

*Environmental policy reform has proceeded along two parallel tracks: a rationalizing perspective and a democratizing one. Efforts to blend the two (including the attempt by "environmentalist-in-chief" Al Gore in his book *Earth in the Balance*) have often been awkward and unpersuasive. As the new century dawns, Science Communication might help pursue a reconciliation.*

Blended Rationality and Democracy

An Elusive Synthesis for Environmental Policy Reform

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Environmental policy is always contentious, largely because environmental laws and rules inevitably create economic winners and losers (Greve and Smith 1992). But important noneconomic values clash as well. "Partnership"—a label that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) applies to its relations with almost any entity it is not suing—is but one of many magnets for ambiguity and contention. Which partner (EPA, a state agency, or a local government) should take the lead in raising or deciding a given question? Every answer likely attracts a different supporting coalition. The former champion of equitable treatment (defined as treating like cases alike), faced by different and prospectively more painful circumstances, will tend suddenly to see the virtue of responsiveness and "flexibility" (Wilson 1989, 326). The environment/development trade-off has been so fundamental a problem for so long that a furious search for "win-win" approaches and "green gold" is now a regular motif in environmental policy discourse (Gore 1993; Moore and Miller 1994). But if that trade-off has prompted considerable creativity, another political and intellectual puzzle looms as far more challenging: the

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tension between *rationalizing* and *democratizing* strains in environmental policy reform (Foreman, 1998).

The past two decades have witnessed considerable rationalizing criticism of environmental policy, with economic analysis predominating. The economic version of the rationalizing critique holds that environmental policy (among other kinds of regulation) has been too often wasteful because program ends and means have displayed insufficient regard for the social costs imposed by regulation. From this perspective, cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses, as well as marketlike alternatives to command-and-control regulation, have been too seldom used or been accorded insufficient weight (Litan and Nordhaus 1983; Morgenstern 1997).

A different sort of rationalizing critique, while respectful of the need to address costs and benefits formally when possible, encompasses broader concerns: the discordant, meandering, and occasionally even panic-stricken character of regulatory politics and policymaking. In this view, the waste afflicting environmental regulation springs from a general failure to (1) set priorities grounded in the severity or pervasiveness of problems; (2) define and adhere to consistent approaches among issues and agencies; and (3) remediate risk only to a degree deemed reasonable in light of the relevant costs and benefits. Probably the best-known exponent of this more general line of analysis is Supreme Court Associate Justice Stephen Breyer, who is famously dismayed by society's frequent determination to reduce even minimal risks to zero, thus spawning "the problem of the last 10 percent" (Breyer 1993).

The rationalizing emphasis is, of course, not just economic but broadly scientific in origin. Widespread appreciation of the uncertainty pervading environmental regulation has generated regular calls for access by policymakers, and by EPA in particular, to better scientific analysis, especially in epidemiology and toxicology. Advocates for a National Institute for the Environment, which is intended to improve the scientific basis for environmental decisionmaking, are animated by a rationalizing spirit similar to Justice Breyer's (Committee for a National Institute for the Environment 1993).

But as the readership of *Science Communication* understands only too well, faith in scientific and technical expertise is by no means universal. The data and interpretive tools necessary to address many social problems (especially when those problems become entangled with risk assessment) are likely to remain unsatisfactory for the foreseeable future. And it is now virtually a truism that "rational analysis" cannot resolve what are ultimately value questions, and may even be a way of injecting values into decisionmaking without appearing to do so. Moreover, postmodern ideas and attitudes,

and a strain of radical environmental philosophy, continually challenge the scientific perspective in intellectual discourse, much to the chagrin of more traditional analysts (Gross and Levitt 1994; Gross, Levitt, and Lewis 1996).

All of this, along with accusations of gross inequity both in the distribution of pollution and in environmental law enforcement (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Bullard 1994; Lavelle and Coyle 1992) have helped to propel an alternative to the rationalizing reform vision. The democratizing alternative emerged from several sources: a general suspicion of elites; an unease with industrial capitalism (especially as pursued by multinational corporations that evade accountability); a conviction that citizen perspectives are inadequately mobilized and represented in policymaking; and the profound racial and economic inequity that has long bedeviled the United States. The ascendancy of the hazardous waste issue on the national political agenda, along with the broader themes of antitoxics advocacy and mobilization around episodes of "environmental racism" (Bullard 1994), are all components of the larger democratizing enterprise that Andrew Szasz has termed radical environmental populism or "ecopopulism" (Szasz 1994).

The central political project of ecopopulism is the amplification and empowerment of the collective voice of ordinary citizens, a stance that remains skeptical not only of corporate power but also of its perceived handmaidens in science and technology. From this perspective, science and scientific findings may be helpful but are just as likely to provide a distraction or, worse yet, ammunition for the enemy. That is why grassroots environmental activists regularly counsel communities battling a locally unwanted land use (LULU) to be wary of science in general and institutional epidemiologic analysis in particular (Gibbs 1995; King 1996).

Although traditional public lobby activism in the Ralph Nader mold also has the fundamental goal of creating institutions permeable to activist energy (Harris and Milkis 1989), its comfort with scientific and technical analysis, and with the Washington institutional milieu, make it quite different from grassroots activism arising out of particular communities and site-level disputes. Even when casually scrutinized, mainstream environmentalists and grassroots activists appear culturally divergent to a startling degree (Ingram, Colnic, and Mann 1995). Among grassroots environmental groups, a "useful" expertise is that which is comprehensible among friends and neighbors, directly addresses their concerns, and facilitates their leverage over local debates and decisions. Unlike rationalizers such as Justice Breyer, ecopopulists tend to gauge success, and to assess technical knowledge, according to standards of inclusiveness, community comfort and legitimacy, and fidelity to democratic practice. Put somewhat differently, there exists a wide chasm indeed between a managerial language emphasizing scientific

expertise as a legitimating force in policymaking and a communitarian alternative espousing direct citizen action and influence as primary (Williams and Matheny 1995).

Perhaps the most interesting and important question facing environmental scholars and policymakers as we approach the new century is how, if at all, we might achieve a more satisfying and durable blend of the technical and democratic demands that weigh so heavily on environmental policymaking. At present we are left with little more than the cumulative result of group politics and good intentions.

The single most influential and thoughtful presence on today's environmental policy stage, Vice President Al Gore, has yet to grapple effectively with the problem. Perhaps the least satisfying aspect of his best-selling book *Earth in the Balance* (Gore 1993) remains its artful dance around the collision of science and ecopopulism. For the most part, Gore is both well informed and unafraid to say where he stands on such matters as global warming, the preservation of rain forests, and the need for population control in poor nations.

Yet Gore's recitation of local environmental grotesqueries among the developing and former-Soviet bloc nations is not entirely convincing as an argument for policies he wants the West to embrace. Even more glaring, however, Gore seems utterly stymied by the challenge of ecopopulism. At one point in his book (pp. 289-90), he relates what must seem to him an ideal fusion of rationalizing and democratizing energies: the successful mobilization by Humans Against Lethal Trash (HALT) in opposition to a hazardous waste disposal facility in Henderson, Tennessee. Gore judges that HALT had both popular might and technical right on its side (and he may indeed be judging that case accurately).

But what does he make of the many examples of local NIMBY ("Not In My Backyard") activism where citizens (and especially committed activists) have little interest in, and remain resolutely unpersuaded by, a project's technical merits no matter how well articulated? In such instances, residents and activists simply demand that the dreaded toxic beast be banished, no matter what. Gore uncritically recites the well-debunked claim of environmental justice enthusiasts that the petrochemical industry has turned the Baton Rouge–New Orleans corridor of Louisiana into a "Cancer Alley" where minority residents endure an epidemic of environmentally induced cancers. In fact, no such epidemic has been found (Groves et al. 1996). Gore is properly sensitive to the fear and alienation underlying the folklore, but is nonetheless unable to combine his head and heart into a clear synthetic perspective.

By the same token, the presidential executive order 12898 on environmental justice, issued in February 1994, instructs federal agencies to identify and address "disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects . . . on low-income and minority populations" (U.S. Government Printing Office 1994). The executive order is thus a document embedded firmly in notions of administrative and technical rationality, at least all the way up to its rather vague provision for "public meetings." Alternatively, EPA's Office of Environmental Justice and National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) purportedly offer democratizing counterweights, pathways for average citizens into the belly of the bureaucratic beast. But no one appears to have a clear sense of how the two halves of the policy whole should be put together. Attempting to conduct rational analysis with abundant public input is an obvious safe haven (Morgenstern 1997), and some observers have focused on trust-building to mitigate the NIMBY problem (Rabe 1994). Still, at best, the rationalizing and democratizing reform trains glide mostly along parallel tracks having little to do with one another; at worst, the wreckage is a sight to behold. One must also be mindful that, across the spectrum of health and safety issues, the phenomenon of "grassroots victim organization" emerges from popular fear and anger, galvanized by entrepreneurial energy (Foreman 1995). Risk magnitudes are inconsequential to the process.

So as we look to the next century, work that offers plausible and intelligible guidance on how better to navigate and synthesize the divergent realms of technical analysis and democratic aspiration, in environmental and other policy areas, is something the readers of *Science Communication* should all be hoping for. One hopes also that the journal's contributors will be among those providing it.

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