
WORLD SOCIETY, THE NATION-STATE, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION*

Comment on Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer

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It is useful for the discipline that the Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer paper (2000, henceforward FH&S)—a paper from the “world society”/“world polity”/“institutional structure” tradition¹—finds a place in this special issue of *ASR*. While the world society approach has been represented in the sociological literature for over two decades (cf. Meyer 1980; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer and Hannan 1979), its impact on the discipline (with the partial exception of the sociology of education) has been only modest.² This is unfortunate because the world society literature is based on two very intriguing insights: First, while the world’s peoples have come from strikingly diverse sociocultural origins, there is a startling (and apparently growing) degree of global cultural homogenization. Second, there exists today a level of isomorphism of social structural and organizational forms across world societies that is far too great to be solely ex-

plicable in terms of functional necessity or task demands. In particular, the modern bureaucratic state has become the only legitimate form of political organization across the world, despite the fact that there are many dysfunctional aspects of such nation-state organization (see Finnemore 1996a: 332). Thus, for example, we can observe that states as diverse as those in Europe and Africa have roughly the same roster of ministries (defense, agriculture, finance, etc.), the same tripartite organization of the military (army, navy, air force), and quite similar educational systems (state-organized schooling with strikingly similar curricula).

How can one account for these patterns of cultural homogenization and organizational isomorphism? World society theory advances a bold, sweeping explanation. The basic argument is that over the past century or two there has emerged a “global society” of international organizations and related groupings that share the norm of the desirability of Western-style (i.e., essentially Weberian) rationality, and that as a result of the creation of this global culture there has been a steady global diffusion of particular organizational forms, such as bureaucratic states and bureaucratic organization generally, constitutions and citizenship, market institutions, and so on.

THE WORLD SOCIETY MODEL OF THE NATION-STATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

FH&S’s core argument is that the world society of international/intergovernmental environmental organizations has cultivated and helped diffuse the norm of nation-state responsibility for environmental protection, and that domestic factors and/or processes have played little part. FH&S examine the diffusion of the norm of nation-state respon-

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¹ FH&S utilize the terminology “world society,” but their perspective is essentially identical to the “world polity” (Meyer 1980) and “institutional structure” (Thomas et al. 1987) perspectives. Though the term world polity arguably does more justice to this theory than the expression world society, in this comment I utilize the terminology of FH&S.

² World society research is very closely associated with event history analysis and other sophisticated analytical methods. This arguably has helped research to achieve publication in major sociological research journals but may have limited world society theory’s overall influence. Interestingly, world society theory has had more influence in political science, particularly in international relations and international political economy (see, e.g., Finnemore 1996a, 1996b; Katzenstein et al. 1998), than in sociology.

sibility for environmental protection by evaluating the emergence of five organizational forms of environmental regulation: proliferation of national parks, formation of national chapters of international environmental organizations, memberships in intergovernmental environmental organizations, passage of environmental impact assessment laws, and formation of state environmental ministries. FH&S note that their model of the "environmentalization" of the state is "top-down" and diffusionist. Their explanation of differential rates of diffusion among nation-states over time is largely twofold. First, FH&S posit that a high level of nation-state ties to world society increases the likelihood of state environmentalization. Second, they posit what might be called a "nation-state receptor-site effect," whereby societies with many national environmental organizations and natural science associations will be best able to "receive environmental 'signals' from world society and transmit them to domestic actors" (p. 105).

The event history, diffusion-type analysis of their five indicators of the institutionalization of state responsibility for environmental protection includes a three-item indicator of "global institutionalization of national environmental protection" plus indicators of nation-state ties and receptor site variables. In addition, FH&S incorporate several control variables to address competing hypotheses.

The results seem to bear out each of FH&S's hypotheses. The data reported in Figures 1 through 4 do show trends over time toward diffusion of the five indicators of environmentalization of the state. By the end of the 1990s there was a global isomorphism of environmentally related organizations and practices surpassing typical sociological expectations. FH&S thus demonstrate that the tendency toward homogenization and isomorphism observed in other realms (e.g., educational, citizenship, social welfare, and scientific institutions) is present in the environmental arena as well.

There are, however, some shortcomings in FH&S's conceptualization and data that require comment. First, the authors do not address whether their five measures of state responsibility for environmental protection have, or are likely to have, any definite connections with actual environmental protec-

tion outcomes. Addressing the degree to which the organizational forms documented by FH&S are correlated with actual societal outcomes would obviously be a difficult task. But this task is critical. An illustration: Those persons who have traveled extensively in developing countries, most of which have planning ministries, will attest that there is uneven, and often minimal, development planning or urban and regional planning.

This distinction between the existence of a given state-organizational form and its actual sociopolitical impacts or outcomes is a particularly important matter with regard to the authors' five dependent variables.³ Environmental impact assessment legislation has been very uneven in its effectiveness across nation-states (Weale 1992:22-23). Many poor countries belong to intergovernmental environmental organizations but do not even have the resources to send delegates to meetings. Thus, while FH&S's data do show a long-term pattern of diffusion of organizational forms, there is no evidence that this diffusion is effecting actual outcomes.

Second, the authors ignore a great deal of literature on the domestic antecedents of national (and international) environmental policies. For example, there is scarcely a serious analysis of national (or comparative national) environmental policymaking that does not stress the role played by national environmental organizations in catalyzing state responsibility for environmental protection (e.g., see Andrews 1999; Hays 1987; Szasz 1994). Relatedly, in footnote 5 FH&S dismiss, prematurely I believe, Yearley's (1996) persuasive analysis, which discounts the notion that there is an intrinsic global character of modern environmentalism and environmental policy. In particular, Yearley notes that the globalization of environmental discourse during the 1980s and 1990s was, in part, a self-conscious strategy by scientists and certain environmental organizations to make environmentalism more persuasive.

Third, FH&S's attempt to dismiss empirically the role played by domestic factors has

³ Note as well that the mean intercorrelation of the dependent measures is quite low ($r = .40$), given the authors' argument that state responsibility for environmental control is a singular or unidimensional construct.

serious shortcomings. They argue that a domestically-driven social movement logic of environmentalization of the state can be modeled by including population (a measure of “pressure” on natural resources) and iron and steel production (a measure of “national wealth and environmental degradation”; p. 105) as control variables. There is no reference to existing literature illustrating or substantiating that such variables are valid indicators of national environmental mobilization. I am not aware of any sociological literature arguing that environmentalism tends to be a direct response to environmental degradation in objective terms; in fact, the literature tends to endorse precisely the opposite—that the objective seriousness of environmental problems tends to have little effect on mobilization (Hannigan 1995; Martell 1994). Moreover, they use no direct measure of the intensity of domestic environmental protest in their model. Thus, their dismissal of the domestic social movement mobilization hypothesis is premature.

Fourth, problems with the overall world society perspective emerge as weaknesses in FH&S. One such concern is that the transmission of environmental rationality from global society to nation-state is portrayed by FH&S in essentially conflict-free terms. There is no mention of coercion or contestation. The only reference made to international conflict is the claim that “in the environmental realm, interstate pressures only rarely appear as exercises of raw power” (p. 102). Perhaps so, but FH&S’s account is inconsistent with the fact that there has been persistent conflict between the Group of 77 (G-77) developing countries and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (particularly the United States) over a range of environmental regulatory matters (e.g., see Paarlberg 1993; Porter and Brown 1996, chap. 4; Yearley 1996). In interpreting FH&S’s results we also must recognize that many of the types of state environmental forms they measure have been imposed on developing countries against their will by the World Bank as a condition of receiving loans (Goldman 1999). Thus, a related weakness is that the world society perspective tends to privilege statistical association over documentation of the actual process by

which global cultural institutionalization occurs.

Finally, concern can be raised that the world society portrayal of Western rationality in general, and FH&S’s portrayal of environmentalization of the nation-state in particular, overemphasizes the degree to which cultural consistency exists. The culture of Western rationality has long involved deep contradictions—between capital accumulation and inequality, bureaucratization and democracy, and so on. Environmentalism is no different. Contemporary environmentalism and cultures of environmental regulation exhibit important tensions. For example, should effective environmental management involve “command-and-control” regulation or market- or incentive-based regulatory systems (Mol 1995; Weale 1992)? Should the burden of proof with regard to the safety of chemical products be placed on producer organizations (the “precautionary principle” favored by many environmental groups) or on state regulatory organizations (the predominant approach in most OECD countries)? Should environmental regulation confine itself to the most pernicious pollutants and the most serious waste problems in order to make the capital accumulation process “cleaner,” or does effective environmental regulation ultimately presuppose serious constraints on consumption and a shift to a no-growth society (Hajer 1995; Murphy 1994)? These contradictions are increasingly being played out in international environmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations (Yearley 1996). FH&S thus tend to ascribe to environmental culture and its “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992) a greater coherence than actually exists and gloss over tensions within global environmentalism. In so doing, FH&S’s world society approach removes the stuff of politics from the analysis of political institutions (also see Finnemore 1996a).

THE ENVIRONMENTAL INTERNATIONALIZATION DEBATE

One reason the FH&S’s paper merits attention, though, is that they may shed light on whether effective environmental control will be best accomplished through global/international dynamics versus through the nation-

state (or some other level of politics and/or civil society). While this debate is multifaceted, much of it boils down to two issues: whether action at the global level (particularly that catalyzed by the environmental "epistemic community" [Haas 1992] and international environmental organizations) can ultimately be effective in overriding the more parochial regulatory patterns that tend to prevail within the nation-state; and whether structural inequalities in the world-economy and global politics will dictate that international environmental action will be conflictual, prone to stalemate, and successful only to the degree that the environmental concerns of the developed industrial countries are emphasized.

FH&S's approach and data are highly germane to what will be one of the most critical policy debates of the next millennium. Though they do not explicitly take sides in this debate, FH&S are clearly aligned with the "environmental internationalists," but they are not out on a limb in this regard. To a considerable degree the internationalization image of future environmental progress is assumed (Taylor 1997). Note, however, that the sociological literature contains some persuasive analyses and arguments to the contrary. Yearley (1996) makes the case that the globalization of environmentalism and environmental protection could ultimately be a discursive and political dead-end. In particular, global frameworks for promoting environmental protection are ultimately based on claims that all of humanity has a "common future" (WCED 1987) when, in fact, the more striking and enduring aspect of "world society" is that it is built on—and in many respects can be thought of as helping to sustain—a strikingly unequal and divided world order. The key shortcoming of the latest round of international environmental agreements (e.g., the 1997 Kyoto Protocol of the Climate Convention, the Biosafety Protocol to the Convention on Biological Diversity) has largely been that, in a highly unequal world order in which social exclusion is increasingly a core principle, a large share of the nation-states of the developing world have little to gain, and sometimes much to lose, from signing and adhering to international environmental agreements (Taylor 1997).

CONCLUSION

FH&S have made a noteworthy contribution to our understanding of states and environments. Sociologists from all areas of the discipline can benefit from confronting their observation that there is a good deal of social-structural isomorphism across the world's diverse nation-states. FH&S's results and the considerable literature written by sociologists who work within this perspective should signal the need to take more seriously international organizations, epistemic communities, and international regimes. FH&S have documented that the global organizational-homogenization process is relevant to environmental protection institutions, policies, and practices. Now that the organizational homogenization phenomenon is better understood in terms of extent, timing, and incidence, more work should be done to specify the social processes and the concrete societal impacts, outcomes, and implications of structural isomorphism—particularly of the political sort.

Fleshing out the world society research agenda will in all likelihood require moving beyond the "top-down" imagery employed by FH&S. The authors themselves acknowledge that there are arenas of environmental protection policy in which the impetus has come from the nation-states of the developing world, rather than being diffused from world society to the less modern nation-states (also see Martinez-Alier 1995). The world society research community may be best able to incorporate insights such as this into the core of its theory if it explores some of the parallels between their work and that of the world-systems community. Both world society and world-systems theories embrace a global level of analysis and posit that there is a tendency toward a singular world-scale dynamic that affects social life across the globe. World society and world-systems theory and research have both suffered from deterministic or reductionist tendencies. The world-systems community, however, has made some considerable theoretical and methodological strides in confronting this problem. For example, McMichael's (1990) work on comparative research in a world-systemic context advances the notion that the world-economy, the international state sys-

tem, and individual nation-states must be seen as being mutually constitutive. Adapting McMichael's approach may provide a template for world society researchers to develop a more nuanced view of the antecedents and consequences of structural homogenization.

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