

## THE TREADMILL OF PRODUCTION: EXTENSION, REFINEMENT, AND CRITIQUE

Introduction to Part II of the Special Issue on the  
Environment and the Treadmill of Production

RICHARD YORK

JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

University of Oregon

Philosopher of science Imre Lakatos (1978) argued that the key to evaluating merit in the sciences lies in the distinction between *progressive* and *degenerative* research programs. A research program is progressive if its theoretical growth anticipates its empirical growth (i.e., if it predicts novel facts with some frequency rather than merely explaining facts discovered by rival research programs). In contrast, degenerative research programs are those whose theoretical development lags behind their empirical development. Needless to say, a research program may switch between these two states at different periods in time. This part of the special issue is focused on Schnaiberg's (1980) treadmill of production (ToP) in environmental sociology and presents articles that implicitly explore the extent to which the ToP research program has been progressive and has the potential to be progressive in the coming years by providing novel insights into emerging phenomena. Whether the program ultimately proves to be progressive or degenerative remains to be seen, but it is indisputable that the ToP is one of the leading theoretical perspectives in environmental sociology and is at the center of most major contemporary debates in the subdiscipline.

As with the first part of the special issue on the ToP (September, 2004), the articles here are 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 at 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 Overdeest, Brad Brewster, and Damayanti Banerjee.

In this issue, Foster provides an assessment of how the ToP developed in relation to other Marxian traditions and where it presently stands in the field of Marxist political economy. Hooks and Smith present an analysis of the distinction between the logic of the ToP and the logic of militarism, what they call the "treadmill of

---

Guest Editors' Note: *We thank the organizers of the symposium from which these articles stem and the many anonymous reviewers who helped improve all of the contributions to this issue and the previous special issue.*

*Organization & Environment*, Vol. 18 No. 1, March 2005 5-6

DOI: 10.1177/1086026604270325

© 2005 Sage Publications

destruction.” Bunker considers the importance of geography and global inequality in understanding the operation of the ToP. Oliver examines the role trade agreements, NAFTA in particular, play in environmental policy in the ToP. Overdevest takes up the topic of the political economy of information in the treadmill. Finally, Mol and Spaargaren, two leading figures in a prominent research program that rivals the ToP—ecological modernization—propose a reframing of debates in the environmental social sciences based on a focus on environmental flows. Together, these articles present important extensions, refinements, and critiques of the ToP, which may serve to further the progressive development of environmental sociology.

### REFERENCES

- Lakatos, I. (1978). *The methodology of scientific research programmes: Philosophical papers* (Vol. 1). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schnaiberg, A. (1980). *The environment: From surplus to scarcity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

*Richard York is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. His research focuses on the relationship between population, development, capitalism, and the environment. In addition to Organization & Environment, his research has been published in American Sociological Review, Ecological Economics, Social Science Quarterly, and other scholarly journals. He won the 2004 Outstanding Publication Award from the Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association for a series of articles produced in collaboration with Eugene Rosa and Thomas Dietz. He may be reached via e-mail at rfYork@darkwing.uoregon.edu.*

*John Bellamy Foster teaches sociology at the University of Oregon. Among his major works are Marx's Ecology (Monthly Review Press, 2000) and Ecology Against Capitalism (Monthly Review Press, 2002). He may be reached via e-mail at jfoster@oregon.uoregon.edu.*