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# How Environmental Movements Can Be More Effective: Prioritizing Environmental Themes in Political Discourse

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## *Abstract*

*A number of observers have pointed out that environmental movements have, at best, met with mixed success. Our paper develops a theoretical framework for why this has been the case. The work draws on a number of intellectual traditions, including theories of rational choice, human ecology, rhetoric, resource mobilization, social movements, criticism and conflict. We examine ways in which environmental issues are framed and prioritized in the collective decision process, both within environmental movements, and for the overall polity. Environmental issues often are used to energize a constituency to support a given political regime; yet unless the environment is one of the regime's top priorities, it is typically abandoned in favor of other issues. In a related vein, we consider how other social movements can effectively co-opt environmental concerns, thereby diverting significant amounts of collective energy to other ends. The theory adduced is fractal, or recursive, applying on a number of levels of analysis. The paper concludes by suggesting ways in which environmental movements can become more effective.*

**Keywords:** *environmental movements, orphan issues, prioritizing summary symbols, environmental justice, discourse, mobilization*

## **Introduction**

Observers have noted that, despite growing numbers of members in environmental organizations, and despite the considerable fundraising successes of many of these organizations, the natural environment has sustained, and continues

to sustain, significant damage (Brulle 2000; Commoner 1991). For instance, in an in-depth review of environmental movements in the U.S., Brulle (2000, 1 ff.) points out that . . . "We are losing the struggle to reverse ecological degradation. The evidence for this is beyond question . . ." He then goes on to review work in a number of areas where this is the case: depletion of life-sustaining resources, exceeding the ability of the natural environment to absorb waste, human encroachment into ever-increasing portions of the natural environment, irreversible loss of biodiversity, and human impact on the local and global climate.

Social scientists have debated whether environmental movements have been successful in stemming these patterns, particularly in developed countries such as those of Western Europe, the United States and Canada. Although there is no overarching consensus, many have argued that these movements have been successful on some fronts, such as changing *attitudes* of citizens on such issues as concern for natural resources and the loss of ecosystems used for inexpensive recreation. They can be considered a failure at other things, such as changing citizen *behaviors* in terms of lifestyle modification or devoting time to the movement (Gould et al. 1999, xi), although others have argued that the United States has the strongest and most professionalized environmental movement in the world (Rucht 1996, 198). On a more structural level, we observe only limited success in shaping political outcomes. In using the term *success*, we refer to *effectiveness in shaping outcomes*, rather than to amounts of money raised or to numbers of people on membership lists of organizations.

Drawing on a number of intellectual traditions, we analyze what is likely to make a movement successful, and com-

pare environmental movements to this ideal type. We broadly consider the crucial question of *how social issues are prioritized*, both within the environmental movement and in the overall polity. We then consider how these prioritization concerns impact a number of related factors, including: (1) rhetorical strategies of environmental movements and counter-rhetorical strategies marshaled against them, (2) compositions of environmental movements as they interpenetrate with prioritization of issues within those movements, (3) interactions of environmental movements with the political system, and (4) factors influencing the legitimacy of environmental concerns and claims in the broader culture. These considerations, though far from mutually exclusive, are analytically distinct. Prioritization strategies are critically important because, as sociologists and political scientists have demonstrated, even among successful political groups, typically only a limited number of issues can be resolved favorably; remaining issues, *even if endorsed by a substantial majority*, tend to be abandoned. The implications of these prioritization strategies are crucial for environmental movements.

In this paper, we develop theoretical arguments and use illustrations from social and political movements. Previous researchers have given comprehensive overviews of environmental movements at various levels of analysis (Brulle 1996, 2000; Dunlap and Mertig 1992; Taylor 1995), and it is not our purpose to replicate that work here. Rather, we develop a theoretical framework with which to analyze what we believe is a ubiquitous social process applying to how ideas from social movements in general and environmental movements in particular, come to be incorporated into, and prioritized in, the political process. We then examine implications of that theory in light of how it might inform why environmental movements have heretofore met with such limited success.

The theory we develop is fractal, or recursive, in that the processes it describes operate on a number of levels. We thus give instances from a variety of arenas — first from the U.S. polity, particularly in terms of its interface with American environmentalism, and then present more global examples.

## Environmental Themes in Political Discourse

In the polity, environmental issues compete for attention and action with an assortment of social issues. The political arena itself is organized around political actors, such as candidates for public office. Because of this, a useful vehicle for exploring the dynamics of this competitive process can be found in the way individual candidates prioritize social issues within their political campaigns. The political arena is especially important because social movements in general are apt

to work through political opportunity structures (Kitschelt 1986, 66), and they often have a greater success rate when they forge alliances with political elites (Tilly 1978).

Candidates campaign on a multiplicity of issues, utilizing polls to decide which political issues to emphasize (Robinson 1982). It is here that politicians decide which “truth” to tell. For example, a politician in the U.S. may be pro-choice, pro-environment, pro-affirmative action, and pro-union. Which issue he/she emphasizes, and to whom, becomes critical: pro-choice to NOW, pro-affirmative action to the NAACP, pro-environment to the Sierra Club, pro-union to the AFL-CIO, etc.

The critical question is the method in which the issues are *prioritized*; given a *choice* of focusing on reproductive, minority, environmental, or labor issues, *which* set of issues does the politician stress? These considerations become especially important when only a few issues can be resolved in any one individual’s favor (Coleman 1971, 1986). Those who succeed in advancing a subset of issues set priorities and *bargain away* votes on lower priority issues to garner support for concerns that they hold as vitally important. In such a case, ancillary issues falling below the highest priority levels, become bargaining chips — *assets to give away* — things to abdicate (Jenkins and Perrow 1977, 266). We refer to those herein in as “orphan issues” (Burns 1992).

Should such a “crunch time” occur — a situation in which a decision must be made among a number of endorsed issues — a pertinent political question becomes *which* issue the candidate would choose. Consider that, for years, politicians have acquired both environmental and union votes by appearing to favor both positions. Only during crunch times do a politician’s priorities become clear. For example, Walter Mondale and Paul Simon, both prominent former U.S. senators from major union areas, campaigned as both pro-union and pro-environment representatives. During times of choice, they almost invariably chose manufacturing industries over the environment (Schneider 1987). They nonetheless continued to garner the support of environmental groups, despite action inimical to those groups.

More recently, Al Gore, a candidate often identified as an “environmentalist,” lent support to a variety of measures that directly or indirectly led to environmental damage. For example, after writing that environmental concerns should be the “central organizing principle” of social and political action (Gore 1992), he was instrumental in the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). While NAFTA contained minimal environmentally-friendly language, NAFTA’s priority was not the natural environment and, in some ways, NAFTA was directly counter to environmental concerns (for a discussion, see Mayer and Hoch 1993). In both examples, politicians continued to receive the

support of environmentalists, despite not adhering to their political rhetoric, and in some cases, directly engaging in action that had negative environmental consequences.

In Gore's case, such actions led to a dilution of support from some environmentalists, thereby giving life to an otherwise moribund Green Party candidacy of Ralph Nader. Yet the overall effect was to divide and squander environmental support, thereby facilitating the ascendance of a candidate (G.W. Bush) to be elected with virtually no engagement of environmental concerns whatsoever.

These illustrations are not so much about any particular politician, as about a general phenomenon. During a crunch time, when the candidate is forced to choose among endorsed issues, these orphan issues tend to be sacrificed. We term this behavior "*crunch time prioritization*," and it is found in a number of political contexts. There are three considerations for predicting when these crunch times prioritizations will occur: (1) the power of a side relative to the opposition; (2) the scarcity of resources; and (3) the ability to assume the moral 'high road' in the bargain (which is, at least potentially, a function of the degree to which the opposition is successful in framing *its* priorities in terms of dominant cultural symbols).

Taking the issue of power first, if one side (e.g., the "left") has more power than the other side, it is able to enact many policy changes in its favor, even those of lower priority. In contrast, the opposition, by nature of possessing less power, must carefully choose amongst its priorities.<sup>2</sup> Yet even a powerful party or interest group must invest that power in a concerted way, by adhering to a set of priorities, or its power will be squandered through fights from within.

Closely parallel to the issue of power is the second consideration of scarcity. The social movement sector must compete with other sectors and industries for the resources of the population. At the individual level, for many or most constituents, the allocation of resources to basic needs, such as food and shelter, has a considerably higher political priority than social movement issues. These social movements benefit from the satiation of these other wants, whereby, except during crisis times, the social movement sector is a considerably lesser priority (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1224).

This phenomenon is true at different levels of analysis, including at the societal level. During times of abundance, lower priority issues can be attended to because there are myriad resources to circulate. An example of this process can be illustrated by comparing core and peripheral countries in the world system. The United States has a relative abundance of resources, and its polity can consider both economic development and environmental protectionism, which manifests itself through agencies such as the Environmental Protection

Agency (Paige 1998). In contrast, a peripheral country like the Congo has much more limited resources and its citizens are thus more likely to see themselves as having to choose between the destruction of the rain forest or economic development. It is here that the rain forest has become an orphan issue while economic development is promoted despite the environmental costs (Whitefield 1998; Lanjouw 1999). This is not to imply that the choice is necessarily one that is positive for the economy *or* the environment.

Because a politician typically comes to be associated with specific issues and continues to *talk* about advocating, orphan issues like the environment serve the additional purpose of continuing to *energize* a constituency to continue to support that politician, thereby adding to the politician's power base. In fact, on many occasions, supporters of the environmental movement considered mobilizing resources a lesser priority, because they believed that a politician was addressing their concerns. This would have a significant negative impact on successes (Edelman 1971). Nonetheless, the *issue's* constituents, barring some major recasting of the issue, continue to support that group in a less active way (Goffman 1959).

Ironically, to fulfill a political promise can serve to *de-energize* a politician's power base because its constituents have been satisfied and thus have no more impetus to vote for the candidate. It becomes a 'done deal', and the constituents advance to the next issue that has replaced the one that has been rectified. Ronald Reagan's support by the pro-life lobby is a case in point. This support helped Reagan to win by a landslide, claim a "mandate", and in turn to pursue his priority issues (arguably military growth and capital concentration via "supply side economics"). By continuing to discuss the idea of an anti-abortion amendment, he mollified his anti-abortion constituency sufficiently to garner their vote in the next election; and by *not* producing on promises, he kept this constituency energized (Kelly 1993; Schulte and Thomma 1996).

In juxtaposition, by delivering on promises made to a constituency, the effect is to enervate constituent support, which tends to compromise the power base of a political actor. The decline of a power base is exacerbated by the possibility of creating a backlash from opponents of a program by bringing that program to fruition. This backlash, in part, explains the expansion and contraction of the social movement sector in the 1960s and 1970s (Jenkins 1983), and is typical of social reform movements in liberal democratic regimes (Tarrow 1982). In the political context, loyalty is attributable to hope for the future rather than remuneration for the past; this is especially true when utilities need to be marshaled to achieve the next scarce item on the priority list.

## Crunch Time Prioritization and Free Riding

This continually energized base afforded by adherents to orphan issues has important political implications. It allows free riders, especially given the dichotomous way in which issues tend to be framed in a two-party system, to parasitize their supporters (c.f. Olson 1965; Fain, Burns and Sartor 1994). For example, abortion and union special interests are akin to parasites to the environmental movement whose constituents tend to vote for the “liberals,” “liberals” who are more apt to support the abortion and union issues over the environment. The greater the amount of emotional energy about a set of issues, the higher the stakes of this ironic action.

In the U.S., Republicans tend to cede environmental issues to Democrats, who in turn take the support of environmental groups (at least that of “light greens,” such as the Sierra Club) for granted (Dreyfuss 1996). So environmental issues compete for prioritization with other constituencies who also have been ceded to the Democrats (e.g., unions, affirmative action, abortion rights, etc.) (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1224; Diamond and Newman 1992, 26). Thus, environmental concerns typically are not discussed in any real depth, and instead, environmental rhetoric is used primarily to energize a constituency (Music 1996).

Thus, it is not uncommon for Democrats to win an election with the support of environmental groups, but subsequently to support other issues at the expense of environmental ones (which regularly become orphan issues) (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1224). Democrats lose, however, when some of their major constituencies no longer support them. For example, Jimmy Carter, who did take some pro-environmental stands, lost his bid for re-election in a landslide when unions broke rank (Kaplowitz 1998).

Yet this phenomenon is far from unique to the United States. In the case of France, the question of how closely environmental movements should ally themselves with left parties has caused serious breaches within the movements themselves. This in turn has undermined attempts to create a central organizing apparatus, and has thwarted attempts at taking unified action in addressing environmental problems. The outcome has been a notable lack of success in affecting policy outcomes (Rucht 1989; Nullmeier and Schulz 1983).

In fact, it is not unusual for movements to try to co-opt one another, thereby acquiring an additional following. Which group co-opts the other is typically a function of which has the greater cultural capital (Burns and LeMoyné 1999). Cultural capital allows groups to take the moral high road because they can frame issues in the first place, and thereby largely define them.

This orphan issues effect is fractal in nature (or alternatively, can be seen as recursive, or nested), which is to say that the process we have been discussing tends to operate, and at times even to replicate itself, on multiple levels. The examples given above have focused on one of many ways of dichotomizing issues: right vs. left, and to model pro-environmental and pro-choice concerns as leftist movements. This admitted simplification is used for illustrative purposes. None of these issues, particularly environmental concerns, are monolithic; the priorities of the Earth First! movement, the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society are quite different from one another, for instance. These differences often are rooted in fundamentally different value systems, such as those valuing nature for its own sake, as opposed to those valuing nature in pragmatic terms (Light 1993).

It is important to recognize the fractal nature of this process. A given organization, even a “single issue” lobbying group, still places priorities *within* the scope of its primary issue. Factions within this group are likely to form, and priorities are likely to develop around those factions. Each faction has its own sub-issues, which themselves are prioritized. The sub-issues of lower priority are more likely to become orphan sub-issues during crunch times within the organization.

Because the process we have been discussing is fractal, or recursive, resolution on one level affects the equilibrium of debate on other levels. This particular aspect of our theory is reminiscent of Simmel’s (1907/1978) “principle of emergence,” or Merton’s (1968) insight that what is functional on one level may well be dysfunctional on another. In our analysis, it is crucial to specify on what level or levels of analysis a given debate is taking place. On the international level, for instance, battles over framing of environmental issues often take place in terms of “North/South” dichotomies, such as whether the focus of the problem and therefore the solution should be centered around population control or the reduction or equalization of consumption patterns (Grubb et al. 1993, 56).

These debates affect and are affected by discussions involving other levels of the political process. For example, Grubb et al. (1993, 56-57) identify the

*central tension . . . between perceived sovereign national interest on the one hand, and international responsibilities on the other . . . [for even] if sustainable development is now much more firmly rooted as an important concept, on each specific issue at least some governments will have strong reasons related to their national interests for resisting the desires of the broader international community.*

Regardless of level of analysis, it is not unreasonable to assume that social actors will attempt to maximize their self-interest. We can gain some insight into what that interest is likely to be by focusing more closely on the social composition of specific movements.

## The Social Composition of Environmental Movements

A number of researchers have found differences in the character and composition of national or international movements, and local environmental movements (e.g., Freudenberg 1984; Freudenberg and Steinsapir 1992; Cable and Benson 1993; Mitchell et al. 1992; Dunlap and Mertig 1992). National organizations, especially those considered "mainstream" (e.g., the National Audubon Society and the Sierra Club), are typically comprised of non-minority middle-class and upper-middle-class members who donate money to hire full-time lobbyists to represent their interests. This professional cadre typically are full-time employees of the organization that compensates them for their work (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1227). In contrast, the constituents of local grass roots movements are often, though by no means uniformly, working-class and/or minority members, whereby their leadership tends to come from within, from people who have enough time to mobilize (Collin and Collin 1994).<sup>3</sup>

The actions of local movements have often been more successful than national and international groups. This can be attributed to the acuteness of local issues whereby they become priorities for the local citizenry. While these gains are laudable, it is crucial to have additional and consistent success on a more universal level. With some exceptions, in an ideal-typical sense, local movements tend to be *reactive against* some identifiable opposition, while national and international movements tend to be *more diffuse* in focus (Lewis and Henkels 1996). As a result, universal, proactive environmental intervention tends to be a priority among national and international movements, much more so than among local ones.

While environmentalism and ethnic or gender identity movements are often assembled under a broad rubric of "new social movements" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Garner 1996), there is a critical distinction between the two. For someone whose ethnicity is central to his/her self-image, that person will identify with, and internalize, an identity movement more profoundly than will an environmentalist identify with his/her movement (Marx and Useem 1971).

This is crucial to the understanding of many Third World environmental movements as well. While environmental movements in developed countries often are comprised of

people with committed beliefs, they seldom are made up of people whose very *identity* is intertwined with the movement itself. Identity-based movements, including ones with an environmental component, tend to have a ready-made constituency, while many other environmental movements, particularly global ones, do not. As Mostern (1994, 108-109) argues

*[W]e must pay special attention to those identities which retain their form from movement to movement — race and gender being the most obvious examples — instead of pretending that identity is simply created anew all the time . . . in lumping together "national movements" with the "anti-nuclear movement" Laclau and Mouffe fail to provide a means of analysis which can explain the differences between those movements which transparently rely on newly created identities and those which rely on identities that have been shaped throughout the lives of the participants and as a result of centuries of struggle.*

This phenomenon is crucial in a number of contexts. Consider the example of two movements that came into prominence in the U.S. in the 1960s and largely overshadowed environmentalism: the women's and the civil rights movements.<sup>4</sup> A number of participants were active in both of those movements (and perhaps others as well, such as the anti-war movement). Civil rights leaders, most notably M.L. King, Jr., were understandably concerned about this, primarily because of the very sorts of prioritization issues being considered here (Friedland 1998).

Outsiders to a social movement are more apt to shift their allegiances from movement to movement, making leaders skeptical of the involvement of conscience constituents (e.g., men in the women's movement, whites in the civil rights movement). These constituents tend to be fickle because they have wide-ranging political concerns (Marx and Useem 1971). The issue in this case becomes which movement is most salient to the participant, the civil rights movement or the women's movement. This is an especially important question because social movements centered around solidarity on pre-existing or "natural" groups, and linking visions of change to the larger group culture are most effective in reaching their goals (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1232).

The eco-Marxist movement is another case in which prioritization questions are critical. One of the central tenets is that capitalism and the attendant processes of capital accumulation, unchecked economic growth and the unequal distribution of resources, are the primary causes of environmental degradation. The policy prescription thus would involve some Marxian regime for the expropriation of private pro-

ductive property followed by a more equal redistribution of resources. This in turn should lead to a more ecologically sound way of living (O'Connor 1998; Foster 1999). This solution requires a series of leaps in faith, most particularly in believing that environmental problems will be eradicated once capitalism is overthrown. Assuming someone is motivated both by Marxist and by ecological concerns, how is their energy spent? In the short-run (which is likely to be of interminable duration), significant amounts of one's energy are consumed by the Marxist movement, while ecological concerns are left to be resolved at some later time. To make sense of how such a process occurs, we briefly examine the importance of summarizing symbols (Burns 1999) in organizing discourse.

### Priorities and the Organization of Discourse

In discourse as in thought, ideas are organized around symbols (Mead 1934; Duncan 1968). Ways in which people construct social problems are profoundly affected by the symbols they use in thinking and speaking about them (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993; Burke 1966). These symbolic constructions, which themselves go by various names such as "motifs" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993), "summary symbols" (Burns 1999), "frames" (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Snow et al. 1986; Williams 1995), or "ideographs" (McGee 1980), for example, are important to consider briefly here (for a more detailed overview, see Burns 1999). Symbolic constructions tend to simplify the problem into a few words that "encapsulate or highlight some aspect of a social problem" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993, 47). Examples of these given by Ibarra and Kitsuse include: 'epidemic,' 'menace,' and 'crisis.' To associate a symbol of "crisis" with a situation, for example, is to imply a package of meanings (e.g., a dangerous situation that requires immediate attention and resources) that may go well beyond the reality of the situation itself. Put another way, many observations stem from association with the symbols used in perceiving them (Burke 1966; McGee 1980).

As people negotiate their respective life worlds, some of these symbols have greater pragmatic value than others, and out of these pragmatic constraints, a set of priorities emerges. A symbol around which a wide array of information is organized can be thought of as a "*prioritizing summary symbol*" (Burns and LeMoyné 1999), because it not only serves as a device to organize information, it prioritizes it according to how central or peripheral that information is, relative to the symbol itself. Once a person labels oneself an "environmentalist," subsequent information is organized relative to that self-perception, for example; yet that label must still compete with other labels, perhaps even more central to a person's self concept.

Examples of key ideas around which much of current day discourse is organized are concepts such as 'equality' (Condit and Lucaites 1993) or 'sustainability.' These can be thought of as 'prioritizing summary symbols' because they imply an accompanying package of thoughts, values, emotions or beliefs that accompany the terms themselves (Burns 1999). Such symbols are important in thought and discourse because of the potential they have for collapsing a wide array of ideas into a relatively narrower symbol that enters, and is exchanged in, the common discourse. One may thus see the discursive processes around the environment in terms of hegemonic struggles (Gramsci 1971), in the sense that thought and discussion about a given social or environmental reality becomes organized around a set of simplifying ideas. Some of the most important struggles, then, are over *which* simplifying set of ideas will take precedence.

To examine this phenomenon more closely, we turn attention to a number of manifestations of one such battle. Because much of the prior analysis has been expressed in terms of "frames" as the vehicle for prioritizing summary symbols, we follow that convention here.

### Priorities within Environmentalism

Broadly speaking, Hawkins (1993, Hannigan 1995, 51 ff.) finds identifiable strains of environmental rhetoric, or "frames" in environmental movements around the globe, two of which serve to frame the issues for present purposes: a "global managerialist" frame, which sees environmental issues in technocratic terms, and addressable by political avenues, such as through legislation enacted at the nation-state or extra-national level, and through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which act as information and pressure groups in this process; and a "redistributive development" frame, which places an emphasis on the inequity between richer and poorer nations as the central problem.

Environmental activists in developed nations tend to embrace the first while those in poorer countries tend to see issues through the lenses of the latter. Environmental issues themselves are seen and communicated radically differently in different parts of the globe. Overlay this with the empirical fact that social processes leading to environmental degradation tend to be quite different, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in different tiers of the world system (Burns et al. 1994, 1997; Kick et al. 1996). Both the material and the symbolic realities are thus very different in different parts of the world.

Yet within a country, it is often the case that different environmental movements set very different priorities than one another. This can have a debilitating outcome on how effective they are likely to be in shaping outcomes (Rucht 1989).

## Implications for the Framing of Environmental Rhetoric

A common strategy in the presentation of rhetoric in general, and of environmental rhetoric in particular is that of “frame extension” (Snow et al. 1986).<sup>5</sup> This involves presenting environmental issues in terms of other existing communities of discourse, and in terms of the issues attendant to those communities. It is here that social movement organizations often extend their boundaries to include interests that are often negligible to their primary objectives. While one objective may well be to increase the number of participants in the movement, there is the very real risk of losing the focus of the original issue or grievance; of becoming a foot soldier in the campaign for someone else’s issue (Snow et al. 1986, 472-473).

Many of the very poorest people in the world tend to preponderate in either remote, rural, ecologically fragile areas, or in concentrated urban areas (Homer-Dixon 1999, 78; Stonich 1989). Environmental issues, especially among rural people, involve issues of access to environmental resources, many of which they see being hoarded or depleted for export. Agarwal (1986), in discussing the *Chipko* (“Tree Hugger”) movement in the foothills of the Himalayas, points out some key differences between environmental movements in developed and those in developing countries. In developing countries, an emphasis tends to be on ensuring the natural livelihood of indigenous peoples, rather than to further the goals of environmentalists from foreign countries.

There are other examples of this. In fact, Chico Mendes as an icon of environmentalists in the developed world, was in fact president of a chapter of the Rural Workers Union in Brazil, and a leader of an indigenous movement in Brazil — one geared to ensuring a livelihood for rubber trappers (Shoumatoff 1990).

The irony is that, for many indigenous movements, the point is to keep Westerners *out* — to perform social closure as it were. For instance, indigenous groups from the Philippines, Peru and Indonesia came to the United States in May 2000 to warn shareholders of one of the world’s largest gold mining corporations that the company has damaged the environment and abused human rights. Catalino Corpuz, with the Mining Communities Development Center based in the Philippines, said he came to Denver to stop Newmont from operating in the Cordillera region of his country so that it does not pollute the environment as he says the company has done in Nevada, Indonesia, and Peru (Knight 2000).

Likewise, representatives of the Embera Katio indigenous community in Colombia plan to travel to Canada, the United States and Norway, which are financing the Urra dam project, to demand that the flooding of their land be stopped.

According to Jimmy Pernia, spokesman for the 170 indigenous men, women and children camping out on the grounds of the Environment Ministry in protest, “The national government has failed us.” The spokesperson went on to say that “the only option left” was to urge officials in the countries taking part in the project to do something to stop construction of the dam (Llanos 1999). In this case, the prioritization strategy was clear within the movement itself, although the priority might well be different among other environmental groups, particularly those with little or no connection with that indigenous community.

At the risk of oversimplification, it is often the case that the “haves” of the world tend to subscribe to the first (“global managerialist”) frame, and the “have-nots” (who preponderate in the Third World, but are in the developed world as well), either real or socially constructed, tend to subscribe to the second (“redistributive development”) frame. In this sense, the common stereotype in many developed countries, that environmentalism is largely a middle-class issue, may be partially correct (Foreman 1998).

As Bahro (1984) points out, the working classes in Western countries are the richest of the world’s “lower class(es).” Many people in developed countries, particularly environmental Marxists, presume that equality issues are coterminous with environmental ones. This is not necessarily the case. For example, one of the chief cultural artifacts of the globalization of American culture has been preserved land — the national park model (Nash 1982). While preservation is valued by westerners, it is often seen as a form of imperialism in indigenous cultures and Third World countries.

It bears noting that *both* sides of the celebrated preservation vs. conservation debates that have framed much of the environmental discourse in the United States (Oravec 1984) would fall under the first, or managerialist, frame. While there has been no dearth of equality discussions in the U.S., the ideas expressed in those discussions tend to be processed differently in the minds of people in the developed world than they do in developing countries.

Thus, environmental issues in many cases compete with other issues, such as those constructed around “equality,” for attention and prioritization in the developed world (for an extended discussion of how the symbolic power of the term “equality” has developed historically in the U.S., see Condit and Lucaites 1993). They are both seen as goods, but still need to find a place in the prioritized order that has room for few priorities. There is sometimes a competition between equality issues and what many and probably most Northern environmentalists see as environmental issues, but the nature of the competition itself is quite different on the world stage than it is within the North itself.

Summary symbols for the environment often come together with those of equality in movements organized around ideas of “environmental justice.” Yet environmental justice movements, whether in developed or developing countries, are fraught with prioritization battles of their own, both within the movement itself and relative to other movements. For example, in a review of environmental justice and related movements in the United States, Foreman (1998,15; also see Ostheimer and Ritt 1976), adduces a quote from a prominent black mayor of a U.S. city that . . . “the nation’s concern with the environment has done what George Wallace was unable to do: distract the nation from the human problems of Black and Brown Americans.”<sup>6</sup> Taylor (1992) argues that there is significant environmental concern among Blacks and other minorities, particularly in terms of environmental threats to public health in and around predominantly minority communities. Possibilities for coalitions emerge in movements that have “environmental justice” as their prioritizing summary symbol, but it is important to realize the complexity of the issues involved, and to make a realistic assessment of what priorities are likely to emerge from such a coalition.

Seen in this light, a crucial question becomes *which* summary symbol receives priority over the others, for this becomes the symbol around which *other* symbolic constructions are organized and interpreted (also see Gamson 1988). Put another way, is the summary symbol with the highest priority the environment, markets, equality, or some other distinct, but related symbol? In developed countries, it is arguably some combination of markets and equality (or more precisely, the axis of discussions pitting equality against the coercive power of money) that trumps environmental discussions. On the world stage, environmental discourse often centers on issues of equity juxtaposed with those of sustainability.

While in time there may be a synthesis between these two sets of prioritizing summary symbols, it most assuredly has not been developed yet. For the time being and indefinite future, they imply very different, sometimes competing, prioritization schemes. It is important to acknowledge, for example, the power in the current day of discourses around issues of “equity” or “equality” (Condit and Lucaites 1993), and how those exchanges profoundly affect how people discuss environmental issues and indeed, how they conceptualize them in the first place.

This is not to imply that anyone should necessarily retreat from the conservation of what little of the world’s resources are left. Nor is it to relativize what arguably truly is the universality of western environmentalism. It is, however, crucial to consider that conservation efforts need to be coupled with realistic options for livelihood for the world’s people. There may well be a synthesis at some point, and

developing such a synthesis is itself a priority worth serious effort.

## Environmental Movements and the Larger Culture

The ultimate success of environmental movements will depend to a large degree on how they are perceived by, *and integrated into*, the larger culture. Prioritization concerns are crucial here as well.

As we stated at the beginning of this essay, large numbers of people may endorse significant aspects of the “New Environmental Paradigm” (Dunlap 1983, 1992), which acknowledges that human beings are part of a finite planet, and that as such, there are constraints on what is practical or even possible. Yet in spite of this endorsement, large numbers of people still *behave* in accordance with the “Human Exemptionalism Paradigm” (Dunlap 1983), which assumes an infinite planet with few constraints. As LaPiere’s (1934) classic work underscored, there is often a wide disparity between reported attitudes and objective actions.

Pro-environmental attitude scales (Dunlap 1983, 1992; Inglehart 1990) may predict what party voters will align themselves with, but this does *not* necessarily translate into environmentally friendly behavior (Dunlap 1991). While multitudes claim to endorse “green” attitudes, the real questions arise when there is a crunch time, where the difficult choice between the environment and something else (e.g., support for a favored position in the job queue) emerges. A critical, though largely ignored, question, is thus how people *prioritize* environmental concerns, *relative* to other sometimes very positive values. In other words, satiation of basic needs aside (e.g., food and shelter), how can the environmental movement become a higher political priority, in times that are not crisis-driven?

The Montreal Protocol, which was an early attempt to stem the release of ozone depleting agents such as chlorofluorocarbons and halons into the atmosphere, stands as one limited counter-example of international success. A number of actors from a wide array of institutions were involved, including businesses, such as the DuPont Corporation, which saw participation to be in its own business interests. In this case, the various sub-groups were able to move beyond the win-lose mentality that, for example, recently contributed to debilitating discussions about national health care in the U.S. One key breakthrough was the emergence of a set of symbols organized around the idea of “acceptable alternatives” in lieu of the use of chlorofluorocarbons and vehicles for their release, such as aerosol spray cans. As the idea of acceptable alternatives was developed, it became clear that a situation could unfold in which all involved would benefit: citizens of



the planet by decreased chlorofluorocarbons, and businesses who could open markets with safer acceptable alternatives. Rather than insisting on a priority that "Big Business" must lose, environmentalists were able to stay focused on the more central priority of protecting the environment. In so doing, they came away with an agreement that has made a positive difference in the world (for detailed discussions, see Morrisette 1989; Benedick 1991).

### Can Environmental Movements Be More Effective?

What lessons can we draw from the preceding discussion? Environmentalists must be more conscious of prioritization strategies, and it is important to think through implications of those strategies on a number of dimensions.

A crucial factor in movements' successes often has been the ability for those movements to act in a concerted fashion. Some observers have even gone so far as to suggest this should manifest itself in a coordinated institutional structure. Rucht (1989), for example, finds that environmental movements in Germany have been more successful than those in France, largely because they have been able to forge ideological and institutional links among themselves, rather than becoming polarized and cutting off dialogue. They have been successful in hearing out the various factions, and then setting priorities that a critical mass of those factions feels a part of.

Because the media often stresses action over context (Jenkins 1983, 546), the environmental news that gets reported is often discrete (e.g., fires, accidents, etc) even though much environmental news tends to be continuous (e.g., deforestation) (Palmer 1996). Therefore, what gets reported often are environmental events that can be staged (e.g., a news conference about some report about global warming), and ironically may thus be *removed* from the actual reality of the movement. This approach is often more compelling to the average viewer, and it invites counter framing (e.g., a scientist uninvolved in environmentalism denies that the reported event, such as global warming, warrants any real social concern). As a result, viewers are left ignorant of both the causes and goals of environmental movements. Put another way, media coverage tends to prioritize news that is "novel" and "interesting", often forcing movements to look either outlandish to secure coverage (which alienates much of the citizenry), or too conventional (which may be ignored by the media) (Jenkins 1983). It is important for environmentalists to understand this, and to prioritize and frame issues that acknowledge this artifact of media coverage, while prioritizing information in such a way as to convey the essential information. This should be accomplished in conjunction

with various other mobilization strategies (Jenkins 1983, 546), that we discuss further.

Politically, environmentalists would do well to advance the discussion of green issues in much greater detail; organizers who draw on the cultural symbols of the target populations are more successful than those emphasizing abstract ideologies (Brill 1971). Movements in general are successful when people oppose one another about the details, but take the goals themselves (e.g., the planet should be a livable place) as a given. As a practical step, it is important to *re-engage* the right as well as the left in the environmental conversation. Environmentalists could facilitate this by taking advantage of the multi-party (at least two) system characteristic of most polities. For example, environmentalists might initiate this process by encouraging pro-business (and very possibly Republican, in the case of the U.S.) politicians to champion various ideas concerning responsible environmental usage, (e.g., in the areas of clean industry, recycling or eco-tourism — for counterpoint, see Rothman 1998). This strategy would encourage the polity toward a point of balance, so that in a two-party system, both sides would have to *compete* for environmental support. From this would follow a much more detailed set of public conversations about the natural ecology. There is no *a priori* reason why the "environmental vote" should have been captured by one party or even one side of the political spectrum.

The principle of prioritization is vitally important in terms of markets as well. A key factor here is to measure environmental externalities as part of any sustainable economics, so that actual costs and benefits are considered more closely. Yet ironically, efforts in this direction may be stymied by the way many environmental issues are framed. It is important to move beyond the sanctimoniously presented, and often alienating, dichotomy between business and the environment. Discourse and action need to promote businesses that are sustainable, and measures must be developed around that sustainability rather than around the global economic treadmill of GNP, etc. (Brown 1999; for discussions, see Schnaiberg 1980; Schnaiberg and Gould 1994).

For example, environmentalists could do considerably more to promote the value of retreat and quiet (Schnaiberg and Gould 1994). Noise pollution is a serious environmental hazard that compromises the collective's ability to think clearly and critically about solutions for the common good (Marcuse 1964). By way of solution, retreats in close proximity to residential areas could be promoted, in conjunction with the creation of neighborhood pathways that cultivate walking over vehicle use.

Ironically, while environmentalists typically have an intuitive and profound understanding of how the tragedy of the commons works in the natural environment, there is a ten-

dency to lose sight of that in terms of social movements. Environmentalists would do well to be wary of free riders, and thus to be sensitive to the co-optation strategies of other movements, including those with whom there may seem to be some natural affinity. Thus, more pragmatism may be called for, with a much greater precision of inquiry in terms of what outcomes they are likely to gain or lose by a given alliance and its attendant prioritizations.

In a related vein, environmental movements must look at how various collectives, including social movements, have successfully coped with the free rider phenomenon (Olson 1965; Fain, Burns and Sartor 1994). One such way is to frame their priorities in moral and group solidarity terms, in which there is a fusion between personal and collective interests. Therefore, solidarity and moral commitments are generated to the broad population in whose name movements act and from whom their social legitimacy ultimately derives (Jenkins 1983, 536-537; Griffin 1992).

These suggestions are not mutually exclusive. Instead, there is a natural synergy among these levels — a synergy that could become a powerful force for social change.

## Conclusion

Environmental movements can indeed be more effective. Environmentalists, perhaps more than most, should recognize the importance of how the social world and its institutions are organized, and work within the ecology of those organizations. For ultimately, human institutions have a number of properties like the natural ecology itself.

While there are exceptions — for instance, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States, in which one social program after another appeared in rapid-fire succession — most politically mediated social changes arrive more slowly. The dream of the society suddenly passing environmentally friendly laws and programs in an unmitigated and extended way is probably unrealistic in the short run. A far more reasonable scenario is one in which hard-won gains are slowly accumulated. In such a situation, prioritization schemes are crucially important, because those issues accorded secondary importance may not be acted upon at all.

Experience tells us that all of society's problems will not be solved simultaneously, and given this pragmatic reality, entertaining an otherwise utopic vision is ineffective and probably even destructive (for a counter argument, see Harvey 2000). In the realpolitik of the social world, things *continuously* get prioritized, and effective interested parties are able to influence those priorities. Many social movements (e.g., the Lesbian and Gay Rights movement, the

Women's Movement) have made large gains through the polity, and environmental movements would be shrewd to analyze them, and implement successful strategies. The environmental movement must pay close attention to the prioritization issues discussed in this essay, and react to them, because if they remain ignored, more pragmatically astute movements *will* impose their own priorities, which rarely (if ever) have environmental concerns as *the* central organizing principle.

For the time being and foreseeable future, if environmental movements are to increase their successes, they need to keep their focus. It is tempting to use rhetorical strategies such as frame alignment to attempt to play to a wider audience, when to do so increases the stakes of prioritization. If that is to be done, environmentalists should understand more precisely how the process works. However the discourse is framed, it is still a social construction, and a means to an end. It is important to keep the end of a livable and sustainable planet distinct from the discursive means of achieving that end. Environmental movements would do well not to lose sight of that distinction.

## Endnotes

1. Burns@soc.utah.edu
2. It is also the case that when a polity is closely divided and normal coalition partners are lost, politicians will often support a new social movement, because the politician perceives this priority as less politically risky (Tilly 1978, 213-214).
3. There are those who argue that citizens with more education will not only give more money to social movements, but will also volunteer their time (Morgan et al. 1975). This implies that the middle and upper classes also have the time to mobilize.
4. For an in depth comparative analysis of the women's and the environmental movements see Rucht (1996).
5. Snow et al. (1986) identify four frame alignment processes — frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation. Frame extension is the most appropriate process for our discussion.
6. George Wallace ran for the U.S. Presidency as a third-party candidate in 1968. With racial segregation as a central part of his platform, Wallace carried five states.

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