

Environmental Issues in Political Agenda: Towards Civil Environmentalism*

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ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS: GLOBAL SCENARIO

Environmental concern has become firmly established in the mainstream agenda of international politics. Central to global strategies for dealing with environmental problems is the goal of sustainable development. International agreement about the desirability of this goal has coalesced because it appears to hold out the promise of a win-win scenario, whereby economic development can continue while its environmentally harmful consequences are avoided. Yet, when it comes to devising and implementing appropriate policies, that promise remains largely unfulfilled.

Although environmental issues and forms of environmental concern have a very long history, awareness of the environmental consequences of economic development was given an increasingly political character from the 1950s onwards. Individuals produced provocative studies warning of particular threats to the environment as Rachel Carson's well-known criticism of the increased use of DDT as the pesticide. Groups formed to press for solutions to particular or local problems or sought to get the political system to respond. Think tanks, such as the Club of Rome, published accounts dramatizing the potential depletion of Earth's resources. International agencies, including the United Nations Environmental Programme, began holding international conferences and promoting detailed studies of issues as part of an effort to get more co-ordinate and effective responses to increasingly global environmental problems. Later, protest movements, linking up with late 1960s student radicalism and with various antiwar mobilizations, took to the streets and forests in efforts to get a political

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response. In some places the mainstream political parties began to respond, in others, environmental concern was mocked and marginalised. In (West) Germany, history of radical protest in the midst of obvious environmental problems and the nuclear threat of an active phase in the Cold War produced the formation of a radical Green Party (Die Grunen), which from 1980 to 1982 had enough electoral support to be represented in various state parliaments and in 1983 to enter the Federal Parliament in Bonn. The image of the West German Greens strolling into parliament in casual clothes, carrying potted plants and announcing that they were there to represent the politics of life was a sufficiently dramatic symbol to suggest that new forms of environmental politics are were starting to challenge routine assumptions about the workings of the normal political process.

Most books and publications on the environment begin with a litany of environmental problems and issues, but the very concept of environment is used in so many and in such contested ways that its meaning has become quite problematic. What counts as an environmental problem depends on varying ways of judging the ecological consequences of any particular act or development. It is important to understand that the term 'environment' is often constructed differently in different cultures and is used in different ways by different people. Not only the word defined differently, but alternative clusters of issues are identified and a whole range of different kind of politics can be generated on this basis. For example, environmental politics has been used to challenge the status quo in many societies. In North America, Australia and parts of Scandinavia the environmental agenda has often be dominated by attempt to protect wilderness areas from the intrusion and excesses of human development. Here environmental conflict has challenged the dominant goals of advanced capitalism and industrialism, such as unlimited growth and the rights of private property. It would be wrong to view environmental politics simply as a challenge to capitalist orthodoxy. In Eastern Europe, environmental politics developed as a, rejection of state socialism's promotion of rapid and ecologically damaging forms of industrial and agricultural development. As part of the East European 'velvet revolutions' of the late 1980s, environmentalists championed pluralist democracy and 'free market' economic solutions derived from the tenets of capitalism, in a bid to overthrow the rigid, bureaucratic and authoritarian rule.

Some Asian and African countries ever used environmental debates to challenge a different and global status quo, where a few affluent and powerful countries have access to, and consume, disproportionately greater amounts of Earth's limited resources. The governments of these countries are less concerned with the rights of 'other nature' and are more concerned with economic development to raise the standard of living of their populations. In these countries, environmental politics often focuses on issues of human survival such as the adequate provision of housing, food and employment, as well as safe work and healthy living conditions.

As far as these governments are concerned, the more powerful nations are busy promoting their own plans to solve these problems. 'Global Ecology' is an excellent example of the environmental agenda of the 'developed world', since the global ecological issues on top of North's environmental agenda are often not the same as those issues espoused by governments and peoples of the South. For example, population control, species extinction, global climate change and deforestation are high priority problems as defined in Northern elite and scientific terms. In the South, the emphasis is on solving environmental problems that have an impact on basic levels of standard of living and quality of life.

Governments of some industrializing countries oppose moves from the USA and Europe to impose global environmental objectives on them. Hence, in the environmental debates over greenhouse problems, Malaysia has set itself firmly against any moves that would make it harder for it to industrialize and export its goods. It should be noted that within these industrializing developing countries environmental issues are still raised by groups of environmental activists. For example, in Nigeria, the struggle of the Ogoni people against the military regime has a strong environmental theme. Here poor people protest against the damage being done to the land by polluting activities of Shell Nigeria and the links between Shell Nigeria and the oppressing military regime. In Indonesia, environmental groups oppose the logging of rain forests; in India, environmentalists oppose the logging of forests, the polluting consequences of industrialization, the environmental damage associated with population growth and urbanization, and they are concerned about consequences of global climate. Further, in many parts of the world environmental politics has been used to contest inequalities