

# BOOK REVIEWS/NOTES

## THE POLITICS OF POLLUTION

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Those concerned with environmental protection should always ask of a book: do the insights it offers outweigh the environmental costs (for example, destruction of trees) involved in its publication. It is a peculiar feature of contemporary societies that sources of anxiety are usually immunised by a flood of publications offering explanations for the latest crisis. The environmental crisis did not escape this process; since the late 1960's the world has been inundated with books, reports, pamphlets and learned articles dealing with, among other environmental questions, the destruction of forests to accommodate the 'information explosion'.

Our institutions are flexible enough to respond, within certain limits, to these new stresses. One of the examples of this process was the creation of the Environmental Protection Authority by the Victorian government in 1970. The Politics of Pollution is a timely investigative study of the history of this authority.

A case study of a particular phenomenon may be used to frame hypotheses that can then be tested for general applicability. The Politics of Pollution may provide some insights into the political economy of the environmental crisis in Australia by suggesting some hypotheses. The major questions to be asked in this area are: why has the crisis arisen and how have contemporary institutions responded to it?

I believe that the answer to the first question is most usefully framed in terms of the mutually reinforcing features of the capitalist mode of production. The capitalist epoch has been characterised by a combination of rapid population and economic growth, urbanisation and technological change altering the quality and quantity of demands made upon environmental resources. Over the last two decades in the advanced capitalist nations, this process has led to a qualitative change in the availability of these resources. What were once seen as 'infinite' physical resources, now appear as scarce resources. One of the forms of scarcity is environmental decay or pollution. Pollution arises because those resources in which wastes are absorbed are not subject to partitioning or private ownership. The market does not regulate the use of these resources. Under the competitive regime, the perception that these goods are both scarce and 'free' leads to an above-optimum rate of use. Thus, whilst A. Smith's 'invisible hand' may lead to self-interest to serve the public good, H. Daly's 'invisible foot' allows the pursuit of self-interest to kick the common good to pieces.

Underlying these market relations are the social relations of production in which one class, the capitalists, own and control the means of production. This class initiates production with the sole aim of expanding capital. This system, therefore, is ecologically unsound as perpetual growth, in itself, will eventually violate the biophysical constraints. In addition, the process of accumulation

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\*Peter Russ and Lindsay Tanner, The Politics of Pollution, Visa Books, Widescope International Publishers Pty. Ltd., Victoria, 1978.

hastens the day of reckoning because it leads to the concentration of capital. This allows increasingly large-scale energy intensive production. Such industrial development may cause severe intrusions into the local environment, this initial disruption being transmitted throughout the system. Large corporations also have the power to influence the type of distribution and consumption commodities. Thus it is likely that distribution and consumption will develop in a manner that places increasingly intense demands upon the environment. If it is assumed that most decisions about technical innovation and marketing are made on the basis of previous experience accumulated within the corporation then their response to changing ecological conditions is likely to be sluggish. Once these corporations have developed production and marketing techniques based upon natural resource abundance, the costs to the corporation of switching to alternative techniques consistent with natural resource scarcity would usually be judged to be greater than the long-term threat to the reproduction of the conditions necessary for their survival. In addition, the switching of techniques would involve behavioural changes on the part of the corporation, and involve an ideological threat because the knowledge of environmental conditions upon which this change would take place has been developed in institutions that have either been indifferent to or hostile to the role of the corporation.

On the other hand, the non-owning class's function as commodity consumers has become increasingly important as accumulation has proceeded. As Gintis<sup>1</sup> has argued, individuals may want satisfying and creative work, decent communities and a non-toxic environment but it becomes increasingly important for capital that their capacities are developed to only need more consumption. This capacity to consistently choose commodity consumption instead of an improved social context is developed as it becomes apparent to individuals that they do not have the power (at least as individuals) to arrest the deterioration of work, community and environment, whilst they do have greater individual control over commodity consumption. So as the social context deteriorates, the alternative to this appears to become more unrealisable. The preference for an improved social context is devalued and the compensating goal of possessing ever greater numbers of commodities gains in value. Thus the reproduction of these social relations requires a high rate of economic growth, urbanisation and technological change, not *despite* the threat of environmental breakdown but *because* this breakdown is occurring.

Whilst The Politics of Pollution displays both the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of a case study, it does aid us in exploring the institutional response to the environmental crisis. It is a detailed study of the Victorian government's response to the crisis but it does not compare this with the responses of the other Australian governments: hence the validity of the propositions to be drawn from this study depends upon how typical is this case. Similarly this study does not deal with the other important institutions active in this area — the environmental groups, industry associations and universities. The ideal account would deal with the interactions between these important institutions.

The timing of the creation of the Victorian Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) is perhaps as significant as the reasons for its creation. By 1970, Australia had experienced twenty years of virtually uninterrupted growth. It appeared to some that the 'economic problem' had been solved. In particular, the 'new' middle class, living in the outer suburban areas of our metropolitan cities, had experienced a momentous increase in their material living standard during a period of unparalleled security. However, the cost of this development was a deterioration in the 'quality of life', symbolised in Victoria by the heavy pollution of its waters. This anxiety was translated into the Liberal Party's fear that the suburbanites would drive it from office because of its indifference to the 'quality of life'. Thus the promise by the Victorian government to create an independent pollution control authority can be seen in the context of a general expectation (of the middle class in particular) that the role of government should now be concerned with goals other than the single-minded promotion of expanding commodity production. The corollary of this hypothesis is that as the economic crisis deepened in the 1970's

the effectiveness of the EPA would be emasculated as the Victorian government reverted to its former role. Chapters 1 to 8 in The Politics of Pollution are a description of how this occurred.

Even if the EPA had not been tamed by the Victorian government, its effectiveness in protecting Victoria's environment is highly questionable. Despite its name, the EPA was conceived as a pollution control authority administering the direct regulation of waste discharges. In creating this authority the Victorian government displayed little understanding of either the factors contributing to environmental decay or the scope of the activities implied by the term 'environmental protection'. The EPA was not established to regulate the empirical contributing factors (population and economic growth, urbanisation and technological change) nor the social relations underlying these factors, but was a substitute for the failure of markets to regulate the use of natural resources.

The EPA is congenitally unable to conceptualise the problem of ecological decay in an ecological manner. For example, on page 32, the faults in the drafts of the EPA's water policies are listed. These faults include the failure to determine either the existing water quality or the load, nature and structure of pollutants currently impinging upon these waters. Hence no assessment of the options and costs of maintaining or improving these waters consistent with their competing uses was made. Perhaps more damning is the failure of these drafts to evaluate the social and economic costs of attaining alternative objectives. This shows the extent that the EPA conceive of pollution control as an exercise in pure biology rather than the regulation of the interaction between human and natural systems.

The danger to the environment of this kind of tunnel vision is illustrated by the manner in which the EPA's appeals system worked during the controversy over the construction of the Newport power station (see Chapter 15). The Victorian State Electricity Commission (probably Victoria's most powerful department due to the history of Victoria's determination to be independent of New South Wales supplies) presented the Newport proposal to the State government without accompanying alternatives. The EPA did not become involved in evaluating the proposal until several trade unions placed a ban on the construction of the station. At subsequent EPA enquiries the opponents of the station were reduced to arguing that the station would significantly contribute to Melbourne's photochemical smog problem. The EPA sought to establish the degree of damage this proposal would cause, instead of becoming a forum for canvassing some more environmentally sound alternatives to constructing a natural gas-powered station near the centre of Melbourne. Its two enquiries found that the station would not significantly contribute to Melbourne's smog. However, a third independent enquiry found that the Newport station would contribute to Melbourne's air pollution but recommended, for 'economic reasons', that a scaled-down version of the station be built. It is because of the failure of the EPA to demand that alternatives to Newport be canvassed that this disastrous proposal has been allowed to survive three public enquiries. In fact, Chapters 3 to 8 of the book by Russ and Tanner (detailing the operations of the EPA) and Chapters 9 to 17 (covering specific instances in which the EPA either failed to protect the environment or assisted the Victorian government in covering up severe instances of pollution) provide ample evidence that the EPA doesn't minimise pollution. Rather, it legitimises it.

Central to the manner in which the EPA immunises public anxiety about pollution is its current policy on the freedom of information. In Chapter 18, the authors explore the most blatant instances of a policy of secrecy and misinformation. Some of the instances are the cover-up of the heavy metals pollution in Port Phillip Bay, the extensive practice of placing innocuous EPA documents under official secrecy, the doctoring of EPA annual reports at the request of the minister and the terrorising of the individual EPA staff in order to prevent the leaking of 'confidential' information. The most telling example of misinformation has been the recent literature produced by the EPA. It emphasises the individual and domestic causes of pollution whilst ignoring the industrial and government sources; it

promotes EPA action no matter how inconsequential and fosters the illusion that *all* pollution can be either seen or smelt. The EPA has become the Victorian government's public relations department on environmental matters. This public institution has responded to the environmental crisis by depoliticising it.

If the hypothesis that pollution control authorities are the public relations institutions for the depoliticisation of pollution is valid, then The Politics of Pollution is a doubly valuable case study, as the particular set of circumstances that led to this book being written may not occur for the other authorities in Australia. Similarly, if the above hypothesis is true then official publications from the institutions protecting our environment are not worth the trees killed in order to publish them. So, with the warning that reading this detailed chronicle is heavy work, I would recommend it to students of the political economy of the environment.

<sup>1</sup> H. Gintis, 'Consumer Behaviour and the Concept of Sovereignty', in Readings in Political Economy, eds. E.L. Wheelwright and F.J.B. Stilwell, vol. 2, pp. 19-26.



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