Confronting the Contradiction: Global Capitalism and Environmental Health*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contradiction of economic globalization and environmental health. Despite the emergence of a significant environmental movement, the ecological health of many democratic industrial nation-states remains poor and the overall environmental health of the planet is declining rapidly (Brown 2000). The first section of this paper reviews literature that suggests that the inability of democratic industrial nation-states to reduce environmental degradation results from compromising environmental health in the interests of capital accumulation by regulating rather than eliminating environmentally destructive behaviors. The failure of democratic industrial nation-states to achieve environmental health is being exacerbated further by the creation of a globalized capitalist system managed by a variety of international free-trade agreements and the World Trade Organization. In the second section, we examine decisions made by these new managers of capital over the interests of environmental health. In the last section of this paper, we deconstruct the ideological tenets of global capitalism as they pertain to achieving environmental health and social justice.

Introduction

Globalization is a powerful driving force behind today’s unprecedented biological implosion. . . Yet the new rules of the global economy pay little heed to the importance of reversing the biological impoverishment of the planet. This mismatch between ecological imperatives and prevailing economic practice will need to be bridged if the world is to avoid an unraveling of critical environmental services in the early part of this new century (French 2000a:15).

Environmentalism properly understood is political; much of the movement has focused on asserting particular rights to meaningful work, clean air and water, healthy land and food, and a right to enjoy pristine areas of wilderness (Berry 1986;

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Berry 1990; Commoner 1990; Faber 1998; Shiva 1989, 2000). Since the 1960s, the environmental movement has produced significant environmental legislation and policy by challenging two fundamental tenets of neoliberalism. First, the environmental movement on the nation-state level has challenged the unimpeded exploitation of environmental resources in the process of capital accumulation by requiring corporations to spend billions of dollars cleaning up the air, water, and land (Chambliss 1993). Second, the environmental movement on the nation-state level has provoked a clash between the expansionary logic of property rights and personal rights by promulgating legislation that has required the protection of public air, water and land, and non-human life (Bowles and Gintis 1987).

While the environmental movement has produced major pieces of legislation in democratic industrial nation-states, the environmental health of most remains poor (Bell 1998; Brown et al. 2000; Clifford 1998; Faber 1998; Halsey 1997a; Switzer 1994). In the United States, for example, 60,000 people die each year from air pollution and another 164 million are facing respiratory and related health problems due to unhealthy amounts of air pollution (Faber 1998). Water quality in the United States, despite over a 100 billion dollars spent on meeting clean water legislation, is poor (Faber 1998). Despite ample environmental legislation in Australia, Halsey (1997a) notes serious ecological problems with deforestation, pesticides and herbicides, water problems, and extinction of flora and fauna. Canada recently had a major outbreak of E. coli bacteria in the water supply, and Hessing (1993) has noted pulp pollution problems throughout northwest Canada despite protective environmental legislation. Switzer (1994) has noted serious acid rain problems in parts of western Europe along with water and air pollution despite stringent regulatory standards. Most environmental legislation is simply inadequate largely because it attempts to regulate rather than eliminate deleterious behaviors.

The environmental movement worldwide finds itself in what is becoming a losing battle for a healthy planet. With projections of a world population growing to 8.9 billion by 2050, already warming temperatures, falling water tables, uncertainties in food security, declining oceanic fish catches, shrinking forests and accelerating flora and fauna species extinction (Brown 2000; French 2000a), our future prospects, if we continue doing business as usual, are bleak. Exacerbating the challenge to abating ecological degradation is the integration of a world-wide economy around the interests of Transnational Corporations (TNCs); a process typically referred to as economic globalization.

With the emergence of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the 1994 “Uruguay Round” of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), a whole new era in corporate power began to emerge, affecting the legal structures of both developed and developing nations. This new era of corporate power is an effort to restructure the legal environments of nation-states through international trade agreements signed by nation-states but heavily influenced by TNCs.