents, the subordination of environmental concerns to economic imperatives is evident in their statements and provisions.

For example, the eco-rhetoric is strong in Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration, which calls upon states to cooperate 'to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystems'. However, paraphrasing Article XX of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade,¹⁹ Principle 12 stresses that trade policy measures for environmental purposes 'should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade'. Principle 2 of the Rio Declaration significantly weakens the state's commitment to environmental protection, by proclaiming that 'States have ... the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies'.

¹⁷ P Little (1995) 'Ritual, Power and Ethnography at the Rio Earth Summit', *Critique of Anthropology*, 15(3), p 268.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p 278.

¹⁹ M Pallamaerts (1993) 'International Environmental Law from Stockholm to Rio: Back to the Future?', in P Sands (ed), *Greening International Law*, Earthscan, pp. 1-19 at p 18.

Principle 12 goes even further in reaffirming the prevalence of economic imperatives over environmental protection by prescribing that:

States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation.²⁰

Economic growth is also a prominent theme in Agenda 21,²¹ which outlines detailed integrated management strategies designed to combine environmental protection with economic development. Revealingly entitled 'Integrating Environment and Development in Decision-Making', Chapter 8 is entirely devoted to a discussion of the 'primary need' to integrate environment and development and a number of recommendations of specific activities to operationalise this notion. Underpinning this chapter is the neo-liberal dictum that 'the market' determines social outcomes, which is clearly evident in the following statement:

Environmental law and regulation are important but cannot alone be expected to deal with the problems of environment and development. Prices, markets and governmental fiscal and economic policies also play a complementary role in shaping attitudes and behaviour towards the environment. (Point 8.27)²²

The discourse of integration of environmental protection with economic development is also a prominent feature in the Framework Convention on Climate Change. Article 3(4), for example, provides that measures to monitor climate change 'should be integrated with national development programmes', and Article 4(2)(a) draws attention to the importance to 'take into account ... the need to maintain strong and sustainable economic growth'.²³

Pallamaerts draws attention to the failure of the Convention on Biological Diversity 'to impose precise and unconditional obligations on the contracting parties', in order to ensure that their national policies on biodiversity will not affect the environment beyond their jurisdiction.²⁴ He notes that the provisions specifying the obligations of contracting parties to ensure that policies related to biological diversity are ecologically sound are often qualified by the phrase 'as far as possible' and 'as appropriate'.²⁵

²⁰ <<http://www.mrtc.org/~lesslie/rio.html>> (19 November 1997); author's italics.

²¹ <gopher://unepq.unep.org:70/11/un/unced/agenda21
<gopher://unepq.unep.org:70/1> (19 June 1998).

²² <<http://www.igc.apc.org/habitat/Agenda21/ch-08.html>> (19 November 1997).

²³ <<http://www.unfccc.de/resource/conv/index>> (7 September 1999).

²⁴ Pallamaerts (1993) p 7.

²⁵ The full text of the Convention on Biological Diversity is available at <<http://www.biodiv.org/chm/conv/default.htm>> (7 September 1999).

The non-legally binding Statement of Principles on Forests clearly reflects the primacy of economic imperatives over environmental concerns characteristic of UNCED's eco-modernist discourse. This is particularly evident in Paragraph 2(a) which grants states the 'sovereign right to develop their forests in accordance with their development needs and level of socio-economic development and on the basis of national policies consistent with sustainable development legislation'.²⁶ Thus Paragraph 2(a) removes national forest policies from the constraints of international environmental law, as it is up to individual states to make decisions on the future of their forests. Regrettably, these decisions often subordinate environmental concerns to economic imperatives, as seen in the wilderness debates unfolding in Australia over the past few years. For example, since 1997, six Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs) have been signed between the Commonwealth and state governments.²⁷ Notwithstanding the rhetoric of forest protection contained in these documents, they play a pivotal role in legitimating alliances between the states and the timber industry, which is granted long-term free access to previously protected forests. As stated on the RFA Website: 'Regional Forest Agreements ... provide a blueprint for the future management of our forests, and the basis for an internationally competitive and ecologically sustainable forest products industry.'²⁸

The conclusion to draw at this point is that, whilst the instruments that emerged from the UNCED process legitimate environmental protection as a valid concern of governments around the world, and have begun to form the basis of decision-making on environmental matters in many nations, they do not contain the potential to engender significant change in the ways goods and services are produced, consumed and disposed of in industrial societies. They are informed by developmentalist ideology, which promotes economic growth as inevitable and desirable, ignoring the effects that growth for the sake of growth can have on the global environment.

Another institutional outcome of the UNCED process was the World Commission for Sustainable Development (WCSA), created to ensure effective follow-up of UNCED's recommendations to monitor and report on implementation of the Conference's agreements at the local, national, regional and international levels. The WCSA is discussed further below.

As the ritual legitimisation of the merging of the notions of environment and development, UNCED has come to further reinforce the discourse of integration of environmental protection with economic growth, which maintains the socio-economic status quo.

²⁶ <gopher://gopher.un.org:70/00/conf/unced/English/ forestp.txt> (7 September 1999).

²⁷ East Gippsland (Victoria) in Feb 1997; Tasmania in November 1997; Central Highlands (Victoria) in March 1998; South West Forest Region (WA) in May 1999; Eden (NSW) in August 1999, and North East Victoria in August 1999. <<http://www.rfa.gov.au/rfa/overview.html>> (7 October 1999).

²⁸ <<http://www.rfa.gov.au/rfa/overview.html>> (7 October 1999); author's italics.

Marginalisation of Dissent

The second process in the environment and development debate that contributes to maintaining the *status quo* is the marginalisation of environmental activists whose views challenge the hegemony of the developmentalist discourse. Thus there is no place for 'radical' environmentalists in the discussions with the state. The exclusion of radical environmentalists does not necessarily take place through the use of force and manipulation, but by means of accommodation through a 'subtle discursive process'²⁹ inherent in policy-making. In other words, environmental policies are designed to deal with environmental problems *within* the institutional apparatus of modern industrial societies, hence excluding proposals for alternatives to the industrial mode of production put forward by counter-hegemonic, 'dark-green' environmentalists.

Whilst organisations from the darker end of the green spectrum are often invited to work in collaboration with leading reformist organisations in specific campaigns,³⁰ their role can be said to be more symbolic than pragmatic. That is, they reflect the ideals of the counter-cultural groups of the 1960s and 1970s, mobilised to challenge the dominant values of industrial society, in particular the ideology of progress-as-economic-growth.

Thus what is commonly referred to in popular discourse and media reports as the 'the environmental movement' is in actual fact a certain type of environmentalism whose advocates agree to take part in the environment and development debate according to terms set by representatives of the political and economic systems; this type of environmentalism is inherently reformist in its goals and strategies. Indeed, it is an elite of moderate environmental activists that frames key environmental issues, prepares expert submissions, and interfaces with government representatives. This 'environmental elite'³¹ does not challenge explicitly the foundations of industrial society, but accepts solutions for environmental problems within the established socio-economic order. Moderate environmental activists are prepared to work in partnership with the state and, at times, even with business corporations.³² They are

²⁹ Hajer (1995) p 22.

³⁰ Interview with Peter Wright on 22 February 1997. Wright was then the Campaign Coordinator for the Australian Conservation Foundation.

³¹ Catherine Jensen-Lee (1997) *Green Politics and the Organised Environmental Movement: An Australian Study*, PhD thesis, University of New South Wales, p 75.

³² For example, Greenpeace and a business 'think tank' called SustainAbility Ltd have been coordinating a project called 'Beyond Sparring', which brings oil companies, governments and other groups together to develop onshore decommissioning strategies <<http://www.greenpeace.org/information.shtml>> (5 January 1999); Greenpeace Australia has worked with manufacturers such as Miele, Electrolux and Ikea to 'develop safe alternatives to chlorine in processes and materials' (Fundraising brochure entitled 'The more you give, the more you save', 1998); Greenpeace Australia has been working with industry in the Olympic Village project.

prepared to compromise in ways that their radical counterparts would not accept. For environmentalists who challenge the hegemony of industrial society, compromises with developmentalists mean abandoning the original goal of the environmental movement, which was to seek alternatives to address environmental problems *outside* the industrial mode of production, hence moving beyond the developmentalist paradigm.

Here, it must be pointed out that the process referred to as 'marginalisation of dissent' can be viewed also as a *reformist shift* of the environmental movement, whereby environmental activists consciously chose to moderate their critiques of industrial society in order to have a voice in the debate, in order to legitimate their claims to the state. As noted by Sharon Beder, the environmental movement now places less emphasis on *activism* — that is, direct actions such as demonstrations, blockades, pickets, protest marches and meetings — and favours negotiations and compromises with the state.³³ The term 'negotiation' implies a more moderate process of 'give and take' between environmental groups and representatives of the political system, which often entails compromises and trade-offs. Beder further points out that, whereas activism continued to be the chosen strategy of 'dark-green' environmental groups,³⁴ negotiations became the main strategy of 'light-green' groups. As she puts it:

Activism is confrontational and is therefore not an option for those who wish to maintain respectability and gain trust of decision-makers. Negotiation is not an option which is available to more radical environmentalists. On the other hand leaders of environmental groups who are attempting to form links and alliances with the power structure will be wary of those in the group who undermine the group's 'respectability' with activism that challenges and confronts the power structure.³⁵

Thus the willingness of the 'light-green' groups to avoid confrontational tactics and negotiate and compromise with the state grants them access to the decision-making process, legitimating their participation in the environment and development debate.

Another important point made by Beder is that the power of the environmental NGOs negotiating with the state is contingent upon their ability to influence voters, and this 'requires respectability and *moderation* which many types of activism destroy'.³⁶ Within this context, 'moderation' means avoidance of views or actions that could undermine the balance required by

³³ Sharon Beder (1992) 'Activism versus Negotiation: Strategies for the Environment Movement', in Ronnie Harding (ed) *Ecopolitics V Proceedings*, Centre for Liberal and General Studies, University of New South Wales, 1992, p 56.

³⁴ *ibid.* Beder suggests that dark-green groups are in fact 'ideologically opposed to negotiations and compromises'.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p 58.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p 56; author's italics.

developmentalists to maintain the socio-economic *status quo* — and reproduce the modernist paradigm. Here, the barriers to structural changes created within the environment and development debate are evident.

Whether the reformist shift of the environmental movement was the result of political cooptation or a deliberate strategy devised by environmental activists to be taken more seriously by the state, the original aim of the environmental movement to 'save the planet' seems to have changed significantly since the 1960s. As Wolfgang Sachs commented: 'Once, environmentalists called for new public virtues, now they call rather for better managerial strategies.'³⁷ In the next section, it is argued that these managerial strategies only deal with the symptoms of environmental degradation — not its causes.

Ecological Modernisation

The third process in the environment and development debate that contributes to the maintenance of modern industrial society is closely intertwined with institutionalisation, in that it refers to specific policy practices and discourses that have been generated in the environment and development debate over the past three decades. Borrowing from Hajer,³⁸ this process is termed for the purpose of this article 'ecological modernisation', a policy-oriented discourse which emerged in industrial societies in the 1980s. Hajer conceptualises ecological modernisation as a 'political project' that recognises the structural character of the ecological crisis, but assumes that environmental problems can be addressed within the political, economic and social institutions of industrial society.³⁹ Thus, over the past two decades, there have emerged a number of new techniques allowing individual firms to integrate environmental concerns into their calculation of costs and risk. Examples of these techniques include the 'polluter pays principle', 'cost benefit analysis', 'precautionary principle', 'tradeable pollution rights' and levy charges on polluting activities.⁴⁰

Ecological modernisation appeals to governments because it does not call for changes in the core structures of modern industrial society, but is basically a reformist technocratic approach to deal with environmental problems, based on the assumption that these problems can be solved with 'techno-institutional fixes'. Indeed, ecological modernisation is informed by modern institutional principles such as efficiency, technological innovation, techno-scientific management, procedural integration and coordinated management.⁴¹ Reflecting the discourse of integration of environmental and economic concerns discussed previously, it presents the notion of coexistence between

³⁷ Wolfgang Sachs (ed) (1993) *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict*, Zed Books, p xv.

³⁸ Hajer (1995), p 263.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p 25.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p 27.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p 32.

environmental protection and economic growth as unproblematic — and even desirable. This is clearly reflected in the discourse of ‘sustainable development’, which is a pivotal concept of the project of ecological modernisation.

Sustainable Development

The notion of sustainable development was officially launched in the Brundtland Report, which Hajer describes as ‘one of the paradigm statements of ecological modernisation’.⁴² Sustainable development is defined in the Report as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.⁴³ As noted by Pallamaerts, the ‘artful vagueness’ of this definition has led to widespread acceptance from leaders of industrialised and industrialising nations, environmental movements, Third World social movements, international bureaucrats and managers of financial institutions in both capitalist and socialist nations.⁴⁴

Since the Brundtland Report, sustainable development has attained discursive autonomy, producing its own institutions, practices, texts and speaking figures. The discourse of sustainable development is premised upon ecological knowledge, relating it to the management and conservation of land, water, air, and biodiversity. However, it remains at its core an essentially modernist concept, informed by Enlightenment notions of progress-as-economic growth and faith in science and technology. As observed by Beder, ‘sustainable development seeks to make economic growth sustainable, mainly through technological change’.⁴⁵ Indeed, economic growth remains an integral aspect in the discourse of sustainable development, as is evident in the excerpt below from the Brundtland Report:

‘Far from requiring the cessation of economic growth, [sustainable development] recognizes that the problems of poverty and underdevelopment cannot be solved unless we have a new era of growth in which developing countries play a large role and reap large benefits.’⁴⁶

The operationalisation of the discourse of sustainable development can be illustrated with the activities of the previously mentioned WCSD, which has become something of a *global environmental manager* overseeing the implementation of the project of ecological modernisation around the world. Amongst the WCSD’s current activities is a ‘multi-year programme of work 1998–2002’, which includes a ‘review of action for the sustainable

⁴² *ibid.*, p 26.

⁴³ WCED (1987), pp 8, 43.

⁴⁴ Pallamaerts (1993) p 14.

⁴⁵ Sharon Beder (1994) ‘An Unsustainable Development?’, *Frontline*, August, pp 5–7 at p 5.

⁴⁶ WCED (1987), p 40.

development of small islands' (1999 session); 'integrated planning and management of land resources' (2000 session) and 'integrated planning and management of atmosphere and energy' (2001 session). The 2002 session will consist of a '10-year comprehensive review' of sustainable development initiatives hitherto implemented.⁴⁷ It is also relevant to point out that the WCSD was actively involved in the Special Session of the General Assembly to Review the Implementation of Agenda 21 — or 'Earth Summit + 5' — held in New York, in June 1997. Attended by heads of state, scientists, environmental NGOs and representatives of business corporations, this event has further consolidated the project of ecological modernisation through the adoption of yet another canon of the environment and development debate produced by the WCSD, a text entitled *Programme for Further Implementation of the Agenda 21*.

At a local level, the notion of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) has become central to national environmental strategies. In 1989, then Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke released a statement on the environment entitled *Our Country, Our Future*, followed by a summit involving representatives of industry, union and conservation organisations to stipulate ESD principles. In 1991, the Commonwealth government announced the establishment of a federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a central body to implement the ESD process. The concept of ESD also lay at the core of the *Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment* (IGAE), a quasi-legal document signed in 1992, between the federal government, the state governments, the territories and the Australian Local Government Association. IGAE is one of the most comprehensive initiatives to be taken by the Australian government in recent years; indeed, it has prompted a number of national initiatives on environmental matters such as land degradation, logging of old-growth forests, ozone depletion, greenhouse emissions and protection of heritage areas. However, as a by-product of ecological modernisation, IGAE does not have the potential for any significant structural change, as it looks for solutions to environmental problems strictly within the existing institutional apparatuses of modern industrial society.

As conceptualised in the statements and instruments of the environment and development debate, the discourse of sustainable development adds further legitimacy to the paradoxical notion that environmental problems can be addressed through economic growth. It is thus a politically laden concept that serves the interests of the power elites of industrial society. As Beder puts it, sustainable development is 'inimical to those who believe that the business-as-usual-capitalist-free market economic system is a root cause of environmental degradation'.⁴⁸

Summing up, through its central notion of sustainable development, the political project of ecological modernisation plays a crucial role in the

⁴⁷ <<http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd9802.htm>> (3 January 1999).

⁴⁸ Sharon Beder (1996 [1993]) *The Nature of Sustainable Development*, 2nd edn, Scribe Publications, p 279.

environment and development debate to maintain and reproduce the very structures that generated ecological problems around the world.

The 'Political Economy of Truth'

The fourth strategy in the environment and development debate that contributes to the maintenance of industrial society is what is termed, drawing on Michel Foucault, the 'political economy of truth'.⁴⁹ For the purpose of this article, the 'political economy of truth' is defined as a system of politically motivated filters, operating within the environment and development debate, which privileges statements and practices conducive to the maintenance of industrial capitalism. These statements and practices are represented as 'the truth', despite evidence that they are informed by a certain point of view that promotes economic growth as a solution for environmental degradation.⁵⁰

A tendency is observed among the gatekeepers of developmentalism to construct their regime of truth as an 'officialising category' or claim to be 'in the right'.⁵¹ The purpose of officialising categories is, according to Pierre Bourdieu, 'to transmute egoistic, private, particular interests ... into disinterested, collective, publicly avowable, legitimate interests'.⁵² Here, the issues at stake are represented in normative terms, invoking the authority of the rules and the means of enforcing compliance, which confers legitimacy to the truth claims being made. Whilst environmental activists, too, claim 'to be in the right', they are disadvantaged by the fact that their regime of truth is counter-hegemonic, and thus illegitimate *vis-à-vis* the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism. Hence environmental activists who advocate zero economic growth as the solution for environmental problems find themselves relatively disempowered in the debate, as they are unable to invoke the authority of the rules and means to enforce compliance because of the counter-hegemonic nature of their claims.

In the environment and development debate, the 'political economy of truth' operates at various levels, and manifests itself in different ways.⁵³ It can be seen as the driving force of the intense backlash against the environmental

⁴⁹ Foucault (1980 [1977]), p 131.

⁵⁰ Here, I must stress that in this analysis the term 'truth' is not used in its traditional *objectivist* sense, but in a *relativistic* sense — that is, there are different truths and different ways of saying what counts as truth; there is also a close relationship between 'truth' and power. In other words, systems of power define and impose their own version of 'truth'.

⁵¹ P Bourdieu (1977 [1972]) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, pp 38–43.

⁵² *ibid.*, p 40.

⁵³ What I am conceptualising here as the 'political economy of truth' is well documented in books such as *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism* (1998), by Sharon Beder; *The War Against the Greens* (1994), by David Helvarg; *Green Backlash: The History and Politics of Environmental Opposition in the US* (1997), by Jacqueline Vaugh Switzer, and *Green Backlash: Global Subversion of the Environmental Movement* (1996), by Andrew Rowell.

movement that emerged in the late 1970s in the United States, and has now spread to other OECD countries, including Australia. This 'green backlash', as it has come to be known, includes practices such as specialised public relations activities designed to 'green' the image of corporations with a poor environmental record; law suits against environmental activists and citizens who hold governments and corporations responsible for environmental damage;⁵⁴ and corporate-funded research in neo-liberal think-tanks to counter claims by environmentalists for more environmental legislation (e.g. the Cato Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute in the United States; and the Centre for Independent Studies and Institute of Public Affairs in Australia). This analysis is particularly concerned with the 'political economy of truth' as it manifests itself through neo-liberal think-tanks, and we will briefly examine some of the main discursive and thematic patterns found in texts produced by these institutions.

The politics of truth is immediately evident in some of the titles of books produced by neo-liberal commentators on environmental issues, shown in the table below. Ronald Bailey, for example, refers to environmentalists as 'The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse', and calls one of his more recent publications 'The True State of the Planet'; while the title of Robert Balling's book refers to 'Predictions Versus Reality'.⁵⁵ This choice of words reflects the authors' confidence that they are in control of officialising categories.

The 'officialising categories' in the 'political economy of truth' of the environment and development debate are informed by the modernist discourse of progress-as-affluence, which legitimates the desirability of economic growth. For example, in *Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse* (1993), Ronald Bailey refutes what he sees as the fallacies of environmentalism, comparing 'our gloomy century' to nineteenth-century Europe and America, who 'celebrated a robust faith in human progress'.⁵⁶ Bailey strongly objects to the 'limits to growth' model which lies at the core of counter-hegemonic environmental philosophy. He notes that 'the only limit to growth is the human imagination — if we sink back and accept antigrowth eco-theology we may well condemn our posterity to desperate poverty in a resource depleted world'.⁵⁷ In the same vein, in *Apocalypse Not: Science, Economics and Environmentalism*, Bolch and Lyons stress that their book 'demonstrates the reality of human progress' and their hope that 'it will thereby restore the next generation's belief in its future'.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ These lawsuits are referred to by Canaan and Pring as 'Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation', or SLAPPs.

⁵⁵ Author's italics.

⁵⁶ Ronald Bailey (1993) *Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse*, St Martin's Press (published by the Cato Institute), p 2.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p 78.

⁵⁸ Ben Bolch and Harold Lyons (1993) *Apocalypse Not: Science, Economics and Environmentalism*, Cato Institute, pp xi-xii.

Table 1: A Selection of Texts Produced by Neo-liberal Think-Tanks in the Political Economy of Truth

<i>Writer</i>	<i>Publisher</i>	<i>Publication</i>
Ronald Bailey	Cato Institute	<i>Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse</i> (1993)
Ronald Bailey	Competitive Enterprise Institute	<i>The True State of the Planet</i> (1995)
Robert C Balling	Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy	<i>The Heated Debate: Greenhouse Predictions versus Climate Reality</i> (1992)
Ben Bolch and Harold Lyons	Cato Institute	<i>Apocalypse Not: Science, Economics and Environmentalism</i> (1993)
Thomas Gale Moore	Cato Institute	<i>Climate of Fear: Why We Shouldn't Worry About Global Warming</i> (1998)
Julian Simon	Cato Institute	<i>The Ultimate Resource 2</i> (1996)

Bolch and Lyons' basic thesis is that 'the world is not coming to an end and that by nearly any measure, the people who reside in the market-oriented economies of the West enjoy a cleaner and safer environment than ever experienced in modern history'.⁵⁹ The argument presented by Indur M Goklany runs along similar lines: 'Anything that retards economic growth generally also retards environmental clean up and consigns millions to squalid and untimely deaths'.⁶⁰ Goklany further notes that the evidence presented in this particular work indicates that 'ultimately, richer is cleaner, and affluence and knowledge are the best antidotes to pollution'.⁶¹

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p 12.

⁶⁰ Indur M Goklany (1995) 'Richer is Cleaner: Long-term Trends in Global Air Quality', in Ronald Bailey (ed), *The True State of the Planet*, Competitive Enterprise Institute, p 341.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p 343.

The theme of progress-as-affluence also informs Julian Simon's optimistic 'long-run forecast' predictions in *The State of Humanity* for an affluent future. He writes:

The material conditions of life will continue to get better for most people, in most countries, most of the time, indefinitely. Within a century or two, all nations and most of humanity will be at or above today's Western living standards.⁶²

Closely associated with the discourse of 'faith in progress' is that of 'faith in science and technology' to deal with environmental problems. Thus, invoking Britain's 'dark satanic mills', Bailey acknowledges that 'the initial stages of the Industrial Revolution did impose some costs on the natural environment — but modern technologies are much less polluting'.⁶³ He further notes, reflecting the evolutionist (and ethnocentric) orientation of the progress model, that 'developing countries will be able to adopt cleaner manufacturing processes and more efficient pollution controls techniques as their economies grow, thus avoiding some of the damage caused by *earlier primitive technologies*'.⁶⁴ For Bailey, modern environmentalism is pervaded by a 'legacy of technophobia', which he traces back to the 'peace activists' of the 1960s.⁶⁵ He states that, for environmentalists, science and technology are a 'threat to all future progress'.

Speaking for the official world-view of progress-as-affluence, neo-liberal think-tank experts are authorised to promote their statements as 'the truth'. This is reflected in another thematic pattern of their work — namely, a persistent implication that developmentalists are *in the right*, and environmentalists are *wrong*. As Bolch and Lyons comment, 'by looking at the environmental movement as a form of utopianism, one has the best chance of understanding its complex, sometimes *irrational*, and *often contradictory* viewpoints'.⁶⁶ In the same vein, Bailey states: 'The apocalyptic *factoids manufactured by radical environmentalists* develop a life of their own once they are fixed in the popular imagination.'⁶⁷ In the discourse of neo-liberal think-tank experts, even environmentalist claims which are grounded on 'scientific knowledge' are dismissed as unscientific. As Bailey puts it:

[R]adical environmentalists have become very skilled at portraying scientific findings as part of a 'global ecological crisis'. Consequently, politicians and other policy-makers are often forced to respond to the illegitimate fears fostered by apocalyptic environmentalists. Political

⁶² Julian L Simon (1995) *The State of Humanity*, Blackwell in association with the Cato Institute, p 642.

⁶³ Bailey (1993) p 73.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*; author's italics.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, pp 38–39.

⁶⁶ Bolch and Lyons (1993) p 5; author's italics.

⁶⁷ Bailey (1993) p 22; author's italics.

leaders must make decisions — often far-reaching ones — based on a very uncertain, and sometimes deliberately distorted scientific findings. Some environmentalists are not above lying in what they believe is a good cause.⁶⁸

Religious metaphors are often used in reference to environmentalism and environmentalists to imply irrationality. For example, Thomas Gale Moore asserts that: 'Environmentalists couch their appeals in emotional or religious terms.'⁶⁹ For Bolch and Lyons, 'The Green Movement has embraced nomadic bands of witches, anti-nuclear activists, Celtic nationalists, sun worshipers, and discontented persons of all stripes.'⁷⁰ Making a distinction between 'charlatan ecologists' and 'genuine ecologists', Kenneth Mellanby states that:

The 'charlatans of ecology' and many environmental publicists are trying to scare the world's population with a false picture of environmental crisis, which they allege is rapidly getting worse and worse. I have quoted certain instances where they have gotten things seriously wrong.⁷¹

Another prominent theme in the 'political economy of truth', which reflects the neo-liberal bias of the green backlash is a strong objection to 'government interference'.

For example, in an article suggestively entitled 'The Coming Age of Abundance', Stephen Moore expresses his opinion that:

Unwise government intervention policies as were experimented with in the 1970s can often have economically and ecologically debilitating consequences. But if politicians can resist the ever-present temptation to intervene in natural resource markets, America and the rest of the world face a surprisingly rich resource future in the twenty-first century.⁷²

Nicholas Eberstadt traces 'the reversals and catastrophes that have recently befallen heavily populated low-income countries' to 'the policies and

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p 15.

⁶⁹ Thomas Gale Moore (1998) *Climate of Fear: Why We Shouldn't Worry About Global Warming*, Cato Institute, p 6.

⁷⁰ Bolch and Lyons (1993) p 22.

⁷¹ Kenneth Mellanby (1997) 'Natural Ecology Today and in the Future', in Julian E Simon (ed) *The State of Humanity*, Blackwell in association with the Cato Institute, p 638.

⁷² Stephen Moore (1995) 'The Coming Age of Abundance', in Ronald Bailey (ed) *The True State of the Planet*, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, pp 110–39 at p 137.

practices of presiding governments'.⁷³ In an article on the situation of global water, Terry L Anderson puts forward his view that: 'Removing legal impediments to water markets would allow private firms to enter the water supply industry and take the burden off the public treasury.'⁷⁴ In this essentially neo-liberal type of discourse, Anderson further notes that: 'Market forces could pare demand, boost supply, reallocate water, and end the threat of water crisis.'

As shown in the above excerpts, the 'political economy of truth' is an effective process to maintain the *status quo*, in that it highlights 'officialising categories' informed by the modernist discourse of progress-as-affluence. It thus undermines the ecological worldview and legitimates the neo-liberal discourse of progress-as-affluence. As Foucault comments: '[W]e are forced to produce *the truth of power* that our society demands, of which it has need in order to function.'⁷⁵

Conclusion

In summary, this article has contended that the environment and development debate plays a significant role in maintaining and reproducing the economic *status quo* through four interrelated processes: the institutionalisation of environmentalism; the marginalisation of dissent; the political project of ecological modernisation; and the 'political economy of truth'.

It should be acknowledged that the environmental legal instruments resulting from the debate have had a positive impact, in that they have drawn the attention of governments around the world to the seriousness of ecological problems. However, environmental law has not prompted any significant social change. As Pallamaerts puts it, environmental law has been 'subordinated to economic imperatives extent'.⁷⁶

To a considerable extent, environmentalism has been coopted into developmentalist discourse, prompting a reformist shift in the environmental movement. The latter has been forced to moderate its views in order to have a voice in the debate. The political project of ecological modernisation has legitimated the notion of integration of environmental protection with economic growth, through the discourse of sustainable development — a case of offering the poison as a panacea. The political economy of truth operating in the debate has led to the legitimisation of developmentalism as an officialising category, constructed in opposition to the 'irrationality' of environmentalism.

⁷³ Nicholas Eberstadt (1995) 'Population, Food, and Income: Global Trends in the Twentieth Century', in Ronald Bailey (ed), *The True State of the Planet*, The Free Press and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, p 8.

⁷⁴ Terry L Anderson (1995) 'Water Options for the Blue Planet', in Ronald Bailey (ed) *The True State of the Planet*, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, pp 268–94 at p 268.

⁷⁵ Foucault (1980), p 93.

⁷⁶ Pallamaerts (1993), p 17.

The conclusion to draw from this analysis is that, far from being an agent for social change, the environment and development debate is but an integral part of Western industrial culture. It does not provide space for a more radical critique of consumerism and its harmful effects on the global environment. Strictly speaking, then, the environment and development debate is not a *debate*, as it does not consider both sides of the argument equally. It clearly privileges the developmentalist discourse, undermines and at times discrediting the 'environmental worldview'. This only reinforces the power structures of industrial society.

The debate excludes conceptualisations of nature as more than a just a reservoir of resources; it silences voices that propose alternatives to mass production and mass consumption; it gives credence to the *business-as-usual* ideology which has reduced nature to a system of economic resources, destined to disappear into the vortex of consumer culture to satisfy the endless desires created by the advertising industry.

For the environment and development debate to be a more equitable and democratic process — and, most importantly, for it to be a genuine agent for social change — it must go beyond the utilitarian logic of the discourse of progress-as-affluence; it must allow for a meaningful participation of alternative voices; it must transcend its politically conservative eco-modernist worldview which allows corporations to decide what they produce, how they produce and how they dispose of wastes. If the terms and the dynamics of the debate do not change, it will simply proceed indefinitely with its short-sighted, pointless project of 'bailing out the *Titanic* with a hand-pump'.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ This phrase is borrowed from Sydney writer Pip Wilson (pers. comm. 27 March 1999).

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