
ENVIRONMENTALISM AS A GLOBAL INSTITUTION*

Reply to Buttel

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Environmentalism is global in two basic senses. It asserts the priority of a global entity—an ecosystem that operates according to universal laws in a tangled web of planetary interdependencies; and it refers to a worldwide social process—world-level discourse and activity that together have reconstituted nation-states and individuals.

Our work to date has focused on global environmentalism, describing and analyzing its rise and institutionalization (Frank 1997; Frank, Hironaka, Meyer, et al. 1999; Meyer, Frank, et al. 1997) and its impact on nation-states (Frank 1999; Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000, henceforward FH&S; Hironaka 1998). In this reply, we explore the implications of our perspective for the important issues raised by Buttel (2000, henceforward B): improvements in environmental quality, the role domestic environmental social movements play in promoting national environmental activities, international conflict over environmental matters, and contradictions between environmentalism and other global institutions.

THE GLOBAL INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The global environmental regime began to appear in the late nineteenth century, spurred by a new social conception of nature and expanded world organization. Changes in the “facts” of nature first became more rapid in the middle-late 1800s. What, until then, had been conceived mainly as the outcome of “Creation,” often separate from and even opposed to human society, became increasingly

rationalized as a means to human ends. Nature *versus* society, with attendant efforts at taming and eradicating nature, increasingly shifted to nature *for* society. At first this meant that nature could be harvested, used, and sold: whales for blubber, trees for timber, mountains for copper. Increasingly, however, thanks to the efforts of scientific authorities, nature became rationalized to mean life-sustenance. Outside an Earthly envelope, no human life was conceived to be possible. This important cognitive shift helped lay the foundations for the “global ecosystem.”

The late 1800s also witnessed the increasing organization of the world polity, most strikingly in the expansion of the system of nation-states and colonies. Informal diplomatic networks gave rise to international conferences and treaties, and to later inter-governmental organizations. The process eventually led to the formation of the United Nations, an all-purpose forum for the discussion of world matters, which in turn sparked an even larger wave of world-level organization.

These two processes together, the social construction of a rationalized global nature and the institutionalization of a world polity, established the *motive* and *capacity* necessary for building a global environmental regime facilitated by environmental experts and authorities. International conferences, non-governmental associations, treaties, and intergovernmental organizations multiplied exponentially over the twentieth century, around issues as diverse as locust control, access to fisheries, acid rain, and climate change.

At the center of all such international activities lay the assumption that nation-states were the primary actors in the global arena (Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997). Thus the rise of the global environmental regime brought with it the notion that nation-states bore the

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responsibility for protecting nature: The regime reconfigured *what the nation-state is* in the institutions of world society (Boli and Thomas 1997). Nation-states that participated in world society were expected, encouraged, and sometimes even coerced into assuming responsibility for environmental protection. Countries formed parks, established hunting seasons, set water and air quality standards, founded ministries, passed impact assessment legislation, and so on. The catalysts for involvement emanated from the world social system, as did the rewards for proper implementation (e.g., Barrett and Tsui 1999).

Our story thus emphasizes a series of global institutional changes: first in the definition of nature, second in the organization of the world polity, and third in the constitutive bases of the nation-state. Environmentalism, we have argued, is fundamentally global, first in its conception of the natural entity and consequently in the social processes it conveys.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

A first question that follows from our perspective regards outcomes: Do the many changes in world and national policy actually improve environmental quality (B, p. 118)? Some studies suggest they do (Dietz and Kalof 1992; Roberts 1996). Populations of various endangered species (elephant, wolf, tiger) are strong, and even resurgent. Chlorofluorocarbon emissions, the culprits behind ozone depletion, have declined precipitously. Polluted rivers and bays throughout the industrialized world are returning to near pristine condition. Clearly some regulations, international and national, are working.

Holes in the system, however, are legend. One needs only to visit a few national parks in a few countries to witness surprising levels of resource extraction, poaching, or agriculture; or read the text of just a handful of international treaties (e.g., the Climate Change Convention) to find instances of flagrant violation; or scrutinize the conduct of only a few environmental impact assessments to see the obvious incursion of political and economic interests. The rules, it seems, are routinely flouted, and incur little in the way of consequences.

Are policies *effective enough* in restoring and maintaining environmental quality? The answer most certainly is no. Degradation is rampant and spreading. But are policies *effective at all*? The answer most likely is yes: Even a pockmarked system is better than no system at all.

Thus at the world level, we expect the proliferation of environmental policies to decrease rates of global environmental degradation, even while problems continue to accumulate. The nation-state-level effects should be much more variable than world-level effects, contingent mainly on a country's relationship to the wider system. Among nation-states more open to world society (and thus the fountainhead of environmental protection), we expect policies to be implemented relatively effectively, with attendant benefits for observed environmental quality. Among countries less open to world society, we expect more decoupling between policy and practice.

These ideas about environmental quality differ sharply from conventional emphases on nation-state-level outcomes and domestic capacities and commitments. In future work, we hope to test our views; the present evidence, however supportive, is merely anecdotal.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A second question our perspective raises concerns the role of domestic social movements (B, pp. 118–19). Many theorists place environmental movements front and center in discussions of environmental policy change (e.g., Szasz 1994), and the secondary role social movements play in our analysis comes as a surprise to them.

As a practical matter, domestic environmental movements do not appear in our quantitative analysis for one reason only: No source to our knowledge provides information on the extent of environmental movement activity for many countries over the whole century. Even if the data were available, however, we would not expect social movements to play a strong *independent* role in global environmentalism. This is because most domestic environmental movements are generated exogenously—they are outcomes of the same global processes that produce

national policy changes. The redefinitions that rendered nature as a global ecosystem and the reorganizations that rendered the world as a global interstate system catalyze environmental social movements just as they catalyze environmental ministries, national parks, and so on. Thus we expect social movements to have effects on national environmental policies that are mostly redundant with our measures of ties to world society and scientific receptor sites. (Note that in less scientific/universalistic sectors of policy, the independent effect of social movements may be greater.)

Strong support for the notion that environmental movements emanate from world society would require data over time, but some queries are possible using cross-sectional data. In particular, if environmental social movements are seeded by world society, then nation-states with strong ties to world society should have the most domestic environmental movement organizations.

Tests of this top-down hypothesis appear in Table 1. The dependent variable is a count of the number of environmental groups per nation-state "that influence policy or [were] major sources of information" in 1989 (Trzyna 1989:9). We show five pairs of regression models, without (Model A) and with (Model B) a lagged dependent variable measured in 1976 (Trzyna and Coan 1976). All models include logged population size in 1984 as a control.

In the first pair of models, the number of environmental social-movement organizations (logged) is regressed on ties to world society in 1984. In the four following pairs, we add the independent variables typically invoked to explain domestic environmental movements: a measure of resources (gross domestic product per capita in 1984), a measure of political openness (score on the Gurr index of mass democratic institutions in 1984 [Gurr 1990; also see FH&S, pp. 108–109]), and then two measures of environmental degradation (population density in 1984 and industrial degradation in 1980).

The results in Table 1 strongly support the notion that ties to world society promote environmental social movements. Across the board, the effect of links to world society is positive, and in 9 of the 10 models, the effect is significant: Strong ties to world soci-

ety predict a high number of environmental social-movement organizations five years later.

Undoubtedly, as the conventional literature predicts, environmental social movements grow best in fertile soil (i.e., in countries rich in resources and open in political opportunities). The results in Table 1 confirm as much. But environmental social movements also grow best where their seeds are prolific, and those seeds, we assert, filter downward from world society (cf. McAdam and Rucht 1993).

From our perspective, then, it is thus difficult to imagine environmental social movements as independent causal forces behind the environmental policies in most countries (the United States may be an exception). Rather, we see movements and policies as both flowing from the same source. Thus we expect reciprocal positive effects between the two, similar to those demonstrated for the lesbian and gay social movement and liberal state policies on homosexual sex (Frank and McEneaney 1999).

INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

A third issue raised by our perspective pertains to international conflict (B, p. 119). The "global" label given to many environmental issues may be seen to obscure regional differences in responsibility for environmental problems and in the costs and benefits of their solution (Buttel and Taylor 1992; Yearley 1996). International conflicts may, and often do, follow, and examples are numerous. In the United States, for instance, the Amazonian rainforest is typically depicted in global-ecosystem terms—as a world "oxygen pump," as a planetary hub of species diversity, and so on. In Brazil, however, the same Amazon is seen as a local natural resource: in particular, as a store of timber for commodity markets (see Redclift and Sage 1998).

To some extent, such differences follow from disparities in national interests. The United States clearly benefits if the Amazon is treated as a global ecosystem more than if it is treated as a national resource, and the reverse is true for Brazil (at least in the short term). Our perspective leads us to add, and emphasize, that even "national interests" are constructed in the world social system

Table 1. Coefficients from the OLS Regression of Environmental Organizations in 1989 on Ties to World Society, GDP per capita, Democracy, Population Density, Industrial Degradation, and Population Size, without and with Control for Environmental Organizations in 1976

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Ties to world society, 1984	.326** (.034)	.111** (.040)	.213** (.054)	.068 (.052)	.222** (.040)	.095* (.041)	.324** (.034)	.113** (.040)	.292** (.038)	.110** (.040)
Lagged dependent variable, 1976	—	.452** (.056)	—	.429** (.066)	—	.409** (.063)	—	.445** (.086)	—	.457** (.060)
GDP per capita, 1984 (logged)	—	—	.143** (.051)	.043 (.047)	—	—	—	—	—	—
Gurr democracy index, 1984	—	—	—	—	.062** (.014)	.021 (.014)	—	—	—	—
Population density, 1984 (logged)	—	—	—	—	—	—	.066 (.034)	.015 (.030)	—	—
Industrial degradation, 1980	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.054 (.034)	-.015 (.030)
Population size, 1984 (logged)	.066* (.031)	.019 (.027)	.166** (.043)	.079* (.040)	.095** (.030)	.034 (.028)	.067* (.031)	.020 (.027)	.095** (.033)	.027 (.030)
Constant	.159 (.477)	.251 (.404)	-2.371** (.899)	-.920 (.815)	-.433 (.471)	.037 (.425)	-.160 (.501)	.178 (.431)	-.283 (.510)	.130 (.439)
Number of organizations	162	162	134	134	162	162	162	162	157	157
R ²	.55	.68	.54	.66	.60	.68	.56	.68	.56	.68

Note: For data and variables, see Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer (2000:108–109 and app. C).

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed tests)

(Meyer, Boli, et al. 1997). The extent to which a nation-state views the Amazon or any other natural process or entity in global ecosystem terms versus natural resource terms is partly a function of that country's location in world society. Central nation-states are closer to the wellsprings of meaning in the world-system, and thus are more likely to embody newer (in this case global ecosystem) definitions of nature and nation-state responsibility.

All this implies (1) that conflicts over environmental issues will involve countries with different locations in the world social system (i.e., central versus peripheral); (2) that conflicts in substance will hinge on different definitions of the focal entity "nature," usually ecosystem versus natural resource; and (3) that conflicts will decline some over time, as nation-state responsibility for the global ecosystem becomes institutionalized more evenly throughout the system.

Some support for these views appears in the finding that nation-states densely tied to

world society are more likely to adopt environmental policies than are others: The global ecosystem view is more deeply institutionalized at the center. Narrower and more direct tests of these ideas, of course, would be preferable. Given the gap between our emphases on relations "external" to the nation-state and standard emphases on "internal" interests, further investigations are warranted.

GLOBAL INSTITUTIONAL CONTRADICTIONS

Finally, our perspective highlights the possibility of contradictions between environmentalism and other global institutions, particularly capitalism (B, p. 119). Many see the imperatives of national development and environmental protection as irreconcilable. As one sociologist puts it, "[I]f the Chinese try to eat as much meat and eggs and drive as many cars (per capita) as the Americans now do the biosphere will fry. This may be the

most potent contradiction of global capitalism" (Chase-Dunn 1998:xxi).

Such contradictions arise with changes in global institutional arrangements and are driven by the advance of environmentalism. But we see more evidence of institutional accommodation than of system demise. The marriage (however convenient) of development and environmentalism appears in more and more legal/organizational forms. The Nature Conservancy, for example, collects donations from corporate sponsors to purchase wilderness areas (see Hoffman and Ventresca 1999). "Sustainable development" was the hallmark of the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (notice the title change from the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment). The Rio Declaration, produced at the 1992 conference, simultaneously recognized "the integral and interdependent nature of the Earth, our home" and also "the sovereign right [of nations] to exploit their own resources" (McCoy and McCully 1993:24). The contradiction between capitalism and environmentalism hardly disappears under the cover of such forms, but the tensions become less dramatic and more structured (Giddens 1979).

By virtually any measure, environmentalism is ascendant in the global institutional scheme. Yet by no means does this suggest that capitalism is thereby vanquished. Strategies for environmental protection could not eliminate private property, for instance. But mutual adaptation does occur: Pollution credits are traded; debt is swapped for nature; and change, both in "capitalism" and "environmentalism," both for good and ill, proceeds accordingly.

CONCLUSION

At the root of our world society perspective on environmentalism are the "facts" of nature: that a fragile net of global ecological processes, highly interpenetrated and intertwined, supports life on planet Earth, and that tears in the net threaten human survival. That is the compelling cultural matter. Scientists author and broadcast these facts, and they are disseminated throughout the world in primary and secondary schools, and by the media, social movements, and state policies.

The central "reality" of ecologized nature is virtually uncontested. That it is also global and urgent provides impetus to the many changes in policy and practice we have outlined. The question of whether societal responses to environmental crises are deep enough or fast enough seems to us a reasonable one. Whether they are or not, the question itself is alive in world society, and it is a driving force behind much environmental mobilization.

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