

## **GLOBALIZATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT: MOVING BEYOND NEOLIBERAL INSTITUTIONALISM**

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### ***Abstract***

**This article deals with the issue of the environment in international politics and makes a case that the environment as a subject matter is fundamentally different from other political issues. To this effect, the concept of eco-holistic analysis is put forward whereby environmental issues are incorporated into the analysis rather than the structural and systemic forces and constraints within which actors operate. The concept of eco-holistic analysis is based on three pillars (the historical dimension of environment-society relations, the concept of consumption, and equity) which offer new dimensions of analysis highlighting why traditional institutionalist approaches to the study of international environmental politics are lacking in offering suggestions for effective environmental improvement.**

This article explores the study of the environment in International Relations and particularly International or Global Political Economy. The environment has traditionally been approached from an institutional angle in international politics and has featured most prominently in the field of regime theory and more recently in the field of global governance in general. This article will present a critique of such an exclusively institutionalist approach to the study of the environment in international politics and will put forward an argument for an eco-holistic approach on the basis that the environment is a fundamentally different subject matter in global governance and thus needs to be analysed differently from other governance issues. The term eco-holistic is a new concept, denoting the need to merge the concerns of both holistic and ecocentric approaches. Holistic approaches have traditionally been focused on traditional social science, incorporating social, political, and economic factors but have not usually included environmental criteria. Ecocentric approaches, on the other hand, focus on the ecological aspect of analysis, thus usually subordinating the social, political, and economic angle. The term 'eco-holistic' emphasises that analysis will be social, political, economic, *and* environmental and that such an analysis is crucial for the understanding of the structural origins of environmental degradation which in turn is crucial for an

understanding of what political frameworks are necessary for effective environmental regulation.

The concept of eco-holistic analysis is built around three pillars of analysis which are the historical dimension of environment and society relations, the concept of consumption, and the concept of equity. I argue that all three pillars are necessary for understanding the foundations on which global environmental governance needs to be built and that such a basic framework is crucial for understanding the demands on an institutional framework for environmental matters. This article will begin with a discussion of the current debates surrounding global governance in relation to the environment and highlight the need for a more environment-focused approach. This eco-holistic approach will be introduced in the remainder of this article.

### **Global Governance and the Environment**

Most of environment-related International Relations is centered around the notion of governance, either in its traditional neoliberal institutionalist regime theory form or in its transnational form. Global governance is an umbrella term covering different types of international or transnational regulation or institutionalisation. So, for example, regimes are seen as a traditional form of global governance and so are international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the United Nations (UN). Recently, transnational forms of governance have also been included in this definition such as global codes of conducts used by multi-national corporations or the development of norms by global civil society. There is global political and economic governance. The number of global governance institutions has risen dramatically in the past 30 years or so and, with increasing trade and financial regulation, these areas have been opened up for global institutionalisation and removed from the domestic arena. As Rosenau and Czempiel (1992: 12) put it:

Governance is a more encompassing phenomenon than government. It embraces governmental institutions but it also subsumes informal, non-governmental mechanisms, whereby those persons and organizations within its purview move ahead, satisfy their needs, and fulfill their wants...Governance is thus a system of rule that is as dependent on inter-subjective meanings as on formally sanctioned constitutions and charters...It is possible to conceive of governance without government – of regulatory mechanisms in a sphere of activity which function effectively even though they are not endowed with formal authority.

In the environmental field, the number of international environmental agreements and voluntary arrangements is well in the hundreds and covers all sorts of regional and global issues ranging from the Climate Change Convention to forest stewardship councils. These form the main subject matter of the study of the environment in

international politics. However, from an eco-holistic perspective, the heart of the matter is not environmental governance per se but the relationship between economic and environmental governance and the lack of environmental provisions in the economic sphere or the precedence economic institutions and regulations take over environmental ones (Conca, 2000; Weber, 2001). This status quo determines that environmental governance can only ever be a side-show of limited environmental effectiveness.

However, this is not how the regime theory school of thought sees it (Young, 1997; Levy, 1993; Haas, Keohane & Levy, 1995). Regime theorists focus on explaining co-operation between states or other actors competing for power and influence in a situation of anarchy (Hurrell, 1993: 50). Thus the focus of analysis is on the regime, or institution itself, rather than on its social relations with other actors and structures in the global system. Although more recent variants of regime theoretical approaches have been more outward-looking, it can still be argued that regime theoretical approaches are predominantly focused on what goes on inside a regime or institution (and using outside forces for explaining these intrinsic mechanisms) rather than on the weighting of environmental concerns vis-à-vis other political or economic concerns in the international or global system. Thus its methodology is focused on institutions and actors and the explanations of political capabilities. Although this is undoubtedly the main pastime of the study of politics, I am making the argument here that environmental degradation, due to its overarching nature (see below) and political reactions to it need a wider focus of analysis in order to provide effective solutions for the problems in existence.

In the field of global governance a variety of actors, structures, and regulations converge and need to be separated for heuristic purposes, although they obviously form a coherent (or not so coherent) whole. There are a number of global governance organizations which are closely related to global environmental governance. The environmental institutions of the UN but more importantly non-environmental organizations such as the WTO, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have a strong impact on environmental governance through their economic, trade, investment, and development policies. I will not cover the role of international environmental agreements which is mostly put into practice through UN agencies as this has been done in great detail elsewhere; and it has been demonstrated that these agreements are fairly marginal to global environmental governance from an eco-holistic perspective (Kütting, 2000).

Global economic and political governance, which structurally determines environmental governance, leads to the side-lining of ecological considerations and a lack of understanding of environment-society relations. This means that global governance takes place in the absence of an understanding of social dependence on ecological foundations. Thus it can be explained that the absence of environmental priorities in the WTO as the main system of global economic governance is more indicative of global environmental governance than the drafting of international environmental agreements on particular issue areas which are negotiated under the constraints of this global

institutional economic framework. Likewise, the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have a strong environmental message through the role that is being apportioned to environmental considerations in this development framework. Although the World Bank has put environmental policy high on its agenda, this has been done in a sustainable development framework which assumes unlimited growth and denies the basic realities of environmental equity and resource access (Williams, 2001; Miller, 1995).

A large part of the academic debate on global governance focuses on the changing role of the state in the international system, the decline of state sovereignty and how other actors will potentially replace the state as the most important actor in the system (Baker, 2002). In the words of Lipschutz (1999: 259):

One of the central issues facing human civilisation at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is governance: who rules? Whose rules? What rules? What kind of rules? At what level? In what form? Who decides? On what basis? Many of the problems that give rise to questions such as these are transnational and transboundary in nature, with the result that the notion of global 'management' has acquired increasing currency in some circles. This is especially true given that economic globalization seems to point toward a single integrated world economy in which the sovereign state appears to be losing much of its authority and control over domestic and foreign affairs.

The debate about the loss of sovereignty of the state is one of the main cornerstones of globalization studies; although from a critical global political economy perspective, it makes more sense to talk of a transfer of power or political division of labor. Although it may seem that states are losing power, they are still the only sovereign actors in the international system and the founders of the very institutions which are supposed to challenge the power of the state. It seems that rather than declining, the power of the Northern or industrialized states is actually fortified through the global economic governance institutions which, at the end of the day, represent the interests of the haves against the have-nots. It is actually the power of the developing country state that is being undermined by global governance or rather prevented from developing as most developing countries have never been in a position of structural power. Therefore the global economic institutions can be seen as the exercise of structural power in Lukes' terms rather than the decline of the power of the state (Lukes, 1974).

It is obvious that the global politico-economic framework legitimized by states and global institutions provides a formidable system for the efficient transfer of resources from the periphery to the core and thus provides a continuation of the more violent or more directly exploitative policies of the past. At the same time, despite the increasing environmental rhetoric in the form of the sustainable development discourse (Redclift, 1987), there has been no real attempt to take on board the strained nature of environment-

society relations; and consequently there has been no real effort to accommodate environmental with social needs.

The disillusionment with state policies and international organizations has led to the rise of transnational protest movements and the rise of non-governmental actors in both the civil society and corporate fields. [Although a strict definition of civil society includes the corporate sector, modern usage of the term suggests a distinction.] These civil society actors have been busy creating additional and alternative forms of global governance which have become part of the global network of regulations, norms, and ethics (Schweitz, 2001). In some cases, they contribute to and shape international governance; in some cases transnational governance exists in addition to international governance (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Princen, 1994).

Global corporate governance takes place on two levels. First of all, the rise of the multi-national corporation has drawn after it the increasing liberalisation of trade and finance institutionalised through international organizations (Newell, 2001). These are structural changes leading to a different corporate climate and can thus be described as a type of corporate governance, although the corporate entity is obviously not the legitimator of this governance. Second, multi-national corporations have set up amongst themselves certain rules they abide by as a form of self-governance. There is a multi-layered rationale to this self-governance (Hein & Fuchs, 1999). First of all, self-governance delays or avoids the imposition of other rules which may be stricter, compulsory, or less convenient. Second, self-governance facilitates standardization which is good for expansion but also for monopolization. Third, self-governance is good for the image. Typical forms of self-governance are for example the International Standards Organization (ISO) which is not an international governmental organization and develops voluntary standards such as ISO 9001 and ISO 14001 which are procedural and environmental procedural standards respectively. Corporate codes of conducts as found in the garment industry are another form of self-governance. These standards have been introduced as apparel companies came increasingly under attack for the atrocious working conditions under which their garments were produced, usually by sub-contractors. These voluntary codes of conduct designed by the companies themselves commit companies to patrolling working conditions in the factories where their garments are made, and the companies themselves are responsible for their implementation. So, global corporate governance has facilitated the establishment of global markets but has so far avoided the regulation of social and environmental degradation.

There has been a very strong response to this increasing global corporate climate and market-based governance from global civil society quarters (Lipschutz, 2001). Global civil society contributes to and tries to reform other forms of governance. The rationale behind this is that the Northern or Western state has increasingly given up on its social welfare role and becomes a representative or guardian of the interests of global markets; and, therefore, the 'policeman role' previously fulfilled by states has been increasingly taken over by non-state actors. Consequently, these actors are given a role in

the international arena. Non-governmental organizations have an advisory role in the formulation and negotiation of international environmental agreements and are increasingly included in the advisory policy-making process of organizations such as the World Bank or the UN. They also have a role at the national level and feed into the policy process through advising foreign, development, and environment ministries. Non-governmental organizations involved in such formal channels are usually reformist rather than radical organizations. Radical organizations do not participate in shaping global governance since such organizations believe fundamental systemic shortcomings exist that cannot be addressed through a reform of existing forms of global governance. Radical movements can be found outside the policy process in the form of the landless movement, protests outside WTO ministerial meetings, and so forth. (Goldman, 1998). The increasingly vocal nature and huge numbers of people involved in such movements have led to a questioning of the legitimacy of some forms of global governance and have had a result, albeit not an immediately tangible one (Conca, 2000).

To conclude, in terms of environment-society relations, the global governance process has become more pluralistic and transnational as a result of globalization, but this has not necessarily led to increased consideration of environmental necessities at the global level. Although there are several groups of actors and institutions that are working in the environmental arena, this happens in subordination to the system of global economic governance; and it can be said that a system of global environmental management exists but not a system of global environmental governance.

The study of global governance provides an overview of institutions and actors and detailed studies of their structures, mechanisms, and motivations. However, these studies are silent on the origins of environmental problems and their relationship with the politico-economic framework in which they exist. Thus neoliberal institutionalist interpretations of the environmental problematique in International Relations focus on what is politically feasible but do not address what is environmentally necessary. This article will develop an alternative framework based on three pillars which identify the structural origins and root causes of environmental degradation in modern society and take this as the starting point of a new, different understanding of the relationship between politico-economic organization and environmental problems.

### **Environment-Society Relations from a Historical Perspective**

Traditionally, literature focussing on the relationship between nature or environment and society or culture has taken the rise of modern capitalism with the associated rises of enlightenment thinking, Newtonian science and the industrial revolution as the starting point of disturbed nature-society relations. This view romanticizes the environmental impact of pre-industrial society, or as Ferry (1995: xxvi) puts it, in a different context, 'it is possible to denounce the real or imagined misdeeds of

liberalism in the name of nostalgia'. There have been several studies (Ponting, 1991; Chew, 2001) that have demonstrated that pre-industrial or pre-modern capitalist societies also engaged in practices resulting in widespread environmental degradation. However, it is often argued, that these degrading practices had a local or regional rather than global impact. Furthermore, modern capitalism and its social relations are the only forms of social organization that actually lead to *global* environmental degradation. Not all pollution in modernity is global pollution but modernity is the only form of social organization that can produce global pollution due to its global structures.

The global nature of environmental degradation can largely be linked to the rise of the fossil fuel economy and the decreasing distance of time and space in the relations between different parts of the globe (Daly, 1996). These phenomena are intrinsically linked to the rise of modern capitalism. However, the latter point is part of a longer and larger process that can also be observed in pre-modernity.

This view of environmental political economy is a fundamentally Euro-centric but also technological/economic determinist view of history. First of all, the notion of the mastering of nature is confined to the industrializing countries and not a global phenomenon. Even today, nature-society relations are far from universal and can take different forms and shapes in different infrastructures even within the same national society. Therefore it is misleading to speak of 'the' environment-society relationship as there are many different such relations in different societies or different segments of society.

Not consciously experienced nature-society relations are much more significant in political economy terms. These are experienced through productive and consumptive relations, but the ecological or environmental aspect of these are not perceived by the various actors in the international system, or domestic systems, and their side-effects in terms of environmental degradation are de-contextualized through the separation of environmental from other types of policy. As a result, social behaviour and actions have a much larger impact on the environment through the environmental impact of economic activities far removed from the actual consumer, and these practices are vitally important in shaping environment-society relations. However, these relations are usually not analyzed in the type of context suggested here.

Because of the complexity of environment-society relations at the conscious and sub-conscious levels as well as at the local, regional, and global level it is difficult to integrate this into a global political economy of the environment. From a global perspective, because of this diversity of relations, it is also difficult to make a case for fundamentally changed nature-society relations after the industrial revolution and the beginning of modern capitalism. Therefore a theory based on the assumption that there is (a) one environment-society relationship and (b) that this relationship is fundamentally different from the pre-modernity relationship is somewhat reductionist and cannot be the basis of a consistent political economy of the environment.

An alternative approach is the ecological world systems theory approach (Hornborg, 1998; Chew, 2001; Goldfrank et al., 1999). The main argument posits that the rise and fall of world civilizations can be traced to environmental degradation as a main contributory factor to the decline of empires or large powers, and that the nature of capitalism can be understood through the social relations of production, labor and the environment. Ponting (1991) in his environmental history of the world advances a similar argument, however, not couched in theoretical terms. These are views of history that integrate an environmental or ecological perspective into predominantly social historical accounts. They are also views that include an account of environment-society relations as connections are made between productive and consumptive relations and economic performance as well as the negative impact of environmental degradation on economic performance. So from this point of view an ecological world systems approach can offer an interesting alternative to the historical materialist orthodoxy that argues fundamentally changed society-environment relations with the rise of modern capitalism.

The main argument of Chew's (2001) thesis, for example, is that different phases in world history and the rise and fall of trading relations can be analyzed from a historical materialist perspective as done by Wallerstein (1982) or alternatively, Frank (1998), and Gills (2000). However, these approaches neglect the relationship between nature/natural resources and the material basis of production, and focus on the social relations of production. In fact, the demise of most empires or large powers also coincide with a decline in the natural resource base through over-exploitation or other exhaustion. Forensic research suggests that even the two historical periods of the dark ages are linked to the depletion of the natural resource base, and this has been documented in carbon testing from these areas (Chew, 2001). So, for example, the dark ages in Germany and Sweden are accompanied by a decline in forestation and the local economies start to recover once reforestation has taken place. This type of pattern is reproduced over time and over space and a strong argument can be made that environmental degradation is a strong factor in world system formation and decline.

This type of approach integrates the environment into political economy and social analysis in a holistic manner. It also has the potential for a holistic account of environment-society relations. The ecological world systems approach overcomes the difficulties associated with a narrow account of the structural origins of environmental degradation as the result of the rise of modern capitalism. It does not narrowly associate the rise of environmental degradation with a particular mode of production, rather it blames the mode of accumulation which can be found in all capitalist systems. It offers a much wider definition of capitalism based on accumulation rather than the specific mode of production found under modern capitalism. This argument could then be extended to make a case for traditional forms of capitalism leading to regional and local environmental degradation. The advanced mode of production related to the industrial revolution and the associated predominance and hegemony of the fossil fuel economy, on the other hand, leads to the spreading and globalizing of environmental degradation



through its global reach. So, in fact it is not the changing relations of production under modern capitalism that lead to dramatically changed environment-society relations but the technological advances of this period. These are associated with changed notions of progress and speed of change in relation to the role of consumption in the economic system, and its meteoric rise and expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is no denying that this period saw dramatic changes in nature-society relations through the expansion of a consumer base and thus the expansion of production. However, it is erroneous to argue that this is the beginning of environmental degradation and that environmental degradation is causally linked to these systemic changes. Rather, environmental degradation has always existed under systems of mass production and modern capitalism merely saw a different phase of this problem.

The extension of consumption and the subsequent increased demand leading to more efficient production methods as well as the advances in technology and scientific knowledge are all related to, and constitutive of, the social relations of production and consumption. These social relations led to the vast extension of trade and consumption of resources and an increasing internationalisation and eventual globalization of the forces of production. This inter- and transnationalisation and eventual globalization of the political economy also resulted in an internationalisation and globalization of the environmental side effects of this extended production base. This can explain why modern capitalism sees a variety of local, regional, and global environmental degradation whereas previous forms of economic organization were limited to local and regional environmental effects. Most global environmental effects can be traced back to the fossil fuel economy; although from a structural point of view, the global structure of production can be indirectly used to make a case for describing local or regional pollution as a global phenomenon.

To conclude this section, a historical perspective of environment-society relations indicates that structural origins of environmental degradation can be found in the economic organization of society and thus political institutions targeting environmental degradation need to take the tension-ridden connections between economy and environment as the starting point for remedial action. This will become even clearer in the next section on productive and consumptive relations.

### **The Politics of Consumption**

Global political economy approaches to International Relations are generally focused on the productive aspects of politico-economic organization and neglect both the concept of consumption and the consumer as an actor. Without going into theoretical and conceptual detail which has been covered in the literature elsewhere (Princen et al., 2002; Kütting, 2004), the argument is put forward here that especially in the environmental field the relationship between productive and consumptive relations are pertinent for an

understanding of environmental degradation in a social and political context. The environmental side of consumption is a major consideration for several reasons. First of all, the social and structural origins of environmental degradation can be found in the excessive consumption of the planet's resources. Second, the dominant neoliberal or even liberal approach in global management institutions is based on the assumption that the current standard of living enjoyed by the richest 20 per cent of the world population can be extended to the whole globe. In terms of resource availability, this is clearly a myth and leads to serious environmental and equity questioning. Third, consumption is not the last stage in the production chain, rather the last stage is disposal of the product consumed. Waste is a serious environmental problem not just for local authorities but also at the global level and it affects the earth's capacity to act as a sink. This article will focus on the first two points made.

The argument that excessive consumption leads to environmental degradation is not a new argument and dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s and the beginnings of the environmental movement and *The Limits to Growth: A Report on the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (Meadows, 1972). It is based on the 'need not want' philosophy. The early environmental movement in the 1970s questioned the ideology of consumerism in the period of unlimited expectations of the late 1960s and argued that the ideology of wanting more and more was fundamentally flawed and would lead to the ecological collapse of the planet. Rather, there should be an ideological shift to considering what people actually *needed* for a fulfilled life rather than *wanted* (i.e. a questioning of the ideology of unlimited economic growth and of an expected rise in the standard of living of those who had already achieved a high level). This movement coincided with the first oil crisis and the first United Nations Conference for the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. The idea that there are insufficient resources has often been discredited with the discovery of new oil fields and the introduction of more energy-efficient technologies. Apart from the oil resources problem, there have been various predictions of disasters or shortages that have not come true. Hardin's (1968) tragedy of the commons has not happened, and the idea that an increasing world population cannot be fed with the agricultural resources of the planet has been discredited, thus also incidentally denying the need for genetically manipulated/modified crops. These are problems of distribution and access to resources rather than availability. Therefore the concern about running out of resources and the *need not want* campaign have lost their immediate urgency and have fizzled out. However, all this does not change the fundamental truth that there is only a fixed amount of resources on this planet, and although we are not in danger of running out in the near future, these resources are being used up at an unsustainable rate by only a small percentage of the world population.

The neoliberal economic order like its preceding economic orders treats the natural environment as if there was an unlimited supply of natural resources. The 'goods and services' provided by the planet are not costed, unlike capital goods and resources owned by a supplier; therefore they are externalized by economists and taken for granted

in economic valuations. Environmental economists such as David Pearce et al. (1988) have overcome this shortcoming by integrating previously 'free' goods into the economic system through price mechanisms, but in essence this still does not change the fundamental paradox of externalizing the resource or energy supply that underlies social survival. In addition, by pricing environmental goods they can become luxury goods, and only available to those who can afford them which often makes environmental quality a preserve of the rich rather than a human right. Again, this raises questions of equity and access.

No inhabitant of this planet has not been exposed to some form of environmental degradation, and suffered a decline in conditions of living because of it. Consequently, everyone is aware of the limited capacity of the planet to cope with the rate of extraction of resources and depositing of waste. The need for creating a careful balance between environmental and societal needs is abundantly clear and the link between an individual's pattern of consumption and environmental decline needs to be highlighted more – leading back to consumption, agency and responsibility.

Environmental equity is a subject that has first made an appearance in the context of intergenerational equity meaning that each generation should pass on to the next generation a planet that can generate the means for survival. However, environmental equity is more than that. It is not just a question of equity over time but also equity across space. Under prevailing concepts of human rights based on a liberal consensus, all humans are equal and have an equal right to a decent standard of living. In practice, this cannot be realized, although the principles of embedded liberalism imply that global institutions are in place to achieve an increase in the standard of living of the global poor. It has to be recognized that equal access to resources is a myth and will not happen without reconfigurations of power structures, or through market economics for that matter, and could only be achieved through a rethinking of approaches to environmental equity and justice.

As Hampson and Reppy (1996: 249) argue:

We can conclude that the demands of social justice are inseparable from our responses to environmental change and our respect for the ecosystem: attention to one necessarily implicated the other. There is a general consensus...that traditional liberal theory is an imperfect framework for evaluating competing moral claims that arise in the context of environmental change. ...A concern for social justice for individuals does not suffice when the cultural identity of the group is threatened. This is not to argue that the interests of the community or group should automatically trump the moral claims of the individual but simply to call for a theory of justice that allows communal values and future generations to be considered alongside the rights of the individuals living today.

The main thrust of this critique of liberal theory is that the overemphasis on the individual neglects the rights of groups such as indigenous communities or other

societies. The emphasis on market instruments as the form of emancipation for the individual makes it difficult to consider group rights, especially in the case of indigenous communities. However, it has to be emphasized that classical liberalism had a strong moral component that safeguarded the rights of the weaker members of society. In the neoliberalism of the post war world order these moral components are still intrinsically present but are employed in such a way that they are in fact ineffectual. For example, policies to integrate developing countries into the world economy are geared towards creating a middle (consumer) class in these countries through trade and foreign direct investment. Such policies would then lead to a trickle down of the investment. So these policies are directed at benefiting individuals which would then create economic circumstances that would benefit society at large. No large-scale poverty alleviation is integrated into economic packages such as structural adjustment programs, IMF debt relief programs or other similar projects. The old argument of the relative versus the absolute benefit still applies and is very much relevant for the practical considerations of such policies.

The arguments made in favor of collective or societal responsibility and their equal status compared to the rights of the individual are points also made by Maniates (2001). Maniates (2001: 33) feels that the individualization of environmental responsibility is detrimental to the development of social institutions tackling the issue:

When responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society – to, in other words, 'think institutionally'.

This may be a problem at the national level, and the main problem is the individualization of environmental problems at the expense of collective political responsibility of society. The argument put forward by myself operates at a different level and is in no way a call for the privatization of moral responsibility of the consumer. Rather, the argument for including the consumer as an actor in the global political economy and as a power entity is to be taken as an analytical and moral necessity for ecological political economy research. A privatization of policy resulting in the sole responsibility on the consumer is neither desirable nor feasible as a consumer's choices are constrained by economic production frameworks. On the other hand, the sidelining of personal responsibility altogether as being practiced by International/Global Political Economy (I/GPE) discourses is equally undesirable and that is why a political economy analysis of both productive and consumptive relations is necessary.

The argument that the issues of social justice and environmental degradation cannot be separated means that there are serious implications for the uneven pattern of consumption globally. If the current pattern of consumption in developed countries cannot be extended, at least hypothetically, to the global population, then clearly a

redistribution of income is called for in order to share the existing resources more equitably in order to be in harmony with the principles of embedded liberalism. However, for debates on this subject to become pertinent, the myths of unlimited economic growth and of wealth for all need to be discredited first.

Last, not only is there a problem with uneven levels of consumption but also with the clearing up of excessive consumption. Consumer goods have a limited life span and then need to be disposed of by the consumer, in addition to the waste products that are unintended consequences of the production process. Commodity chain analysis or traditional environmental auditing undertaken by producers mostly does not take account of this last stage of the production/consumption process. Therefore the environmental cost of a product often does not reflect the whole ecological impact.

A veritable economy of waste has developed, especially in the field of toxic or nuclear waste. This trade in waste removes the unwanted by-products of excessive consumption away from the consumer and further alienates the consumer from the social and environmental impact of his/her actions. So, the consumer is detached from the social and structural origins of his/her patterns of behaviour. First, the manufacturing process of the product to be consumed is something the consumer is only vaguely aware of, and, second, the waste removal is also something that is not immediately obvious to the consumer.

Although most of the problems associated with excessive and uneven consumption find their structural origins in the production process and in the social relations between state and firm, it is not possible to absolve the consumer from their responsibility in this process. The consumer or consumption cannot be reduced to just being the last stage of production. Consumers are dependent on the supply chain in their choices of products and constrained in their actions as they cannot themselves dictate supply except by indicating through their purchasing choices what is wanted. Consumers are able to exert choices within a limited framework, and they are also able to exert the choice of not consuming if it is not possible to consume ethically or in a more sustainable fashion. It is not convincing to take the consumer out of the equation by arguing that they are the unwitting victims of the production process or victims of the capitalist ethic of consumption. They are actors in their own right and as such vastly under-researched as a social, rather than marketing, phenomenon in global civil society.

Thus the study of consumption and environment indicates clearly that global environmental governance, if it wants to be environmentally effective, needs to have a different outlook than the institutions in place at present. This will become even clearer after considering the third pillar, equity.

## Equity

The subject of environmental equity is about control over and access to environmental resources and a clean living environment as well as distribution of resources. At the national level, research has shown quite clearly that especially people at the lower end of social strata are more exposed to environmental degradation and suffer according health and deprivation problems. Reasons for this phenomenon are that socially weaker people cannot afford to live in areas unaffected by pollution and often have to live near industrial estates with pollution problems (ESRC Global Environmental Change Programme, 2001). In addition, they are less able to overcome environmental restraints through the purchase of healthier goods or filtering devices, for example. In many ways, these findings can be extrapolated to the global level.

Of the various types of environmental problems, the North's are typically associated with industrialization while those of the South are associated with the more immediate environment such as deforestation, desertification, or polluted drinking water. (Porter, Brown & Chasek, 2001). Urban problems are apparent both in the North and South. Global problems are structural and affect both North and South, albeit in different ways. It is obvious that of the more immediate environmental problems affecting one's living environment more directly, there is definitely an income gap as the higher income groups in any society are able to buy themselves access to a clean living environment. It is no accident that slums or lower income housing are often situated in the more polluted parts of town or closer to industrial estates. This has an effect on health but also on access to environmental 'goods'. Therefore there can be no misunderstanding about a close connection between income and environmental quality of life. This is not a new argument, and does not need to be pursued further.

Nevertheless, this argument can be extended to the international and the global in that wealthier states can increase their environmental quality by, for example, getting rid of their toxic waste or by out-sourcing certain dangerous practices (Clapp, 2001). Trade in waste is a reality and it is also well known that capital flight takes place to areas where there are less stringent environmental regulations. Thus there is a definite issue of environmental equity as not all citizens of the world have access to the same environmental rights, and these discrepancies are used for profit in the organization of the global political economy. Although some inequity is unavoidable as the environmental conditions of different geographical locations in the world are obviously not the same, these are inequalities generated by the structural constraints of the global economic system. An inhabitant of a mountain village in the desolate ranges of the Bolivian Andes obviously has different food access than an inhabitant of the lower Pyrenees in France. This is not a question of environmental equity. However, both inhabitants' ability to be in control of their respective environment is.

It is possible to discern different levels at which environmental equity is a problem in the international/global arena. First, there is the agenda-setting power of the various

states of the world when it comes to environmental degradation. Second, there is their position in the world economy. Third, there is the issue of purchasing power and consumption.

The agenda-setting power of various actors in the international system is a fundamental environmental equity issue and is also a structural issue. In the field of global governance, it is particularly obvious in the phrasing of the climate change debate (Harris, 2001). There is a rift between different countries which can be superficially described as a rift between developed and developing countries – although this distinction is simplistic, not taking account of the various energy producing roles and the way different states will be affected by global warming. It can be argued that the debate has been framed by developed countries who want this issue to be treated as a contemporary and future problem. Many developing countries see climate change as a historical problem and want past emissions to be incorporated into possible emission reduction strategies. This idea is not something that is discussed seriously in the diplomatic channels used for progressing on climate change. At the same time developed countries are quite serious that future emissions should be taken into consideration. The debate is clearly framed in such a way that 'today' is the baseline from which discussions on equity start, but anything that happened before today is not part of the debate. This seems to be an example of agenda-setting power as there clearly is a temporal dimension to the debate concerned with today and the future. As temporality is an issue, it does not seem logical that it is not applied in both directions (i.e. past and future). However, this would dramatically change the whole responsibility, commitment and power dimension of the negotiations. Therefore equity takes on a very subjective meaning determined by the social and power relations of the interplay between developed and developing countries. Although the climate change example is a particularly dramatic case, it is by no means atypical. Thus agenda-setting power is a major determinant in environmental equity relations.

Agenda-setting power is an indirect, structural type of power, but equity concerns are by no means limited to structural power. Equity problems can also be found in direct power relations between North and South or between any social groupings. Although coercion by violent means is a relatively rare phenomenon in the international system given the number of actors in it, the number of violent conflicts with an environmental or resource dimension is rising (Gleditsch, 2001). In addition, there is financial and political coercion, which is a historical phenomenon and has become especially obvious through colonialism and modern forms of colonialism. Although politically most states are independent and sovereign from a legal perspective, they are not independent given their economic position in the global political economy, which is a direct consequence of historical social relations. Power can also be exercised by the refusal to participate in problem resolution exercises as the withdrawal of the United States from the climate change negotiations demonstrates. Furthermore, the exercise of direct power through

global economic institutions determines the way environmental resources and sinks are used.

This point relates directly to the issue of consumption. A global production economy is juxtaposed with a local consumption economy. Environmental degradation is not only a problem related to production but equally, if not more, to consumption. Thus a phrasing of the sustainable development debate or of common but differentiated responsibilities is focused on production but ignores the consumption side. If the consumption side of the global political economy was included in economic analysis of environmental degradation, a different picture of responsibility and duty would arise. The exclusion of the consumption argument thus seems to draw after itself serious equity repercussions which have been neglected in traditional accounts of global environmental governance.

### Conclusions

This article has put forward a case for seeing the environment as a unique phenomenon in political and politico-economic analysis rather than treating it as another set of case studies for the neoliberal institutionalist global governance literature. In order to understand the social and ecological specificity of the environment in international politics, it is necessary to study the historical dimension of environment-society relations but also to look at the concepts of consumption and equity from an environmental perspective. These three pillars demonstrate quite clearly that it is not sufficient to study the political dimension of the environment from an institutionalist perspective focusing on actor behaviour and institutional dynamics. Rather, the structural origins and root causes of environmental causes need to be understood in order to develop political frameworks that can lead to lasting improvement in the environmental field.

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