

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

Introduction to the Special Issue

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According to Frederick Buell (2003) in his book *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, perceptions of environmental crisis in the 1960s and 1970s were both narrower in scope and more apocalyptic (usually Malthusian) in tone than those of today. Rather than diminishing, the problem of the environment has only expanded in the years since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published. Severe environmental crisis is no longer foreign to us—not some future to be feared and avoided so much as a present in which we are living. It has become a structural reality of modern life and accepted as such, even normalized. If anything, a certain fatalism has emerged. It is now increasingly understood by environmental sociologists and many others that global ecological degradation is at the core of the development of modern (particularly capitalist) forms of production and is inescapable as long as those relations of production remain unaltered. Probably the earliest analyst to articulate such a structural view through a fully developed political-economic theory of environmental degradation under corporate capitalism was Allan Schnaiberg (1980) in his magnum opus, *The Environment: From Surplus to Scarcity*. It was here that Schnaiberg introduced the important concept of the treadmill of production—the topic taken up in this special issue. Schnaiberg rejected all apocalyptic notions, believing that something could be done if social relations could be radically transformed, yet his indictment of our present system of production for its degradation of the environment was all the more damning as a result.

The articles on the treadmill of production in this special issue are all based on papers presented at the symposium “Environment and the Treadmill of Production,” held October 31 through November 1, 2003, and sponsored by the Departments of Rural Sociology and Sociology of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and cosponsored by the Environment and Society Research Committee (RC 24), International Sociological Association. The symposium was organized by Frederick Buttel, Michael Bell, Stephen Bunker, Aya Mirata, Christine Overdevest, Brad Brewster, and Damayanti Banerjee.

The treadmill of production theory—originally developed by Schnaiberg (1980) and then revised and extended in collaboration with his colleagues Ken Gould, Adam Weinberg, and David Pellow (e.g., see Gould, Schnaiberg, &

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Weinberg, 1996; Pellow, Schnaiberg, & Weinberg, 2000; Schnaiberg & Gould, 1994; Schnaiberg, Pellow, & Weinberg, 2002)—has stood the test of time and is perhaps the most widely recognized and venerable theoretical tradition in environmental sociology. The treadmill of production stands out as one of the first attempts in sociology to develop a political economy of environmental crises, complementing the work of other foundational environmental sociologists (Catton & Dunlap, 1978) questioning the growth paradigm that lies at the heart of modern societies. Unlike most 20th-century mainstream sociology (and unlike most social science in general), the treadmill theory is based on a recognition of both the dependence of societies on the natural environment and the dramatic effects of modern societies on natural resources and ecosystems.

The treadmill of production approach is sharply distinguished from other prominent theories of society-environment interactions in at least two important respects. First, Schnaiberg and his colleagues (Gould et al., 1996; Pellow et al., 2000; Schnaiberg, 1980; Schnaiberg & Gould, 1994; Schnaiberg et al., 2002) argued for going beyond micro individualistic analyses, such as characterizes consumer society approaches, and focusing on the power of the economic and political elite to control social interaction with the environment. Second, Schnaiberg and colleagues argued that environmental sustainability cannot be achieved within the context of elite-dominated, particularly capitalist, societies with their focus on the expansion of production for the generation of private profits. In short, the treadmill theory argues that to overcome the modern environmental crisis the fundamental structures of modern society must be dramatically altered.

Given the prominence of the treadmill perspective in the field of environmental sociology and the many developments in the subdiscipline since the original formulation of the theory, now, nearly a quarter of a century since Schnaiberg's (1980) book was first published, is an appropriate time to carry out a careful assessment of the importance of this work for both social science and environmental struggles. The contributions to this issue help further our understanding of the treadmill of production while pointing to potential areas that can be further developed, refined, and extended. In their contribution, Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg explain and clarify some of the central concepts of the treadmill of production and present the case for its continuing importance to the environmental social sciences. They highlight some of the important aspects of the treadmill that are often misunderstood and present a lucid picture of how the treadmill developed at the end of the 20th century and where it stands at the beginning of the 21st.

The other contributions to this issue represent both assessments and applications of the treadmill perspective. Wright, commenting both sympathetically and critically on Gould et al.'s article, provides a perspective on the place of the treadmill theory in the broader field of political economy. Buttel, based on his three decades of work in environmental sociology, provides an insightful assessment of where the treadmill now stands as a body of theory. He argues that the treadmill retains some rough edges and has room for refinement in several ways but remains basically sound as a theoretical perspective. Obach, based on analysis of historical evidence, assesses the relationship of labor unions to the treadmill, reaching the conclusion that they have often played a contradictory role and raising the possibility that labor has the potential to help challenge the ruthless expansion of the treadmill. Finally, York comments on the type of evidence that is needed to adjudicate the contradictory claims of treadmill theory and ecological modernization theory regarding the effect of modernization on environmental sustainability. Taken

together, the articles in this issue both reaffirm the central importance of the treadmill in environmental sociology and point the way for further development, expansion, and refinement of the theory. Like the original treadmill perspective, these analyses in general share a realism that neither downplays the threat of current production relations to the global environment nor gives in to crude apocalyptic visions. Rather, the hard road that human society must travel if the environmental crisis is to be addressed is laid out. These articles thus belong, in our view, to the best social *science* of the environment currently to be found and point the way to its further development.

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