

**Power, politics and environmental change**

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# Class 3: The power of structures

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# 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
- Short group exercise

“...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?

## **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

# 1. 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*)

## 2. 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)

# 3. 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”



# 3. 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**

# 3. 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/ controlling their primary public arena (*the Park*) of social intercourse and political exchange

## CLASSROOM QUESTION

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

How does Brownlow study this "ability to control"?

1. What things (aspects of Cobbs Creek 'reality'/ situation) does he analyse?
2. How does power **operate** upon people?

## STUDYING POWER THE STRUCTURALIST WAY

1. Study: **practices** and **processes** in which power *circulates* among different social groups, resources, and spaces (Paulson et al., 2005)
2. 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**

# Structuralism: binaries

- **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
  - E.g. anxiety (conscious-surface expression) in front of authority (e.g. your boss) is result of unconscious (deep structure) 'trauma' in e.g. early childhood in front of parent, schoolteacher, etc.

# Key approaches and binaries

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

# 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 or reflects those social conditions (private ownership of MoP) and dominant class interests
  - E.g. upper and upper-middle class (bourgeois) dominate working class
  - Environmental legislation = reflects/ expresses class domination



# 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)
  - **Binaries:** environmental change (ecologies of neglect and insecurity) reflect what happens in the base structure (economic and political system: inequality)
- Power = **coercion, domination** that is imposed
  - coercive practices (actions) of actors, e.g. Rizzo, gangs
  - Pressing subjects (community, park, park ecology) **from the outside**

# Value of structuralism

- Important: refines approaches to study of domination
  - Domination brings inequality and environmental injustice = undesirable
  - Inequality and power differentials: deeper roots of environmental degradation (e.g. Latin America – Paulson, 2005)
- Logics of dominant socio-economic systems (e.g. capitalist investment) -> adverse & unequal socio-environmental effects:
  - spatial patterns of environmental racism (e.g. landfills in African-American communities)

# Classroom exercise

- Get into groups
- Can you now think of an example where similar phenomenon (Cobbs Creek ecological and landscape degradation) has happened?
  - Discuss
  - Decide on example
  - Present, describe example to rest of the class

Answers should include following key elements

- **Coercion** (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?
- In brief: explain how degradation is result of a **system and its structure** that produces degradation