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Chapter 14: Global Environmental Politics

Introduction

Global environmental politics has a very long history. It stretches back at least through the period of European colonialism, when colonizers appropriated land, created large mines, turned functioning ecosystems into agricultural plantations, and transported plants and animals around the world (Crosby, 1972; Mintz, 1985; Juma, 1989). Some of this was done explicitly in the name of 'conservation, for example as people were removed from land to create parks in eastern Africa or forbidden to use forests in Indonesia (Peluso, 1992; Neumann, 1998). In another sense, however, global environmental politics is a much more recent phenomenon, stretching back less than forty years, rooted in modern environmentalism with its emphasis on the 'global environment as an object of concern. This idea arose in public consciousness, particularly in the US, as the result of several factors, including fears about 'global (i.e. Third World) population growth, concern about the effects of industrialization, and images of Earth from space (McCormick, 1989; Cosgrove, 1994). In this chapter I focus on the latter form of global environmental politics, following developments from the 1960s onward, but show that the longer history of global relations, particularly between the North and South, informs current debates.

Governance is a central theme in global environmental politics today (Dalby, 2002a). In addition to general calls for global responses to address global environmental problems such as climate change, there is also proliferation of new actors such as non-governmental organizations, debate about the relationship between trade and environment, and new environmental regimes that encompass both specific international laws and inter-governmental organizations. Transnational institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, have become increasingly involved broadly in environmental debates and more narrowly in environmental

management. There are also new challenges related to environmental security and the ecological politics of empire (Klare, 2001; Dalby, 2002b; *Global Environmental Politics*, 2004). Commentators often discuss this combination of trends in terms of challenges to the traditional nation-state framework and the rise of 'global governance as an alternative (e.g. *Global Environmental Politics*, 2003; Lifton, 2003). However, it is important to be cautious about making statements regarding overarching change. Political geographical approaches to global processes greatly enhance our understanding of the dynamics of environmental governance and politics more broadly.

Geographers have contributed not only to our knowledge of 'trans-state organization (Roberts, 2002) but have been among those who have most strongly challenged the notion that globalization entails the end of the nation-state (e.g. Jessop, 2002; Dicken, 2003, chap. 5). Alternative notions of scale are particularly important in this regard: moving from a static notion of scales as ontologically given objects that impact each other to a relational notion in which scales are fluid, contested, and simultaneously material and discursive significantly impacts how we understand and analyze the 'global (Herod and Wright, 2002). Not a thing or unified movement, the global is uneven and multiply articulated, in that its existence is always already a relation with multiple other scales. The global is not only about linkages that connect the world into a single place, but is simultaneously about differentiation and disconnection among people and places (Mansfield, 2003). The 'global' of 'global environmental politics, then, does not indicate a [p. 236 ↓] particular arena for political struggle that dominates regional, national, or local arenas, but is rather about how these all are produced and come together (or not) in environmental conflicts.

Given this expanded definition of the global, understanding issues regarding environmental governance requires addressing the larger context within which struggles over governance are conducted and examining issues that have animated global debates about the environment. My approach is to focus on the relationship between environment, economic development, and equity, and in particular to address neoliberalism and the environment through the dynamic of North-South relations. This approach combines political ecological perspectives, which have long focused on issues of environment and development in the global South, with more recent political economic perspectives on neoliberalism broadly conceived (*Antipode*, 2002; *Geoforum*, 2004; Peet and Watts, 2004; Robbins, 2004). I examine these issues within both a

'formal environmental politics that occurs within the confines of multilateral negotiations and an 'informal environmental politics of activism and social movements.

Formal politics is the environmental politics of UN conferences and reports and which, in recent years, has explicitly extended into the environmental politics of free trade. Key issues are about who is actually responsible for environmental degradation, what are the most appropriate measures for achieving environmental goals, and who should pay for them (with cash or lost development opportunities). Within this politics, the North is often presented as protector of the environment and the South as the protector of the poor, and economic growth is offered as the primary solution to both economic and environmental problems. This is 'politics of neoliberalism.

Informal environmental politics generally occurs outside of official settings and is carried out by grassroots groups. Within this activist politics, a crucially important theme has been about the negative impacts of both conservation *and* development on both people *and* the environment. The activist discourse exposes the North for degrading the environment and the South for promoting policies that exacerbate problems for the world's poor. In this view, much economic development is bad for the environment and leads to greater inequities between rich and poor. This is 'politics against neoliberalism. As will become clear, the distinction between formal and informal does not map onto North and South. Further, using shorthand such as formal/informal (or North/South) risks presenting viewpoints as though they are monolithic; the point, however, is to use this shorthand as a lens that brings into focus complex issues that comprise global politics of the environment.

In making this contrast between formal and informal, my argument is that both types of environmental politics involve and raise key issues not only about environmental protection but also about equity, global power relations, and the relationship between environment and development. Although the issues each raises are different, and in some ways contradictory, in both formal and informal politics people challenge dominant frameworks, whether those are frameworks created by Northern governments and corporations (often criticized for putting their own power and profits first) or frameworks created by Northern environmentalists (often criticized for putting environment first and ignoring the needs of people, especially the poor). Rather, in focusing on global environmental *politics*, it is precisely the contestation of these dominant frameworks that

is at work. Although both are important, the formal lens is dominant and issues raised from within this debate are not exhaustive. The informal, activist lens provides important perspectives about the larger framework and addresses issues that are not generally up for discussion within formal politics. Thus, both formal and informal politics show that the global is uneven and contested, while explicitly addressing informal politics highlights that the global is produced through both linkage and differentiation. The point of this chapter, then, is not to discuss formal politics simply to point out its flaws and dismiss it, but to take seriously issues raised within this framework while also examining other factors that are raised by people within activist social movements.

Formal Politics of Neoliberalism

As environmental awareness rose in the 1960s, people increasingly began to push not only for country-by-country environmental laws, but also for international solutions to environmental problems. One notable outcome is a dramatic rise in international environmental regimes since the 1970s. Certainly some environmental regimes existed prior to this time, such as the International Whaling Convention concluded in 1946, but the majority date to the post-1960s era, and there are now conventions addressing a range of specific issues from acid rain and the ozone hole to trade in ivory from elephants and management of fish stocks that straddle international borders. There is an interesting history not only to each particular regime but also to the institutional context of these regimes as a whole, including the role of different actors and the effectiveness of regimes (Young, 1989, 1994, 1999; Porter et al., 2000).

At the same time that governments were negotiating these international agreements to solve specific environmental problems, they were also [p. 237 ↓] engaged in a broader discussion about environmental problems and their solutions. This discussion, conducted particularly in a series of UN-sponsored conferences and reports that extend from 1972 to the present, was and continues to be quite contentious, as representatives from different countries disagree profoundly on what counts as environmental issues, underlying causes of environmental problems, solutions to these problems, and who should pay. Despite these disagreements, one result of over thirty years of international discussion is that there seems to be a fairly widespread consensus among government officials, as well as many representatives from business and NGOs, that economic

development is the key to solving both environmental and economic problems. While disagreement definitely still exists on specific problems, the neoliberal solution of expanding markets and using market-based mechanisms is now the dominant model for change. The history of these conferences and reports has been recounted elsewhere (e.g. Soroos, 1999; Adams, 2001; Middleton and O Keefe, 2003); I draw on these works to highlight the rise of neoliberalism and changing ideas about links among environment, economy, and equity.

The first of these conferences was the UN Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. This meeting was the first international gathering to focus on global environmental problems, and was originally designed to address the concerns of environmentalists (largely from the North) about negative effects of both industrialization and population growth, including pollution and scarce resources. Countries of the South, however, saw their main problem not as too much industrialization but as too little. To them, the problem was poverty and global inequity: the vast disparities in wealth between North and South. Further, by casting conservation as global — and especially by raising the specter of population growth — environmentalists seemed to be evading responsibility for existing problems; while the North consumed most of the world's resources and produced most of the world's pollution, they presented the problem as equally shared by all. Southern countries feared they would be forced to forgo industrialization in the name of environmental protection, paying for problems they did not create. Global environmentalism seemed like an attempt to keep Southern countries in poverty and take away sovereign control over their land and resources. Because Southern countries forcefully raised these issues, a central theme of the meeting was that environment and development are not opposed: environmental protection need not hinder development, and development need not harm the environment. Thus, the main success of the Stockholm conference is that it changed the emerging global agenda from being one strictly of 'environmental conservation', to being one of 'environment and development'. The meeting seems to be a real success for countries of the South, yet it is also important to note that one outcome of this meeting was the impression, still strong today, that the North was concerned about environmental issues while the South was not.

The link between environment and development was subsequently institutionalized in 'sustainable development, a term that originally emerged in the late 1970s, but that

was popularized and brought firmly onto the international agenda in the 1987 UN-commissioned report *Our Common Future* (also known as the 'Brundtland Report'). The report defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This fairly unobjectionable definition — still in use today — masks the politics of the report, which are in its treatment of the relationship between environment and development. Rather than trying to bring development into a conservation framework, which was the strategy in Stockholm, the Brundtland Report treated environment and development as inseparable. Not only is it possible to have development without environmental degradation, but development is a necessary precursor to environmental sustainability. The basis for this argument was that poverty is the main cause of environmental degradation, because poverty forces people to engage in harmful activities to survive. Policy-makers continued to focus on population as a key problem, but instead of arguing that 'over-population' causes both poverty and environmental degradation, they argued that poverty causes over-population (as people have children in order to support themselves), which leads to further environmental degradation. Given this formulation of the problem, development becomes the obvious solution: it is only through economic growth, including international trade, that a country can hope to close the gap with industrialized countries of the North, thereby reducing poverty and alleviating pressure on resources.

This, again, seems like a major achievement for the South. Poverty and global inequities were recognized as major problems, and developing countries were no longer being asked to sacrifice development for environmental protection. Yet it is also important to note that this new paradigm further distracted attention from the role of the North in causing problems. Policy-makers no longer gave attention to the negative effects of industrial activity — which was instead seen as the engine of economic growth — and paid little attention to the fact that, on average, people in the North cause far more environmental damage than people in the South. Instead of using inequities in consumption to argue that the North should take greater responsibility for environmental problems, the gap between rich and poor was used to argue [p. 238 ↓] for economic development. Further, even while identifying global inequities and arguing that they must be addressed, little attention was given to the role of the North in creating those inequities in the first place, through its colonial and imperialist activities. Therefore,

while acceding to the South's desire to focus on development, *Our Common Future* also treated 'global' environmental problems as problems of the South: it is the poor — not the rich — who degrade the environment. Also, how economic development could be done in ways that were not environmentally harmful remained unclear. As a new paradigm, 'sustainable development seemed to offer something for everyone, but it only did so by avoiding some of the politically contentious issues about responsibility for environmental problems and their solutions.

Implementing sustainable development was the main topic of the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The goal was to produce action plans on a wide range of environmental problems, including binding international regimes on several key issues (climate change, biodiversity, and deforestation). To do so required confronting head-on many of the political issues that had been avoided in the Brundtland Report, and as a result the Earth Summit involved a 'mutual bludgeoning' between countries and, particularly, between the North and South (Adams, 2001: 83). Once again, divisions centered on what counted as important issues (the North focused on climate change and deforestation while the South focused on poverty), and on responsibility for problems. In terms of general principles, the South again made important gains, including acknowledgment of national sovereignty over resources, the idea of 'common but differentiated responsibilities, and the notion of international responsibility for conservation.

In terms of actual means of implementation, the main outcomes of the meeting included two conventions (on Biological Diversity and Climate Change), one non-convention (the Forest Principles, which was supposed to be a convention, but delegates could not agree on binding principles), and Agenda 21, which is a massive document outlining what are supposed to be actual measures for achieving sustainable development. On the one hand, Agenda 21 and the conventions are major accomplishments, in that they are the first, formal global agenda for achieving sustainable development, and they represent a politically fraught compromise among various interests. On the other hand, a close look at the documents themselves reveals important shortcomings, of which I will mention just two.

First, the language of the documents (including the binding conventions, but especially Agenda 21) is not only bland, but much of it is lacking specificity; most of the actions

proposed are several steps removed from concrete actions that might achieve results. Second, the few actual conservation activities that are endorsed in many ways reassert global control over resources. For example, documents on biological diversity recommend 'in-situ' (i.e. protected areas) and 'ex-situ' (i.e. seed banks/zoos) conservation, increased use of genetic resources for biotechnological development, and 'plantation forestry' (i.e. tree farms, often using introduced or even genetically modified species). Because much concern about 'global' biodiversity centers on areas in the South — particularly tropical forests — it becomes clear that these seemingly benign measures in fact echo colonial control over resources. Protected areas and seed banks (including botanical gardens) were part of colonial strategies not only to control territory but to profit from biological resources of the colonies, and local people have long contested such areas (Juma, 1989; Neumann, 1998). Use of 'global' genetic resources by biotech corporations (mainly from the North) for private profit again reproduces colonial power relations regarding control over and benefit from genetic resources, and the contemporary version has been labeled by opponents from the South as 'biopiracy' (Shiva, 1997; Adger et al., 2001). Plantations are used to grow trees for industrial use (i.e. paper pulp), are generally capital-intensive, and often replace existing forest — and, because they are a form of modern agriculture, are *not* diverse biologically (Marchak, 1995). Thus, much of the language of the Rio documents seems to reflect interests of the South, yet many of the actual conservation measures reflect the concerns of environmentalists of the North and work to benefit business interests, also largely from the North.

There is much more that could be said about the Earth Summit (especially on NGOs and efforts to increase involvement of women, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups), but the final point here is that it was at this meeting that policymakers began to make explicit links between sustainable development and neoliberalism. Within the Rio documents, policy-makers cited capital accumulation (i.e. profits) as a tool for achieving sustainable development (e.g. biodiversity will be conserved if it is made valuable by making it available for biotechnological development). Further, the Rio documents began to explicitly tie sustainable development to a free trade agenda. For example, the Forest Principles state that 'unilateral measures, incompatible with international obligations or agreements, to restrict and/or ban international trade in timber or other forest products should be

removed or avoided, in order to attain long-term sustainable forest management (paragraph 14). Here, not only is free trade treated as an important goal, but it is offered as part of the solution for protecting forests. Radical critiques of the Earth Summit have focused precisely on [p. 239 ↓] these economic themes and have argued that sustainable development promotes business as usual, including the enclosure of the 'global commons for commercial interests (Sachs, 1993b; *The Ecologist*, 1993). Vandana Shiva has argued that focusing on "global" environmental problems has in fact narrowed the agenda and 'transforms the environmental crisis from being a reason for change into a reason for strengthening the status quo (Shiva, 1993: 149, 151). (For more on radical, activist critiques, see the following section.)

Ten years later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002, further entrenched the idea that sustainable development should be linked to neoliberal free trade (Barber, 2003; Pallemmaerts, 2003; Wapner, 2003). The intervening decade in many ways saw free trade and 'globalization eclipse sustainable development as the global hot topic, and the WSSD reflects this in several ways. First, unlike past decades in which each new conference and report pushed the environmental agenda in new directions, the purpose of the WSSD was simply to assess progress implementing Agenda 21, and to create an action plan for further implementation. The WSSD did have some successes, such as new targets on key problems (e.g. on providing sanitary drinking water to the world's people), and, for the first time, mentioning ethics and corporate responsibility. However, these successes were tempered by an overall weakness of approach. As one commentary put it, subtle wording changes shifted the Plan of Implementation from 'a promising document outlining commitments and obligations to one filled with voluntary options and choices, and may actually have watered down principles affirmed in the Rio declaration' (La Vina et al., 2003: 64).

Second, the approach institutionalized in WSSD documents shows that sustainable development is increasingly being subordinated to neoliberalism — or, rather, proponents promote neoliberalism as synonymous with sustainable development. Following on from Rio, policy-makers emphasize free trade as a means to achieve sustainable development. Not only are commitments to trade sprinkled throughout the WSSD documents, but there is a section of the Plan of Implementation devoted explicitly to 'sustainable development in a globalizing world (United Nations, 2002: 37–

9). While this section starts by saying ‘globalization offers opportunities and challenges for sustainable development, the discussion goes on to treat the challenges not as ones that result from ‘globalization but those to which globalization can be the solution. The plan promotes free trade and investment, and in particular encourages developing countries to increase their level of participation in free trade. Indeed, there is an explicit commitment to ‘implement the outcomes of the Doha Ministerial Conference by the members of the World Trade Organization’ — in other words, we can only achieve sustainable development if we implement WTO agreements. From this perspective, free trade does not present any potential challenges to the sustainable development agenda, but is simply a means to achieve this end.

Another way the WSSD shifted the sustainable development agenda more firmly in the direction of neoliberalism was through ‘voluntary partnerships, in which governments work with the private sector (primarily businesses, but also NGOs) to achieve particular goals (Pallemaerts, 2003). The formal recognition and endorsement of such partnerships is often cited as a success of the WSSD, because such partnerships can move beyond the gridlock that occurs when governmental negotiations stagnate (La Vina et al., 2003). Such partnerships are neoliberal in several senses. First, they represent a mistrust of government and work to ‘downsize government by shifting state activities to non-state actors. Second, by bringing in private business they require a basic trust that goals of the private sector are congruent with larger societal goals. Third, by emphasizing the private sector — both business and NGOs — they decrease public accountability and get governments ‘off the hook. Also, to the extent they are financed with public funds, partnerships can divert funds from existing programs. Thus, partnerships, in connection with the emphasis on encouraging free trade and implementing the WTO agreement, are emblematic of a private, market-based approach to environmental protection.

It seems, then, that the WSSD represents the triumph of neoliberalism as a framework for sustainable development — what Steven Bernstein (2001) calls the ‘compromise of liberal environmentalism. This shift within global environmental politics toward neoliberalism is consistent with a general trend toward neoliberal environmentalism within countries of the North, especially the US (*Geoforum*, 2004). The WSSD also represents the triumph of ‘development over ‘environment. Paul Wapner (2003) argues that at the WSSD, the North and South to some extent swapped positions.

Governments of the South increasingly expressed concern about environmental issues (while not abandoning concerns about development), and the North largely abandoned its 'environmentalist cloak and argued explicitly for economic development, particularly in the form of economic globalization-cum-free-trade (this was particularly true of the US). Whereas the Stockholm conference thirty years earlier was mainly about conservation with a developmental angle, the Johannesburg conference was mainly about development, with an environmental angle.

This does not mean that the North and South agree now on all issues regarding environment [p. 240 ↓] and development. Many governments of the South continue to highlight the North's contribution to environmental problems, insist that the South be allowed to 'develop, and argue that traditional environmentalism is itself a form of intrusion and neo-colonialism. However, within this formal politics, the emphasis on development by the South has also served the purposes of the North (Sachs, 1993a). The North continues to abdicate responsibility for environmental problems, even as the South has tried to bring issues of unequal consumption onto the agenda (this is a large part of what animates the politics of climate change). The South has had much less success in raising such issues of responsibility than it has in arguing for economic growth, and the reason seems to be that unimpeded economic activity is also good for Northern governments and businesses, whereas blaming the North for environmental problems is not. That the environmental agenda has shifted over time to take into account the economic needs of Southern countries represents a real win on the part of the South, yet it seems to have come at the cost of not blaming the North for any environmental or economic problems, with the result that today sustainable development is subordinate to the 'free market. This is politics within neo-liberalism; few in formal politics really question the economic frame, instead raising questions about how to develop, who is responsible, who pays, and so forth. That sustainable development has become neoliberal should be no surprise, as it was this possibility that made it so attractive in the first place.

Informal Politics Against Neoliberalism

Formal environmental politics raises a host of important questions about environment, economy, and equity, yet these do not exhaust global environmental politics. Much

political activity happens outside of governmental negotiation, carried out by various non-state actors, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen groups. These groups often try to influence what governments do, but they also target other groups, including inter-governmental organizations, corporations, and individual people.

The rise of NGOs, in particular, has received a lot of academic attention, and many commentators have argued that there is a new 'global civil society, comprising not just environmental groups, but also groups active on issues such as human and women's rights (Fisher, 1993; Princen and Finger, 1994; Newell, 2000; Tamiotti and Finger, 2001; Warkentin, 2001; Wapner, 2002). Many NGOs argue for a more substantial role for civil society in formal politics, particularly at the global level. Much attention has been given to the role of NGOs in forums such as the 1992 Earth Summit and the 2002 WSSD, and there is now a significant literature on the direct effectiveness of NGOs in these settings (Arts, 1998, 2001; Betsill and Corell, 2001; Humphreys, 2004). Many international NGOs also work directly on conservation projects. For example, well-known groups such as WWF and Conservation International not only advocate protected areas in environmentally sensitive areas, but actively work to establish them around the world (especially in the South). As would be expected given debates that drive formal environmental politics, these activities are politically charged, as some see them as a form of neo-colonialism — an 'ecologically updated version of the White Man's Burden — that places environmental demands above the needs of people and takes control of land and resources away from local people and governments (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997: 104). Thus, while NGOs are outside formal multilateral proceedings, they do not necessarily challenge dominant frameworks.

Indeed, institutionalized NGOs, which try to engage formal politics, can be co-opted and are 'not necessarily a democratizing force within global governance, while an alternative rests in the grassroots movements that resist the dominant framework, and even call for dismantling existing governance systems (Williams and Ford, 1998: 276). Many citizens groups work outside formal politics and openly challenge environmental and developmental frameworks. There are many thousands of such groups around the world, working on a very wide range of issues and holding diverse perspectives, yet they are often linked in 'transnational advocacy networks; in these networks, activists 'try not only to influence policy outcomes, but to transform the terms and nature of the debate (Keck and Sikkink, 1998: 2). Here, I focus especially on groups that broadly can

be grouped into the 'grassroots globalization' movement (or 'globalization from below') (Evans, 2000; Gill, 2000; Graeber, 2002).

Movement activists have largely engaged in the politics of protest, with the immediate goal of stopping particular meetings and projects and a long-term goal of raising public awareness and undermining the neoliberal project. Because such change requires alternative visions, grassroots globalization activists have also created events, the most prominent of which is the World Social Forum, at which myriad activists gather to 'coordinate actions and articulate shared visions for global change (Smith, 2004: 413; see also Fisher and Ponniah, 2003, for voices from the WSF). Although this is not a single movement, as it comprises groups working on issues ranging from working conditions to reproductive rights, from land control to environmental regulation, [p. 241 ↓] activists increasingly recognize certain commonalities among their goals; primary among these is an opposition to neoliberalism, with its emphasis on profits and the private sector above all else (Routledge, 2003). As they recognize commonalities, heterogeneous activist groups at times come together into larger, transnational coalitions. A prominent example is Peoples Global Action, which is composed of groups from all continents (except Antarctica) and has been a major organizer of some of the most visible protests against corporate globalization (Williams and Ford, 1998; Routledge, 2003).

In connecting what seem to be disparate movements, activists both explicitly and implicitly criticize the idea of sustainable development, especially as it is promulgated within formal governmental politics. As with formal politics, activists show that environment and development are linked, and promote the idea that what happens to the poor of the world is directly related to what happens to the environment — yet the argument is in many ways the inverse of that within formal politics. Rather than arguing that poverty causes environmental degradation and so economic development is the answer, many activists argue that economic development (in its dominant form) increases both poverty and environmental degradation. As authors from the Indian Centre for Science and Environment put it:

the Western economic and technological model is highly material and energy-intensive. It metabolizes huge quantities of natural resources, leaving a trail of toxins and highly degraded, transformed ecosystems in

its wake. It is this very model that today's poor cousins, the developing nations, are following for economic and social growth, leading to an extraordinary cocktail of poverty and inequality side by side with growing economies, pollution and large-scale ecological destruction. (Agarwal et al., 1999: 1)

Activists argue that offering neoliberal economic growth as the solution to all problems is simply a justification for the status quo: the solution is the very actions that created problems in the first place.

Much global activism has come under the anti-free-trade rubric, and while the WTO has been the most famous target, activists have also gathered to protest a variety of other pro-free-trade meetings, such as the Global Economic Forum and negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (Weber, 2001; Klein, 2002). Activists raise a variety of specific concerns about free trade and the WTO, from poor working conditions and low wages to the possible effect of WTO rules on biodiversity (Brecher et al., 2002; Friends of the Earth, 2002). One theme is concern about the effect on national sovereignty of free trade rules, as codified in the WTO and other, regional free trade agreements. The free trade agenda is an overarching framework to which all trade-related actions (including national laws) must conform; a WTO dispute resolution panel can rule individual laws to be illegal under WTO rules. While some governments from the South are concerned that WTO agreements could — in the name of global harmonization — force labor or environmental standards on them, many activists are more concerned that WTO rules could undermine existing (or future) protective regulations. Both labor and environmental activists are concerned about this possibility, yet one of the most prominent cases in which this happened was with a US environmental law that required all shrimp imported into the US to be caught with methods that do not harm sea turtles (see more below). Rulings such as this seem to place free trade above all other concerns and give the WTO unprecedented power to essentially dictate many national laws. People from the North and South have different perspectives on specific cases such as the shrimp/turtle issue, but many activists worldwide share a general concern about the power of the WTO and implications for national sovereignty. Concern about sovereignty derives less from a profound trust in the state (many activists simultaneously criticize their own governments actions) and more from a sense that the needs of corporations should not dominate global decision-making.

As these concerns indicate, within and alongside the anti-free-trade movement is an anti-corporate movement. In their response to the rising power of corporations within both the free trade and sustainable development frameworks, many environmental activists actively challenge the idea that major corporations are generally benign. One way environmental activists do this is by showing that corporate globalization — free trade — has actually been bad for the environment. For example, activists point out that when US and European companies build plants in developing countries — or contract their work to companies in these countries — they are able to avoid more stringent environmental laws (e.g. regarding water or air pollution) in their home countries (this is true even if lax laws are not the primary reason these companies moved in the first place) (*Global Environmental Politics*, 2002). Additionally, long-distance trade has its own environmental costs, particularly as large quantities of fossil fuels are used to transport inputs and finished goods around the world.

Another way activists challenge corporations is to question their own representations of themselves as environmentally friendly. Many of the world's largest corporations use advertisements to convince consumers that they are 'green', and many of these same corporations — including those in chemicals, oil, automobiles, and agriculture — have joined together in the World Business [p. 242 ↓] Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD). The stated mission of the WBCSD is 'to provide business leadership as a catalyst for change toward sustainable development, and to promote the role of eco-efficiency, innovation and corporate social responsibility (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2004). However, activists have shown that, rhetoric aside, the environmentalism of many of these companies is a thin veneer on an otherwise environmentally damaging record; in other words, it is 'greenwashing (Bruno and Karliner, 2002; see also Athanasiou, 1996). To take but one example, the oil company BP talks about being 'innovative, progressive, performance driven and green (BP, 2004) because it is involved in renewable energy — yet it spent more on developing its new eco-friendly logo than on renewable energy itself, which is only a tiny fraction of the billions of dollars the company continues to spend on oil and gas exploration and production (Bruno and Karliner, 2002: 82–5).

In addition to explicitly environmental activism, there is also a wide range of activism that is about socio-economic and livelihood issues, but that has clear environmental dimensions to it. Surveying 'anti-corporate movements, Amory Starr (2000) describes

'environmental movements, but also discusses many other movements that have environmental dimensions: movements for land reform, against genetically modified organisms, for true sustainable development (e.g. permaculture), and for indigenous sovereignty. Livelihood struggles in the South, in particular, have 'ecological content, with the poor trying to retain under their control the natural resources threatened by state takeover or by the advance of the generalized market system (Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997: xxi). One prominent example involves protest against the construction of dams along the Narmada River in India, which is supported by the Indian government, private companies, and, at one time, the World Bank (which pulled out under intense pressure from activist groups) (Roy, 2001). These dams have and will continue to displace millions of people from land and other resources and destroy both ecosystems and historical cultural sites. Other prominent examples include the movement of the Ogoni people against Shell Oil and the Nigerian state (Watts, 2004), the movement against privatization of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia (Barlow and Clarke, 2002), the movement for compensation by those affected by the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India (Fortun, 2001), and the movement for landless rights in Brazil (Wright and Wolford, 2003).

In all of these movements, poor people are demanding the right to livelihoods against activities that encroach on their resources and impair their ability to support themselves; all of these movements also have profound environment implications, as they involve land use, pollution, and/or habitat destruction. Environmental alterations such as these generally affect the poor more than the rich, as the poor lose access to clean water, vegetated hillsides that protect them from landslides, forest products, and so on — all while the profits from such projects accrue to other people. While many of these movements seem quite local, they are a part of global environmental politics because they challenge global models of development, target transnational organizations, and join together in transnational coalitions — even using international pressure as a way to influence their own governments (Glassman, 2001; Hochstetler, 2002). For example, Southern activists have long challenged the World Bank, with its emphasis on large-scale development projects such as dams, as being driven by (Northern) economic interests and for being coercive (Fox and Brown, 1998). Anti-World Bank activism predates the anti-free-trade movement by many years and helped lay the groundwork for the present grassroots globalization movement.

Livelihood struggles are often aimed as much at local and national governments as they are at governments and NGOs from the North; activists do not necessarily see their own governments as allies in their struggles (Agarwal et al., 1999). This is because it is often governments themselves (working with international agencies) that promote actions that dispossess people of their land, access to resources, and, ultimately, their livelihoods — and they often do so in the name of sustainable development. In other words, from the perspective of the poor and marginalized, it is governments and corporations of the North and South that are the problem; that is, the problem is not just the North, but is the neoliberal model that puts economic growth first and only. As the activist journal *The Ecologist* (1993, vi-vii) put it, ‘the top-down, technocratic policies that have increasingly come to characterize the “greening” of development are depressingly similar to those that have characterized the development process’ from the beginning; ‘sustainable development ... would appear to cloak an agenda that is just as destructive, just as undermining of peoples rights and livelihoods as the development agenda of old’. From this activist perspective, then, the real issues are about access to — and dispossession from — the commons: ‘what matters most is rights to equitable sharing of the earth’s ecological commons’ (Agarwal et al., 1999: 2). In challenging the general idea of neoliberalism being good for environment and people, activists also undermine the notion that the North is pro-environment and the South is pro-poor. Not only do activists show that governments of the South embrace ideas and actions that are in fact detrimental to the poor, but their activism broadens what counts as environmental concern. As Ramachandra Guha (2000) [p. 243 ↓] argues, it is socio-environmental issues that are at the heart of environmentalism in the South; ‘environmentalism of the poor is fundamentally about social justice and livelihoods.

These movements are exciting because activists address concrete local concerns while at the same time building explicit interconnections among various movements of both the South and North. This should certainly not be taken to mean that all such movements are ‘progressive or that there are no divisions within the grassroots globalization movement. In particular, even as activists increasingly recognize connections among issues of concern in the North and South, there are important differences of both perspective and power that cannot be glossed over (Mertes, 2002). Issues such as language, technology, and access to media tend to privilege Northern activists even within transnational networks (Routledge, 2003). And Southern issues —

particularly those of livelihood — are still not foremost for many Northern activists, which calls into question a cohesive ‘globalization from below’ (Glassman, 2001).

For example, in contrast to Guha's work cited above, in which he places livelihood issues at the center, in their book *Globalization from Below*, activists Jeremy Brecher et al. (2002) do not directly address issues of livelihood and dispossession; they allude to them in their discussions of debt and debt relief, but nowhere do they make them explicit or put them at the center. Northern activists, it seems, are being educated about global issues by being in this transnational movement; this is especially true of Northern environmentalists, many of whom tend to see livelihood concerns as threats to the environment, rather than as environmental concerns. In these ways, the transnational, grassroots globalization movement still struggles with North-South issues, even while subverting the dominant imaginary of formal politics, in which governments from the North and South clash over particular measures while agreeing on the larger framework. In other words, activists broaden the discussion by raising a host of socio-environmental issues that are never considered — and are actively suppressed — within the neoliberal framework promoted by governments of both the North and South.

Discussion

While it is clear that informal, activist politics *against* neoliberalism and neoliberal models of sustainable development has a critical edge that is missing from formal, governmental politics *of* neoliberalism, my aim is not to romanticize activist politics, nor to argue that formal politics should be dismissed as ideological. Discussions within both are important, and show the impossibility of a completely hegemonic position of any kind; there is indeed a politics of the global environment. It is essential to understand ‘critical’ positions within both debates if we are ever to address problems of environment, economy, and equity. Certainly if one wants to understand global politics of the environment, one must understand both debates, even if at times they are contradictory. But in a larger sense, both formal and informal global politics of the environment importantly show that issues of environment, economy, and equity cannot be divorced; they are inherently intertwined. Not only are environmental and equity issues influenced by economic decisions, but both also influence economic outcomes. This highlights the significance of ‘the global environment not only for those who care

directly about the environment/nature, but for those who aim to understand capitalism and uneven development: environmental questions are at the center of the politics of capitalism today.

A brief example — the shrimp/turtle case mentioned earlier — can illustrate the utility of looking through both formal and informal lenses to understand the linked politics of the environment and capitalism. The US has domestic laws requiring shrimp fishers to use ‘turtle excluder devices’ so that sea turtles — some of which are endangered — are not caught in shrimp nets. The US, under pressure from environmentalists, extended these laws to the international arena by requiring all countries that wished to export shrimp to the US to be able to document that fishing practices are not harmful. Affected countries in Asia — Malaysia, India, Pakistan, and Thailand — argued that these laws were illegal under WTO rules because they were not strictly environmental laws, but acted as trade barriers. The WTO agreed, and forced the US to change its laws and the ways they applied them. Several years later the WTO did uphold modified versions of these laws (a fact that is often not mentioned by anti-WTO activists) (see DeS-ombre and Barkin, 2002, for discussion). That these laws could be undermined in the name of free trade was a major blow to environmentalists, given that such laws were considered major accomplishments of the US environmental movement. These cases have since been used by US environmentalists and various (mainly Northern) anti-free-trade activists as examples of the ways that the free trade agenda is inherently anti-environmental, especially as free trade rules conflict with multilateral environmental agreements (Eckersley, 2004). This suggests that political action should be oriented toward supporting the nation-state from this assault on its sovereignty. Here we have debates about governance.

But how does this issue look when viewed from within the larger context of both formal and informal global environmental politics? *Formal global environmental politics* brings into focus the long [p. 244 ↓] history of unfair trade, in which Southern countries (and colonies before that) were to be markets for products of the US and European countries, but not the other way around. Viewed from this perspective, these US environmental laws regulating imports do seem protectionist and unfair. The technology required to meet the requirements of the US law may be prohibitively expensive (and may even come from the US), which would make it impossible for industries to compete in the US market. Thus, in the name of environmental protection,

the US continues to exclude products from Southern countries. This means that Southern countries are right to argue that they are forced to pay (in lost development opportunities) for environmental protection and economic development in the US — while the environmental effect of US consumption patterns is completely ignored.

Informal global environmental politics, however, raises additional issues. The type of development being promoted by Southern governments — that is, export-oriented, industrial fishing — is exactly the type of activity that leads to displacing people from their resources. Viewed from this perspective, US environmental laws are not the only problem, rather it is an entire development model that is not only bad for sea turtles, but is also bad for local people, who face enclosure of the commons and new rounds of dispossession. Further, once environmental issues are recognized to include not only species protection but also control over resources, the claim that the US is pro-environmental becomes even less tenable. (Similar points could be made about Northern agricultural subsidies, controversy over which brought down the Cancun round of WTO negotiations in 2003.) These activist perspectives are largely absent from discussion about trade and environment; even when commentators do not accept that trade is inherently good for the environment and are critical of existing free trade agreements and the way they have been implemented, they still do not talk about linked socio-environmental dimensions of livelihood issues (Deere and Esty, 2002; Gallagher and Werksman, 2002; Sampson and Chambers, 2002).

Thus, formal/governmental and informal/activist politics both cast light on these complex issues. Whereas environmentalists have often treated environmental issues separately from — or dominant to — socio-economic ones, both formal and informal politics have challenged this view by linking socio-economic and environmental issues in a variety of ways. In other words, it is not wrong for Southern governments to call Northern governments on their double standards. On the other hand, this is not the entire story, as the policies promoted by Southern governments might be equally bad for marginalized people and environments, as is a major argument of many activists. Thus, activists raise important issues that challenge the neoliberal assumptions that underlie sustainable development. As I have shown, the idea of sustainable development, while initially showing some promise and expressing some major wins for countries of the South, has largely embraced and been defined by a neoliberal approach to the environment, in which the 'free market is the solution to all

problems, both economic and environmental. This is where the official, institutional debate stands today, as different players argue for different approaches to sustainable development, free trade, and so on. This is also where the activist perspective takes off, challenging the whole notion of sustainable development in its neoliberal guise. This is the complexity of global environmental politics today. With its emphasis on relationships between places and scales (rather than on the erasure of place in the face of globalization), political geography, broadly defined, has much to offer for understanding these complex debates. This is a field with much room for growth, and as political geographers continue to engage these issues they will yield new insights not only about environmental conflict, but also global power relations, inequality, and uneven development.

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