

Power, politics and environmental change

MA Environmental Humanities 2011-12

Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Class 5

The politics of environmental change I: structuralism

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A note on answering assignments

- File name of your assignments
 - Your_name_assignmentnumber
 - E.g. Christos Zografos 3
 - NOTHING ELSE PLEASE!
- How to answer
 - First, answer the question
 - Then, substantiate, support your answer with arguments and evidence from the text
 - Avoid being descriptive: don't answer by simply describing a situation and don't re-state what the question says anyway!

Intro

- **Purpose:** explain structuralist approach to the study of how power produces environmental change
- Reason **why** you should know this:
 - Because it is one main approach of explaining the role of politics in producing environmental change
 - Which you can use for your research/ understanding environmental change and governance

Class outline

- Discuss answers to student assignment
- Delve deeper in premises of structuralist explanation of environmental change and governance
- With short group exercises

“...the uncontrolled growth of weeds and their emerging dominance in the landscape do appear to symbolize disorder, decay, and the absence of control that accompany years of political and fiscal neglect. Socially speaking, the significance of weeds is not what they do but, rather, what they represent; the same can be said for the abandoned autos, heaps of garbage, discarded needles, condoms, and drug paraphernalia, and broken glass that are pervasive throughout the park” (Brownlow, 2006, p.242)

Why, according to Brownlow, have disorder and decay fallen upon Cobbs Creek?
Do you know of any other examples where the same thing has happened?

CLASS ASSIGNMENT 3

Disorder and decay in Cobbs Creek

- Why?
 - A key factor/ key change that brought about disorder and decay
- **Loss of social (community) control** mechanisms that ensured park security for everyone
- What reasons produced this phenomenon?
 1. Actions of a man in power (Rizzo)
 2. Public Administration's neglect
 3. Change in gang culture

Personal agenda of one person in a seat of power

- Police Commissioner & then Mayor Rizzo:
 - his actions led to a loss of surveillance (local community social control) mechanisms
- Actions: Rizzo policies
 - 1974: Mayor Rizzo cuts park budget by 50% (compared to previous admin)
 - reduce importance of mounted Park Guard (personal vendetta) through its reduction: from 500 guards to 24 and its integration with the Philadelphia Police Department,
 - removal of park benches upon which members of the community would sit and observe “the world passing by”. This also led to elimination of an important element of community self-surveillance (benches)

Result of neglect (of racist-origins)

- Budget cuts started with Mayor Rizzo but continued: since early 80s (i.e. 3 decades=no increase)
- steady decline in budgetary spending on the park further compounded the problem
- budget cuts followed almost exact pattern as exodus of whites from the area (racism within the Philadelphia powerful decision-making institutions)

Change in gang culture

Gangs' informal agreement (50s) over park's neutrality

- John: “The park was sort of that neutral ground because everybody came to the park, and you had picnics out there and all kinds of things in that community – cook outs”
- Tom: “It was an unwritten agreement that the park would be neutral”

Change in gang culture

- Late 60s + early 70s: growing pressure of black power movement to cease black-on-black violence and focus energy and anger on greater social and political wrongs
 - Cobbs Creek's early gangs quietly disappear: informal park security they ensured also disappears
- late 1970s: decline of black identity movement and outmigration of middle-class blacks leaves power vacuum

Change in gang culture

- 1980s: re-emergence of gangs
 - structure and membership not like “organic, homegrown gangs of the 1950s and 1960s”
 - more violent forms and structures mimicked gang activity in cities like L.A., Chicago, and New York, **where there were no agreements, unwritten or otherwise**
 - End of agreement: emergence of violence

The bigger picture

- Loss of social control mechanisms must be analysed from a **wider perspective** of power relations' evolution within Philadelphia's recent history
 - civil rights movement, racial struggles, economic decay, etc.
- Rizzo's decisions to dismantle local social control mechanisms in Cobbs Creek can be seen as a form of **social control**
 - as a means of controlling social organization and activity among politically active black community during a period of racial upheaval
 - by removing their primary public arena of social intercourse and political exchange

STUDYING POWER THE STRUCTURALIST WAY

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY 1

Power: ability to control one's environment including others' behaviour

How does Brownlow study this "ability to control"?

1. What things (aspects of 'reality') does he analyse?
2. Where is power **located**?
Who holds it?
3. How does power **operate** upon people?

Get into groups

1. Study ways (practices and processes) in which power ***circulates*** among different social groups, resources, and spaces (Paulson et al., 2005)
2. *Where* is power **located**?
 - Outside of 'the subject'
3. How does power **operate**?
 - Power presses and shapes subject (community and park) **from the outside**

Block 2

DEEPER INTO STRUCTURALIST EXPLANATION OF POWER AND POLITICS

'Third World' within

- “Today, the Cobbs Creek “condition” is dominated by social indicators of inequality and neglect: ...male unemployment near 50%, ...” (p.231)
- Third World conditions/ spaces inside ‘First World’:
Cobbs Creek is
 - A ‘First World’ periphery
 - The ‘Third World’ within

Structuralism: the 'backwaters'

- Shroeder et al. (2006)
 - “Drawing on structuralist arguments, sees the First World as part of a global process of capitalist uneven development
 - The same forces that produced the Third World as such are responsible for creating **peripheries, backwaters, wastelands, remote areas**, etc. **within** advanced capitalist nations as well”

Structuralism: binaries

- The First – Third World **binary**
- Structuralism: to explain/ understand social reality, builds models based on binaries
- Structuralism makes a distinction between **surface structure** (superstructure) and **deep structure** (infrastructure/ base structure) (Glazer)
 - to understand the surface structure one has to understand the **deep structure**, and how it influences the surface structure
 - Assiter (1984): structures are the "**real things**" that **lie beneath the surface** or the appearance of meaning
 - *Note: origins in Freud's psychoanalysis (surface structure = conscious; deep structure = unconscious)

Key approaches and binaries

- In political ecology, Marxism is probably the most influential structuralist approach
- Traditionally, a **key surface-base binary**:
 - Ideology, politics: surface structure (superstructure)
 - Economics: deep structure (base)

Key approaches and binaries: e.g.

- Society's relations of production = **economic base**
 - e.g. capitalist relations: means of production (non-human inputs, e.g. tools + infrastructure + natural K, e.g. land) are held privately
- Society's **superstructure** (e.g. legal system, ideology, etc.) merely expresses those social conditions (private ownership of MoP) and dominant class interests
 - E.g. upper and upper-middle class (bourgeois) dominate working class

Environmental change

- “I demonstrate how urban ecologies are politically inscribed and manipulated in a manner that reflects and reproduces social relations of power and inequality” (Brownlow, 2006, p.228)
- Power: as **domination**, coming **from the outside**
- **Binaries**: environmental change (ecologies of neglect and insecurity) reflect what happens in the base structure (economic and political system)

Value of structuralism

- Refines approaches to study of domination: important
 - Domination brings inequality and environmental injustice = undesirable
 - Inequality and power differentials: deeper roots of environmental degradation (e.g. Latin America – Paulson, 2005)
- Logic of dominant (e.g. capitalist) investment-> adverse effects:
 - spatial patterns of environmental racism (e.g. landfills in African-American communities)
 - ‘First World’ peripheries (e.g. Cobbs Creek): spaces of domination

Classroom exercise 2

- Get back into your previous groups
- Can you now think of an example where the same thing (Cobbs Creek) has happened?
 - Discuss
 - Decide on example
 - Present, describe example to rest of the class

Answers should include following key elements

- **Domination** and links to environ degradation
- How power shapes **from the outside**
- Use/ build upon **binaries**
 - Base structure
 - Superstructure
 - Groups
- Analyse: **practices** and **processes**
 - Flesh out how these facilitate imposing one's "will even against.."
 - Identify power with specific groups who exercise it: who exercises power upon whom?
- Explain how degradation is result of a **system and its structure** that produces degradation