Environmental Democracy in the United States

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The “benefits” of this civilization have been purchased at the price of unprecedented violations of the ecosystem on which it depends. In order to survive, we have laid waste the land, despoiled our waters, and poisoned the atmosphere. The result is that much of our land is uninhabitable, our water undrinkable, and our air unbreathable, i.e., that our very survival is in question (Balbus 1982, 363).

The environment is a product of interactions between nature and society (see Ophuls 1977, 20–22). Land and natural resources shape the possibilities for social life while social actions alter the natural landscape. For example, natural deposits of coal may enable a society to industrialize and industrialization may cause changes in the flow of rivers or in air quality. In this sense, the environment is a dynamic inheritance that each new generation influences.

Democracy is a theory of influence. It suggests that people and power should be united to make shared decisions that influence public life (see Lummis 1982, 9–11). People should participate together in the process of identifying goals and values that define the public interest; and they should exercise their collective power, through political and social institutions, to secure the public interest. Underlying democracy is the notion that people should be equally free and equally influential in identifying and striving for the public interest.

“Environmental democracy,” then, means that interactions between nature and society should primarily be influenced by people who exercise power to define and achieve the public interest. In an environmental democracy, for example, people would discuss and decide if the benefits from extracting coal outweigh the foreseeable costs of altering the natural landscape. They would then execute their decision, evaluate the results, and, if they so desired, revise it in light of the results. There are no guarantees that people will make wise decisions, but they have an incentive to do so: they must live with the consequences.

My thesis is that to the extent that the environment has been influenced in the United States it has mainly been influenced by elites who exercise concentrated power on their own behalf. They pursue material wealth and systematically ignore the consequences of unrestrained economic growth on people’s daily lives. These consequences now include, for example, the high concentration of dioxin that makes Times Beach, Missouri, uninhabitable; the carcinogens that are regularly discovered in water, food, and drugs across the U.S.; and the air pollution that now extends from cities to suburbs and into rural America. Recently, elites have adopted an ideology that suggests they should be trusted to solve the nation’s environmental problems. As we will see, that ideology is both deceptive and profoundly antidemocratic.

Environmental democracy is an idea rooted in American traditions. It persists as a desirable alternative to the elite domination that has produced and now manages today’s environmental crisis. By examining its practice, on a small scale, in Santa Monica, California, one can see its potential for enhancing the quality of life that the next generation will inherit.

The Historical Legacy

America’s Founders viewed the New World environment as a state of nature that could be cultivated to produce a superior civilization (Schaar 1981, 94). Unspoiled nature would reveal moral laws to guide community and individual living; it would provide enough space for a people to live together and yet exercise their natural rights; and it would offer the fertile lands, rich resources, abundant waterways, and moderate climates that make prosperity available to all
people. Nature's bounty was so great that the American colonies quickly developed a thriving agricultural economy. Thomas Paine's 1776 *Common Sense*, the most important revolutionary pamphlet of the time, argued that America's agricultural wealth made national independence possible and desirable (Paine 1980, 173). The Founders were optimistic that their natural environment would support significant social progress.

The men who framed the U.S. Constitution were especially concerned that individuals have maximum freedom to extract wealth from nature. James Madison crafted the extensive checks and balances that ensure that neither individuals nor majorities could use federal government to inhibit private ownership, accumulation, trade, or investment; Alexander Hamilton's contribution was to demonstrate how pockets of political power in federal government could be used to stimulate industrial expansion of the nation's economy (see Wolin 1981a). In theory, individual competition in the marketplace, with federal government's support, would negotiate the relations between nature and society to produce social progress.

However, the Founders' optimism was limited by fears rooted in their Protestant theology and republican political theory. John Adams, for example, harbored a Puritan fear that moral laws are readily ignored by sinful individuals seeking the material pleasures of this world. He supported the revolution against Great Britain because he believed the mother country had been corrupted by luxury and greed, but he also worried that the American offspring might suffer from the same genetic defect. Others feared that unrestrained materialism would provide individuals the license to exploit their fellow citizens; certainly they had ample evidence that the pursuit of wealth often involved the denial of freedom for slaves, indentured servants, Indians, and the poor.

Thomas Jefferson was perhaps the most profound spokesman for this optimism limited by fears. He studied nature and thought it to be the source for all human progress. Nature inspired virtue among those who worked the land; nature taught that men who participate in their common affairs would appreciate the importance of community and individual self-discipline; and nature, if respected, could serve as a continual source of human sustenance. Yet Jefferson also feared that unrestrained materialism would drive people away from nature and into an urbanized, industrial society that "begs subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition" (Jefferson 1964, 157). He feared that the ambitious would usurp political power, use it for private ends, and deny others equal freedoms. And he feared that the sovereignty of wealth, knowing no limits, would ultimately pervert nature. Jefferson spent a good part of his life promoting education and educational institutions that taught the importance of the quality of life lest it be destroyed by naked materialism.

Nineteenth century U.S. history is mainly a story of optimism overwhelming and absorbing earlier fears. In 1823, James Fenimore Cooper described in his novel *The Pioneers* how wealthy townspeople, oblivious to possible costs, engage in a senseless slaughter of an entire pigeon flock (Cooper 1980, 250–58). Cooper feared that materialism was becoming its own morality, potentially destroying the environment that made civilization possible. In the 1840s, Henry David Thoreau argued that American materialism was sapping people's independence, making them slaves to things; it also produced an expansionist government that waged war with Mexico to satisfy the acquisitive desires of a few powerful men (Thoreau 1980, 592–93). However, the message that materialism could be costly all but disappeared as the U.S. embarked on a period of remarkable economic growth after the Civil War.

During this period, a new unlimited optimism suggested that science and technology could "make progress hurry" (Kargon 1983, 140–43). Furthermore, the scientific method would provide solutions to any problems that occurred. Social Darwinists proposed a "scientific" morality that equated survival in the economic marketplace to survival in nature; it also justified removing virtually all residual restraints on economic activity in the name of survival. When the marketplace produced monopolies that eliminated competition, caused tremendous human suffering among workers and the unemployed in the cities, and stimulated the growth of revolutionary movements, political reformers proposed "scientific" administration of government as a substitute for social conflict; government would harness the expertise necessary for regulating the economy to enhance productivity, cushioning the impact of economic growth on its victims, and granting concessions that would eliminate revolutionary discontents.

The emergence of monopolies and the regulatory state produced the problem of Big Business and Big Government—concentrations of centralized power with little public accountability. However, the scientific management movement suggested that great size, if properly organized, was the basis for the efficiency that would make the U.S. a world economic and political power. And the advocates of the new social sciences assured society that Big Business was not dangerous
as long as a plurality of groups competed to influence it and government, itself the object of group competition, oversaw it. Appropriately, this period in U.S. history is known as the Progressive Era to symbolize its unalloyed optimism that science could tame nature without incurring any serious costs.

In retrospect, the reality that unfolded in the twentieth century was far more ambiguous and problematic than expected. The U.S. achieved incredible economic growth with relatively little domestic strife to become the most powerful nation in the world by 1945. But the costs of national achievement have been immense. The social Darwinism that put materialism at the center of morality legitimated the creation of workplace environments that exposed workers to lung disease and cancer; it also justified the persistence of slums, diseases associated with poverty, and material privations amid national plenty. Furthermore, social Darwinism became the guiding ethic as American business and military interests entered the international marketplace to involve the nation in two world wars, numerous regional wars, a cold war, and a nuclear arms race. Thus, economic survival became the justification for massive human destruction, an assault on natural environments, and the psychic damage that attends visions of nuclear holocaust. At most, political reforms have helped retard the growth of some problems while making others slightly more tolerable. They have done little to stop the deterioration of America's urban environments where energy waste runs rampant while "brownouts" become more frequent and where traffic congestion, pollution, drug abuse, and crime make people fearful of leaving their homes. Big Business has married scientific efficiency to profit calculations that systematically neglect "externalities" such as the contamination of local watersheds or preservation of food with cancer-causing chemicals. While an array of social groups have pressured Big Business to be socially responsible and others have pressured Big Government to force social responsibility on Big Business, their achievements have been spotty. For the most part, Big Business has been able to pursue profits and neglect human costs with the assistance of Big Government.

Our generation has inherited an environmental trade-off. On the one hand, great national wealth and power have, to some extent, trickled down to many Americans in the form of high standards of living that allow people to consume more goods and services than their grandparents could have imagined. On the other hand, what Americans have gained in quality they may have lost in the quality of their lives. Nature has been altered in ways that directly damage people and indirectly threaten major catastrophes in the immediate future; and society, once filled with optimism, may have entered into what Christopher Lasch believes is an "age of diminishing expectations" filled with fear and despair (Lasch 1979). Has this trade-off been a good one? Should we continue to make it? Or should we renegotiate the relationship between nature and society? In a democracy, these questions are generally answered in terms of the public interest.

Who Owns the Public Interest?

In the 1970s and 1980s, millions of Americans made it known that environmental protection should be an important item on the public interest agenda. The makers of American culture sounded the alarm in newspapers, books, and films; demonstrations for ecological sanity took place; pressure was put on the U.S. government to produce appropriate legislation such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); and several gasoline shortages gave new impetus to the search for safe, renewable energy from the sun, wind, and water. Perhaps more remarkable than the rise of environmentalism, however, is its failure to become a major concern among public policy-makers.

The environmental alarm is still being sounded but is increasingly being drowned out by warnings of other crises, for example, in national security, in economic productivity, or in education. Mass mobilizations continue to take place but are largely ignored by officials in the Reagan administration who are now dismantling some of the 1970s legislation. The search for safe, renewable energy has become a very low priority in the midst of today's "oil glut." Does this mean that Americans have suddenly decided that environmental protection is not immediately important? Not necessarily.

In the U.S., what counts as the "public" interest is only partly related to the expressed needs and desires of the American people. The crucial defining role is played by the corporate elites from the world of Big Business who have the wealth and power to exert extraordinary influence over public policy. Corporate elites include the 1 percent of the population that owns more than 50 percent of the value of all corporate stock and who direct major enterprises such as Chase Manhattan Bank and General Motors. They are sometimes connected with the nation's wealthiest families, such as the DuPonts, Mellons, and Rockefellers—each with more than $4 billion dollars in
family assets (Szymanski 1978, 34). They use their concentrated wealth and power to dominate the media, exercise political leverage, and determine how economic growth will take place. In general, either they or their representatives occupy key positions in think tanks, universities, trade associations, and pressure groups that help to shape public policy; in governmental and quasi-governmental institutions that legislate and administer public policy; and, of course, in the multinational corporations that have been the greatest beneficiaries of public policy. Since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, corporate elites have had a stake in using their power to define the "public" interest in ways that emphasize material expansion and silence environmental concerns.

Consider an example. The Los Angeles region once had an energy-efficient, pollution-free system of electric railways for transporting people and goods. In the 1930s, General Motors (GM) bought up and then scrapped the system. They replaced it with diesel buses that wasted energy, generated air and noise pollution, and failed to serve as a reliable municipal transit system. The buses were so uncomfortable and unreliable that residents were forced to consider buying private automobiles; this led to Southern California’s automobile culture that is now a major factor in the region’s environmental woes. Furthermore, the buses did not transport goods, forcing local merchants to buy or hire trucks that contributed to more energy waste and pollution. The motive behind GM’s investment was profits: GM manufactured and sold the buses, autos, and trucks that replaced the electric railway system. However, the costs of GM’s investment were borne by local residents who now suffer through first- and second-stage smog alerts on a regular basis (see Snell 1976).

When the public’s needs are blatantly abused, people often look to federal government to correct the abuse. In general, however, corporate elites are powerful enough to ensure that government efforts do little damage to corporate profit margins. Let us follow the GM example one more step. By 1949, GM had been involved in replacing more than 100 electric railway systems with its own buses, autos, and trucks. That year, the corporation was convicted in federal court of having illegally conspired to replace municipal services with products that it monopolized. At best, the conviction was a symbolic victory for Americans. The government fined this huge corporation a mere $5,000, and GM continued to buy and dieselize electric transit systems anyway. By 1956, GM had invested many times its fine to win government support for the Interstate Highway Act, which spelled doom for the national railroad system and a future of guaranteed profits for the automobile industry (Snell 1976, 311, 320–21). The passage of this act also meant more pollution, energy waste, lost lives, and crippling accidents that are America’s transportation reality today.

There have been instances when public opposition to corporate abuses is well organized and persistent and eventually succeeds in forcing the federal government to regulate such abuses of the environment. Consider a more recent example. The U.S. Public Health Service estimates that each year 100,000 workers are killed and 390,000 workers are disabled by prolonged exposure to toxic chemicals, dust, noise, heat, cold, and radiation in American workplaces (cited in Best and Connolly 1976, 116). Labor unions spent years identifying problems and bargaining with management over solutions with few results. Corporate elites claimed the problems did not exist (only to be proven wrong later on) or that economically it was not feasible to solve them (even when profits grew). Finally, labor mobilized public support, organized a prolonged lobbying effort resulting in passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. Passage of OSHA, however, has had little impact on improving workplace environments.

To the extent that businesses complied with OSHA, the largest corporations have been able to pass compliance costs on to consumers, increase their control of the market as small businesses that can ill-afford compliance go bankrupt, and thereby position themselves to exercise even greater economic and political leverage against regulation in the future. However, businesses have had little need to comply with OSHA regulations because they have used their power to ensure that the law is poorly enforced. By 1974, OSHA’s administrative agency had only 800 inspectors, enough for one visit to the average employer every 66 years; only two employers had been convicted of criminal violations; and the average fine for all violations was only $25 (Best and Connolly 1976, 117). The figures improved somewhat during the Carter administration, but OSHA’s minimal effectiveness is being eroded as the Reagan administration slashes the agency’s budget (Alford 1983, 28). Even with sustained public opposition, corporate elites have been powerful enough to safeguard their prerogative to make investments with little concern for the safety and health of Americans.

A long history of corporate neglect of the environment and a more recent history of corporate opposition to environmental protection provide the major explanation for today’s environmental crisis. Continuing corporate opposition to environmental protection is apparent in recent scandals involving conflicts of interest and maladministration by Reagan appointees in the Environmental Protection
Agency. In fact, the only noticeable change is that corporate elites have begun to recognize that environmental problems do exist and to develop an ideology that (1) absolves them of responsibility and (2) portrays them as the best hope for solving the problems. This change is a function of politics rather than a matter of a newborn corporate morality.

The environmental movement of the 1970s posed no immediate threat to corporate prerogatives and profit margins, but it did pose a long-term danger. On one hand, the historical authority that corporate elites had long enjoyed as the leaders of American prosperity was being questioned. Revelations of corporate bribery, illegal campaign contributions, complicity in racism and sexism, and secret attempts to undermine foreign governments combined with corporate overseas investments that cost jobs at home during a recession created an atmosphere in which corporate elites' credibility was badly shaken. Revelations of corporate superprofits during the gasoline shortages suffered by Americans and of a near meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power facility fueled environmentalists' opposition to corporate practices. For corporate elites, the long-term danger was a legitimacy crisis that might make them vulnerable to tangible and serious public restrictions.

On the other hand, the long-term threat of such restrictions was magnified by the fact that America's corporate elites were losing their hegemony in the world marketplace (Kann 1982, 169–77). U.S. steel companies and automobile manufacturers, for example, were losing the competition with European and Japanese firms. Many corporate economists felt that American enterprises could regain their competitive edge only if they gained access to massive amounts of investment capital to use at their own discretion. In general, they advised corporate elites to oppose existing government regulations and, certainly, to stem the threat of new restrictions demanded by environmentalists.

Within this political context, corporate elites did not want to enter into a contest between their "private" interests and environmentalists' version of the "public" interest. Their alternative was to redefine the public interest. From the mid-1970s to the present, corporate elites have flooded the media through television commercials, newspaper advertisements, think tank reports, academic publications and conferences, and public speeches to convey a new brand of optimism: Big Business can simultaneously bring the nation material prosperity and environmental progress if only citizens trust it and cease demanding restrictions on it. Put differently, corporate elites are now investing in ownership of the public interest.

The Corporate Ideology

How will unrestricted private accumulation secure the public interest in environmental protection? What I shall call "the corporate ideology" provides a relatively sophisticated answer. Nonetheless, it is a distorted and antidemocratic answer.

The first element in the corporate ideology is that fears of environmental crisis are exaggerated. Writing on what he calls "the pollution scare," M. Stanton Evans suggests that "a fairly decent accumulation of data on the subject shows that prevailing levels of atmospheric pollution have been steadily falling" (Evans 1975, 236). If we check the total picture, he continues, "we find that the level of man-made pollutants is nothing compared to the level pumped out unaided by nature" (237). Carbon monoxide, for instance, is nature's own product. The political point of this argument is to reduce the "crisis" to a less threatening set of "problems." Some problems are natural and therefore not subject to human intervention; others are man-made and subject to normal problem-solving techniques.

Within the context of U.S. history, problems are identified and solved in the marketplace. Thus, economist Lester A. Thurow translates environmental concerns into a marketplace phenomenon: "Environmentalism is a demand for more goods and services (clean air, water, and so forth) that...is a natural product of a rising real standard of living. We have simply reached the point where, for many Americans, the next item on their acquisitive agenda is a cleaner environment." Thurow adds, "If they can achieve it, it will make all of the other goods and services (boats, summer homes, and so forth) more enjoyable" (Thurow 1980, 104–5). The political effect of this argument is to disconnect environmentalism from urgent human needs, to neutralize it as simply another marketplace commodity, and, therefore, to rob it of moral urgency (see Wolin 1981b, 28). From this perspective, there is no compelling reason to place environmentalism high on the public interest agenda.

The second element of the corporate ideology is that environmental problems largely derive from consumer choices. Corporations, the argument goes, are simply competing businesses that must respond to consumer demand if they are to survive in the marketplace.
Corporations must produce and sell as cheaply as possible, perhaps incurring some environmental costs, because consumers demand low prices for goods and services. Concomitantly, corporations would be forced to observe environmental safeguards if consumers demanded it and were willing to pay for it. However, consumers generally vote with their dollars to cut costs and thus suffer resulting problems. The politics of this argument is to shift blame for environmental problems away from corporate elites and toward the American people.

Relatively, the argument continues, the American people have fallen victim to the illusion that environmental protection can be had for free. They have voted with their ballots and their pressure groups to put government into the business of environmental regulation only to create a double bind for themselves. On the one hand, Americans have made themselves the dependents of Big Government and its bureaucracy, which costs them individual rights as well as tax dollars, inflation, and budget deficits. On the other hand, government regulation is not only inefficient but also tends to exacerbate environmental problems. George Gilder tells of corporate innovations in pesticides that provide effective and safe protection for the nation's crops. Unfortunately, he says, the Environmental Protection Agency has obstructed their sale and therefore forced growers to continue using dangerous pesticides like parathion. This is another example of government's bureaucratic "incompetence in the face of novelty" (Gilder 1981, 281). The obvious political implication is that citizens should demand that government get out of the regulation business.

The third element of the corporate ideology involves the practice of articulating anxieties and then promising to assuage them (see Edelman 1977, 43-55). The initial argument is that every human action alters the natural environment and potentially creates problems: "Every breath we draw, fire we build, or morsel of food we eat requires some rearrangement of the elemental order in which we find ourselves" (Evans 1975, 235). Furthermore, the benefits of modern civilization, from the transportation and communication systems that open new vistas for people to the wonders of modern technology that prolong human life, inevitably take a toll on the ecological balance. The fact is that we might have to learn to live with our environmental problems.

However, corporations freed from governmental regulations hold the promise for developing solutions that ease and even eliminate problems once thought inevitable. In their study of California's corporate elites, Kotkin and Grabowicz capture this perspective: "The men who made Reagan have created new industries and new wealth and formulated the basic premise of Reaganite philosophy: that private enterprise, unencumbered by government regulation, can solve most of the nation's problems" (Kotkin and Grabowicz 1982, 77).

How? The corporations that thrive in the marketplace are those that invest in high technology research and development. Corporate scientists have made the computer revolution of today; they can also find cost-effective solutions to resource depletions, toxic waste disposal, nuclear waste storage, and so forth. The political message to Americans is to substitute for entertaining fears the energizing optimism in science that originally produced national prosperity.

The final element justifies the new optimism in terms of traditional American rights. John A. Baden suggests that "enforceable, defensible property rights and . . . market allocations" harmonize the private interests of business and the public interest of the nation (Baden 1981, 26). Implicitly, these rights are the foundation for conventional liberal freedoms that Americans cherish. Explicitly, they interact in the marketplace in ways that enhance both economic growth and environmental problem solving.

Baden illustrates his argument with a story. The Audubon Society, a private conservation group, owned a wildlife sanctuary in Louisiana; Mobil Oil, a private corporation, owned the adjacent land. The two groups struck a deal. Mobil purchased the right to drill in the sanctuary, using techniques that would minimally disturb the wildlife, and Audubon, in turn, was to receive royalties it could use to finance other conservation projects. Both partners directly profited from the transaction, and the American people benefited indirectly from the new oil exploration that might yield additional energy and from the royalties that would be used to conserve natural habitats (Baden 1981, 30). This transaction demonstrates the great potential of the unrestricted marketplace to renegotiate our relationship with nature in the public interest.

The overall message of the corporate ideology is that the "private" investment of resources is the most efficient and legitimate means to secure the "public" interest in environmental protection. If we accept the message, then it follows that there is no conflict between Big Business's interest in profits and Americans' interest in environmental health and safety. It also follows that the so-called environmentalists who demand government restrictions of Big Business practices are the greatest threat to environmental health and safety. In short, the corporate ideologists are resurrecting late-nineteenth-century optimism in the hope that the American people will put away their twentieth-century fears.
The Corporate Ideology Versus Democracy

Each element in the corporate ideology is based on a half-truth that distorts rather than clarifies the environmental crisis and possible solution to it. In addition, the ideology is antidemocratic.

Is the environmental crisis largely an exaggeration? If it is treated as a matter of imperiled redwoods, whales, seals, wolves, condors, and eagles or of inefficient management of public lands and resources, then the crisis is effectively trivialized for most Americans who live and work in urban centers. If the crisis is a global matter of population explosion, an overheated ecosphere, or catastrophes stemming from genetic engineering, then it is considerably neutralized among Americans who have enough difficulty confronting national and local issues. And if the environmental crisis is portrayed as the single most compelling crisis of our time, then it is effectively discounted by Americans who face immediate crises such as unemployment and crime. Unless environmentalists communicate the crisis as one of human needs, they will set the stage for corporate ideologists to minimize it.

Corporate ideologists are partly right in doing so. In some ways, the vast wealth that raises Americans’ standard of living has improved their ability to fulfill basic human needs. That wealth has sometimes gone into the eradication of diseases that plagued earlier Americans; that wealth has gone into technology that is useful for cushioning the impact of earthquakes, floods, droughts, and other natural disasters that have usually meant mass starvation for victims. However, these historical gains do not necessarily outweigh the everyday suffering and growing threats to people’s ability to satisfy their needs.

The environmental crisis is manifest most clearly in urban environments throughout the U.S. It is characterized by persistent poverty, malnutrition, and attendant diseases; by housing shortages, unsafe and unsanitary living conditions, and homelessness; by store-bought foods with questionable nutritional value but unquestionable biological hazard; by high-price, high-technology health care accessible only to some people. Relatedly, today’s urban environments include oil refineries, chemical waste dumps, and even nuclear power plants that imperil people’s survival and cause considerable psychological stress. That psychological stress is magnified by inadequate transportation systems that force people to spend hours amidst noxious fumes in congested traffic and by dangers posed by drug pushers, muggers, rapists, and murderers. America’s urban environments also include cutbacks in municipal services, widespread illiteracy, extensive unemployment, consistent racial tension, and, in general, a pervasive sense of human alienation. These environments are ones in which it is increasingly difficult for people to fulfill basic physiological, psychological, and social needs; and they are ones that continue to deteriorate.

Who is responsible for this crisis? Certainly American consumers merit some portion of blame. They have voted with their dollars for gas-guzzling autos and with their ballots for politicians who practice and tolerate bureaucratic ineptitude. But corporate ideologists neglect to mention that consumers’ options have mostly been shaped by corporate elites and their representatives. General Motors, not Los Angeles residents, decided that electric mass transit would not be a consumer option and that inefficient buses and private autos would be consumers’ only choices. More generally, what Harvey Molotch calls the urban “growth machine”—businessmen, financiers, and real estate brokers—have orchestrated patterns of urban development that have produced huge profits for economic elites and environmental liabilities for most urban dwellers (Molotch 1980, 129–50; see also Tabb and Sawers 1978, 3–19). Consumer sovereignty in both the economic and political marketplaces is mostly an illusion because elites, with concentrated wealth and power, control what economists call effective demand or the ability to back one’s demand with significant purchasing power (Macpherson 1977, 86–87).

We have some evidence that American consumers might make different choices if their options were broader. Once Japanese firms broke into the U.S. auto market, offering small gas-efficient cars, they quickly attracted consumer dollars with two ironic results. First, American gasoline consumption dropped, which motivated major oil companies to find new gimmicks for selling more gasoline despite years of proclaimed shortage. Second, “free marketeers” Ronald Reagan, rather than welcoming international competition, sought out ways to restrict Japanese imports which would indirectly tax Americans for acting to conserve energy. Given broader options than the elite-dominated marketplace, it is likely that Americans would demonstrate a far greater environmental consciousness than they presently do.

Corporate ideologists are disingenuous when they complain about government’s bureaucratic ineptitude in regulating environmental affairs. They do not believe that bureaucracies are inherently inept because the corporate world is perhaps the most highly bureaucrati-
support the largest government bureaucracy in the U.S.: the national defense establishment (Green 1981, 8). In fact, corporate elites have been instrumental in engineering the growth of government regulatory agencies when they have found it profitable; they oppose government regulatory agencies only when their profits and prerogatives are threatened by them (see Alford 1983, 45–47; Thuro 1980, 122–54). Considering the bureaucratic ineptitude that forced Lockheed and Chrysler and other giant corporations to look to the federal government for subsidies and bailout monies, it is questionable if corporate elites are more effective than government bureaucrats. Indeed, Carnoy and Shearer treat them alike:

Most public enterprises in democratic mixed economies are run efficiently. They are well managed, technically advanced, and just as productive as private enterprises. Examples of mismanagement are certainly no more frequent than in the private sector (Carnoy and Shearer 1980, 77).

From the vantage point of corporate elites, the real danger of government regulation is not its ineptitude but its potential to be effective and responsive to public needs.

Corporate ideologists are partly correct when they point out that the material progress desired by Americans inevitably alters the ecological balance, causing problems that science and technology may be able to solve. But should corporate elites be the ones to decide what ecological costs are worth risking and how science and technology should be applied to problems? We can draw from current events and historical experience to demonstrate that corporate elites merit the public’s distrust.

Ronald Reagan’s budgets have meant a redistribution of wealth into the hands of corporate elites. The supply-side assumption is that corporate elites would use this wealth to become more innovative, more competitive, and more able to solve the nation’s problems. What have corporate elites done with their bonanza? For the most part, they have used it in a spree of “mergermania” to acquire new holdings rather than to invest in new production or research and development (Zeitlin 1983, 116–21). Moreover, they have devoted few dollars to basic science and far more to applied military science—the art of human and natural destruction (Kargon 1983, 152–59). A longer view of corporate investment history reveals similar disregard for the public interest. For example, GM has claimed patriotic credentials while pursuing profits in Nazi Germany (Parenti 1977, 77), while shutting down American plants but opening up new ones in racist South Africa (see Sloan 1963, 369; Zeitlin 1983, 116–21), and while responding to consumer critics not by product improvements but by campaigns to discredit the critics (Katznelson and Kesselman 1975, 66). Contrary to corporate ideologists, the historical record suggests that corporate elites have long pursued private profits at the public’s expense.

Scientific managers, often responding to pressures from Big Business, have developed what David Dickson calls the “technocratic paradigm” (Dickson 1981, 71–75). This particular approach to science involves emphasizing cost-benefit analysis, centralizing decision making, and separating sharply the scientific from the political. One result is that the prevalent scientific outlook in the United States is more focused on minimizing corporate costs than on maximizing the safety of people exposed to environmental hazards. Another result is that important national decisions—for example, on the use and abuse of nuclear technology—are made privately among elites, and politics then becomes a public arena for announcing and legitimating those decisions (see Schwartz 1983, 162–74). Given this current perspective, we have little reason for optimism that scientific managers will be particularly responsive to public needs and demands for environmental protection.

Even if the first three elements of the corporate ideology were not distortions, they would still be problematic within the context of a democratic society. The fundamental issue in a democracy, writes Peter Bachrach, “is not whether the few rule in the interest of the many or in their own interest. . . . It is rather that they rule and thereby deprive the many of their freedom” (Bachrach 1975, 39). In a democracy, we would expect that the public would be free to determine for itself what constitutes a crisis or call for immediate action, what kinds of action should be taken, what trade-offs are acceptable, and what resources should be invested in a solution. The final element in the corporate ideology is antidemocratic because it excludes the public from the process of making such determinations. It does so by drawing the boundaries of public action at private property. While these boundaries may be justified in terms of protecting a homeowner from undue public interference, they cannot be justified in the case of corporate property.

First, a corporation is a creation of government. It was conceived as “an exclusive grant by the state to a private company for the purpose of providing something special that was in the common interest of the whole society” (Wolfe 1977, 21). A corporation was chartered by government to receive special legal privileges in return
for providing important benefits to the people; its charter could be revoked by government if it failed to serve the public interest. In the nineteenth century, emerging corporate elites used their concentrated power to divorce their legal privileges from requirements to serve the people. “By the end of the Civil War,” writes Alan Wolfe, “the notion of the corporation as an agency of public good was as dead as chivalry” (Wolfe 1977, 22). What did not die, however, is the reality that the corporation exists only as a creation of government and at the good will of government. In this sense, the corporation and its property are creatures of the public domain.

Second, today’s giant corporations are so entwined with the state that it is difficult to justify any rigid distinctions between a “private” and “public” sphere. Some corporations are actually founded by state expenditures. For example, America’s nuclear power industry came out of government research and development, government raw materials, government expertise, and continued government services (Commoner 1976, 76–112). Most major corporations are subsidized by government through outright grants, loans, contracts, and tax exemptions and credits. The corporate economy persists only because the government underwrites its monetary and fiscal structure and then protects corporate interests with military, intelligence, police, and judicial forces at home and abroad. Finally, the marriage between corporations and government is consummated daily through the “revolving door” by which corporate elite pass into government and government officials move into corporations.

Third, major corporations exercise the same powers normally attributed to the public realm. Corporate elites legislate, execute, and adjudicate the rules that govern employees; they also hire their own security and intelligence cadres to enforce their rules. They use the carrot of jobs and the stick of shutdowns to ensure community compliance with their demands. They even have enough economic might to make trade, monetary, and foreign policies that entire nations must obey. In sum, today’s major corporation is a public creature, entwined in public power, performing public tasks. Unlike the average homeowner, corporations administer public property.

The major factor that corporate ideologues ignore is that corporate elites govern public property without the consent of the governed. They make decisions that have important effects on the public environment and yet consider public accountability an infringement on their rights. According to democratic norms that can be traced back to Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, such corporate governance constitutes a tyranny, and an ideology that justifies that tyranny is inherently antidemocratic. In brief, the corporate ideology is an assault on Americans’ identity as a self-governing people.

A Case Study of Environmental Democracy

The alternative to corporate tyranny is not necessarily more government bureaucracy. Rather, it can involve public participation in the setting of environmental priorities and in shaping government as an institution that articulates and acts on the public will. Such environmental democracy is not simply an abstract hope. It partially exists in some American communities as this brief case study of Santa Monica, California, illustrates.

Santa Monica is a medium-sized city surrounded by Los Angeles on three sides and the Pacific Ocean on the fourth. Its broad beaches, clean air, moderate climate, accessible parks, and fine schools make it a desirable place to live. Its sense of community—founded on its “all-American city” population mix of retired people, small business operators, workers, artists and artisans, minorities, tenants, and homeowners—adds to its desirability. From the turn of the century to the 1940s, Santa Monica remained relatively unchanged. Then, a complex set of market forces dramatically altered its urban environment. The most significant manifestation of transformation was a rapid increase in demand for housing. This increase in demand served as an invitation for landlords to raise rents as high as the market would bear and to evict lower-income tenants arbitrarily; for real estate developers to tear down apartments that housed the elderly, minorities, and low-income people and to replace them with more profitable luxury apartments and condominiums; for speculators to buy up land and buildings, neglect them for a few years, and then resell them at inflated prices. Unrestricted property rights and market allocations meant that Santa Monica was turning into a “gentrified” city where only business executives and professionals could afford to live. Gentrification, in turn, was an invitation for corporations and commercial developers to build in the city to attract a professional workforce and an upper-middle-class consumer base.

The impact of these market forces on Santa Monica’s urban environment was potentially catastrophic for a majority of local residents. More than 25 percent of city residents—mainly elderly, minority, and low-income residents—were being forced out of their homes. Small neighborhood businesses that could not afford escalating rents or compete with giant chain stores were being forced out of business.
Santa Monica's longstanding sense of community was disappearing as the city increasingly took on the character of a bedroom suburb for Los Angeles' well-to-do. Overdevelopment, meanwhile, meant traffic congestion and pollution, the loss of parks and green space, the conversion of beaches from public facilities accessible to all into private reserves for beachfront condominium owners, and, overall, a reinforced ethic that the profits of the few are more important than the needs of the community. Because business interests controlled local government, the urban "growth machine" could count on the city council to facilitate overdevelopment.

During the 1970s, numerous citizen groups organized and acted to oppose these trends. In 1978, the groups coalesced into Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights (SMRR), a grassroots electoral coalition founded to mobilize support for rent control and controlled development SMRR activists went into the community, contacted and involved constituencies that rarely participate in politics, and, in 1979, succeeded in winning a voting majority for rent control and for rent control candidates to the city council. The grassroots activity increased, expanded in scope and support, and, in 1981, SMRR candidates wrested control of the city council from the business interests (Shearer 1982, 7-14). Now in power, the coalition has begun the process of building public control over the local environment.

Environmental democracy has two components in Santa Monica today. The first may be termed "democracy with a small d." This means that local residents must have systematic opportunities to express and debate their preferences and to participate in policy-making processes. Citizen task forces, advisory groups, and public commissions have been formed to this end; virtually every city agency now holds open hearings, forums, and workshops on important issues; city staffers provide support for community organizers who form block clubs, neighborhood associations, and special issue groups, particularly among the elderly, minority, low-income, and disabled residents who traditionally have no voice in urban politics. Furthermore, city government now supports affirmative action, unionization, and worker self-management among its own employees, empowering them to give voice to their needs and desires. Democracy with a small d ultimately means that important issues, once decided by business elites and their political cronies, are now objects of public knowledge, public debate, and public action.

It also means that the public itself is now situated to give its own definition to the public interest. And the public has defined it quite differently than corporate ideologues do. Santa Monicans have expressed their belief that community needs and control over the local environment are higher priorities than elites' profits. The community majority that supported an extensive rent-control ordinance, for example, indicated that the 70 to 75 percent of Santa Monicans who are tenants have rights regarding their housing needs, even if it means that landlords, developers, and speculators will have to live with reduced profit margins. Widespread community support for more green space, open access to city beaches, community art fairs, farmers markets, and "ma and pa" shops suggests that Santa Monicans believe that saving community life takes precedence over the corporate investments and developments that erode community life.

The second component of environmental democracy in Santa Monica, related to the first, is that city government should have the democratic authority to secure the public interest even if it wields that authority in ways that antagonize business elites. The city council has exercised this authority in several ways. It declared a moratorium on new developments, worked with community groups to develop guidelines based on local needs, and now requires that developers negotiate with affected neighbors and underwrite the costs of environmental impact by providing parks, low-income housing, daycare facilities, jobs, and a range of community benefits. The city council has revised zoning laws, the housing and land use elements of the city charter, and the very process of decision making to ensure that popular participation and local needs are primary considerations in the future. The city council has also enacted a number of ordinances aimed at environmental safety and health. These include a toxic chemical disclosure law, a requirement that corporate pipelines under the city include new safety measures, a curbside recycling program, policies to make the city more hospitable to the elderly and disabled, support for tenants who wish to upgrade their housing, facilitation of energy saving in homes, efforts to ensure the survival of small businesses and neighborhoods, programs and subsidies for the needy, new traffic controls to ease congestion and pollution, and support for groups working to curb crime and drug abuse. Furthermore, the city council has put some of its weight behind regional, statewide, and national efforts aimed at environmental protection, for example, by passing a resolution in support of a bilateral nuclear freeze. Local officials recognize that much more can and should be done if the people are to govern themselves and their environment.

While the Santa Monica experience is unique in some respects, it does offer some general lessons: (1) There is an environmental crisis that affects people's daily lives; people recognize it when given the
opportunity to influence it; and they can effectively organize to define the public interest in ways concretely related to their shared needs for a healthy and safe environment. (2) People who exercise power through democratic authority can begin the process of renegotiating their relation with nature by substituting their needs for corporate profits as the top priority in environmental policy. (3) Where environmental democracy is practiced, the trade-off between economic development and environmental protection can be minimized if people’s quality of life is a major factor in policy calculations.

These general lessons are simultaneously conservative and radical. They are conservative in the sense of lending support for the preservation of community relationships in the face of destructive marketplace forces. They are radical in the sense that they deny legitimacy to the wealthy and powerful elites who have long used the guise of private property to make public decisions. More significantly, they are rooted in an old American ideal that needs revitalization. That ideal involves the Jeffersonian optimism that a people who participate in self-government will build a society that respects nature and human freedoms, tempered by healthy fears that the ambitious few, if not restricted, will destroy nature and human rights. Whereas corporate ideologists complain of an “excess of democracy” today (see Huntington 1975), the history of corporate abuses combined with the potentials of public participation in environmental policy demand more democracy, that is, environmental democracy.

References


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The Reagan Administration and Environmental Regulation: The Constraint of the Political Market

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This chapter contends that despite the efforts of the Reagan administration to roll back environmental regulations and return decision making to the states, the political market compels strong federal regulation of pollution. We argue that the environmental issue was pushed to a prominent position on the political agenda in the 1970s by a national commitment that overcame great odds. Federal involvement expanded because of past failures by state and local governments to act effectively on their own. Against this background of pre-Reagan policy evolution, we examine the current impediments to significant policy change. We assess whether the environment is so improved as to justify a slackening of effort. Reagan’s performance is then evaluated, including his prior record and campaign rhetoric. The president’s attempts to modify substantially the landmark environmental legislation of the 1970s has been thwarted by his failure to rally public, congressional, and organized group support. At the same time, the administration managed to do great damage to environmental policy.