

giving people what they want—for satisfying their preferences—which means that we should arrange the world so that there can be as much preference satisfaction as possible by allowing all exchanges desired by both parties. But no one really believes this. There are plenty of cases where such exchanges are prohibited, ranging all the way from public offices like the Presidency to the purchase of new cars without seatbelts.

Everything else being equal, it may be better to give people what they want; but until we have said what we mean by “everything else being equal,” we are nowhere.

— Peter G. Brown

Peter G. Brown, director of environmental programs at the University Maryland's School of Public Affairs, is currently working on a book critical of market-oriented approaches to public policy. This article was condensed and adapted from his paper, “Fiduciary Responsibilities and the Greenhouse Effect.” The sources cited are: William D. Nordhaus, “How Fast Should We Graze the Global Commons?” *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 72, no. 2 (May 1982); “To Slow or Not To Slow: The Economics of the Greenhouse Effect,” a paper presented to the February 1990 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; “Greenhouse Economics: Count Before You Leap,” *The Economist* (July 7, 1990); Ralph C. D’Arge, William D. Schulze, and David S. Brookshire, “Carbon Dioxide and Intergenerational Choice,” *AEA Papers and Proceedings* (May 1982); and J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. G. Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979).

Post-Modernism and the Environmental Crisis

The globalization of the environmental crisis coincides with the crossing of what many consider to be a historic watershed in philosophy. On one side we find the dominant tradition of Western thought, with all its efforts to place human knowledge on a solid, unchanging foundation. On the other side we find certain skeptical, or anti-foundationalist, modes of thinking variously labeled “post-modern,” “post-structuralist,” or “deconstructionist.” Whether or not the emergence of these viewpoints truly constitutes a watershed, and whether or not they actually represent a common tendency of thought, the fact is that many intellectuals have recently adopted an attitude of radical skepticism toward the basic premises of scientific rationalism. Perhaps the most important of these premises has been that human beings can gain access to a stable, context-free foundation for knowledge, and so arrive at a univocal, objective truth.

This widespread skepticism about the foundations of knowledge leads naturally to a rejection of “essentialism”—that is, the belief that our language provides access to immutable essences, or meanings, located in a reality beyond, and hence independent of, the language itself. Defenders of essences are now rare indeed. We find instead a pervasive historicism, acutely sensitive to the unstable, contingent nature of language, and convinced of the historical and societal genesis of all our ideas and practices, including the language or discourses by which they are defined.

Terms such as “nature,” “technology,” “science,” and “environment”—which might be thought to represent constituent properties of an independently existing reality—are seen from a post-modernist perspective as contingent products of historical processes. Like all our words and concepts, they are taken to be “socially constructed.” So, far from having a univocal meaning, the import of each term is thought to vary according to historical, social, and cultural cir-



cumstances and, more particularly, according to the speaker's assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

Whatever its weaknesses, post-modernism is a feature of our intellectual world too important to be ignored; and it may even provide valuable critical analyses of certain cloudy regions of environmentalist thinking. Because its adherents do not offer their own "positive" alternative to the conventional theories of

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knowledge they dismiss, most versions of post-modernism, like most versions of philosophic skepticism, are valuable chiefly for the critical, anti-metaphysical insights they afford. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what form such a positive alternative, compatible with the spirit of post-modernist skepticism, might take. We nonetheless believe that the post-modernist critique of traditional assumptions could be useful in rethinking certain theoretical and cognitive presuppositions of environmentalism.

The Hegemony of "Hard" Science

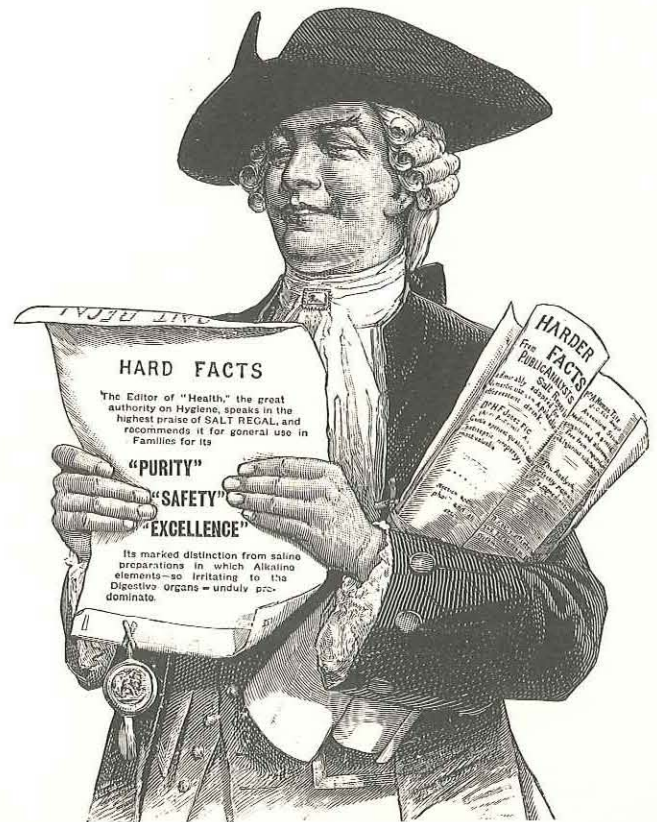
This current tendency, with its bias towards contextualism, may help to break down some long-standing conceptual and practical barriers to collaboration between the "hard" biophysical sciences and the "soft" social or human sciences. To begin with, it calls into question the hegemony of "hard" scientific knowledge and its tacit corollary, a virtually exclusive commitment to reductionist methods of inquiry. That hegemony has created many difficulties for the management of environmental research. It has often meant, for example, that complex problems involving the reciprocal relations between human and natural systems are defined in narrowly technocentric terms.

Because of the perceived "weakness," or "softness," of the social sciences and humanities, the hegemony of the biophysical sciences has also impeded the effective integration of scientific findings about environmental degradation with findings about its behavioral, societal origins. According to *Humankind in the Biosphere*, Martin F. Price's recent survey of international interdisciplinary research on environmental problems, the "research objectives" of many purportedly interdisciplinary projects "tend to be set primarily by natural scientists." Of course, this is hardly a recent development. Price notes that the 1981

international conference aimed at assessing ten years' work by UNESCO's "Man and the Biosphere" program, whose goals were "to develop the basis within the natural and social sciences" for improving the global relationship between man and the environment, found that "less than five percent of projects through mid-1979 integrated the work of natural and social scientists."

These findings compel us to reaffirm our primary assumption, namely, that although the work of scientists and engineers is indispensable for coping with the most urgent environmental problem, the problems themselves are invariably the result of social practices. They are quintessentially *social* problems whose roots lie deep in a long-standing matrix of cultural proclivities. Hence, they are bound to remain intractable until we find ways to integrate (1) scientific analyses of their nature; (2) an adequate understanding of their social, cultural or behavioral genesis; and (3) a plan to change the behavior, or institutional structures, necessary to resolve them. One of the main impediments to coping with urgent environmental problems, in our view, is the deeply ingrained habit of defining them chiefly in terms derived from their biophysical manifestations. Indeed, a fact that scientists and engineers seem reluctant to acknowledge is that many, perhaps even most, environmental problems will have to be resolved in the arena of national and international politics.

All of this suggests that there may be more than coincidence involved in the simultaneous discovery of the global and social nature of environmental degradation



and the skeptical, anti-foundationalist drift of contemporary philosophy and critical theory. These current philosophic tendencies direct attention away from the centrality of "hard" scientific knowledge as the key to coping with the problems of the environment. They emphasize the decisive role not of some context-free body of truth, but of the common understandings, or "background" knowledge, shared by a people. On this view, the ultimate determinant of many of the practices causing the deterioration of the environment, as well as of the practices required to cope with it, is the cultural context. Unlike traditional scientific rationalism, this contextualist concept of knowledge might help to foster a collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to environmental problems.

— Leo Marx

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