

INVESTIGATING ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES UNDER VARIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

Ricky C. M. Chung¹, Patrick S. W. Fong² and Geoffrey Q.P. Shen²

¹ Department of Building and Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China.

Email: cmrchung@gmail.com

² Department of Building and Real Estate, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China.

ABSTRACT

An environmental discourse is a set of unified contexts, approaches and beliefs surrounding an ideology that shapes the actions of governments and organizations in handling environmental issues. The embedded ideologies influence the hierarchy of issues and actors in handling the issues and ultimately determine how key actors and stakeholders interact. This paper explores the effect of environmental discourses in environmental policy formation and subsequent changes in policy style. Different environmental discourses will be investigated to understand the basic characteristics. Policy style in different developing countries will be assessed to identify their dominant discourse. The compatibility of the current social-political structure with sustainability will also be assessed. Discourse analysis helps to illustrate the prevailing environmental movement and policy style of a society, which in turn helps to show the way to greater sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Environmental Movement, Environmental Policy, Discourse Analysis, Ecological Modernization

INTRODUCTION

Policy formulation is a complex social process that involves various actors and the selection of different competing values and ideas (Draelants and Maroy, 2007). Since society itself is complex and issues involved are often multi-disciplinary in nature, different perspectives naturally arise to address the same complex issue that cannot be explained in simple terms. These different perspectives permeate society, and different organizations, scholars and institution bodies will follow the ones that are most appealing to them. These perspectives, once adapted, become the doctrine of the organization and skew their preferences accordingly. These perspectives are called discourses and they dictate how organizations perceive the environment around them. Hannigan (2006) describes discourses as interrelated sets of 'story-lines' which interpret the world around us and which become deeply embedded in societal institutions, agendas and knowledge claims. In the environmental context, discourses reflect the perception that an institution body has of the natural environment and the subsequent issues related to human-nature interaction. In environmental politics, institution is one of the major policy drivers, but it is not the sole actor in the policy dynamics; the ideas and perceptions of other social actors do have a substantial influence in the policy making process. Draelants and Maroy (2007) classified the perceptions in society into a matrix of two dimensions: the cognitive or normative level, with concepts and assumptions in the foreground or background.

	Concepts and theories in the foreground of the debate	Underlying assumptions in the background of the debate
Cognitive (outcome oriented)	Programmes	Paradigms
	Ideas as elite prescriptions that enable politicians, corporate leaders and other decision makers to chart a clear and specific course of action E.g., programmes as “road map”, “focal points” that have enough appeal to facilitate coalition building and political support	Ideas as elite assumptions that constrain the cognitive range of useful programmes available to politicians, corporate leaders, and other decision makers E.g., Paradigm of instrumental rationality E.g., Fligstein’s “views of control “ Esping Andersen’s “family models”
Normative (non-outcome oriented)	Frames	Public Sentiments
	Ideas as symbols and concepts that enable decisions makers to legitimize programmes to their constituents E.g., communicative discourse to justify or legitimize neo-liberal programmes to their citizens British identity according to Mrs. Thatcher “pro-European sentiment” in France The frame intends to improve “the appropriateness” of the programme to the norms and values of their constituents	Ideas as public assumptions that constrain the normative range of legitimate programmes available to decision makers: Public opinion, values, norms , collective identities, “collectively shared expectations” E.g., public sentiments regarding the fairness of military conscription View of State The identity underlying the labour movement

Figure 1 Typology of perceptions at different dimensions (Draelants and Maroy, 2007 , p.48)

In Figure 1, programmes and paradigms on the upper side are the backbone of discourses that are embedded in the institution, whereas frames and public sentiments on the lower side are the reflection and representation of social norms. Under Campbell’s typology, the concepts and assumptions in the foreground and background should share the same perspective and ideology. In other words, the prevailing discourse decides the worldview of the institution and dictates the objectives of action and the perspective on social structure. The underlying objective-worldview becomes the motive for the institution to place their focus on certain stakeholders and policy tools. The layout becomes the precondition for the institution to engage in particular types of communication method in involving the key actors.

The perception typology also explains why, even though the institutional body often has decisive control over the ideologies adapted, there is a limit on how far the implementation can go. The public sentiment, or in other words, the social norm puts a frame on policy choice that can be selected by the institution. Through public sentiment, the general public often has some influence over which programme is adopted in the policy formulation process. Ideologies that come in direct conflict with public sentiment are often difficult to implement. If such conflicting ideas did get to be implemented, it might end in a loss of trust between the public and the institution, which will have an adverse effect on social stability. For this reason, institutions often cannot fully execute everything according to their ideology, and policies are often fine-tuned to fit the social norm while still aiming to achieve the objectives set by the underlying ideology. A policy still carries the objectives, policy itself can sometimes act as a tool to observe the prevailing ideas and ideologies embraced by the institutional body at a particular time. In the case of environmental policy, the change in prevailing ideology can be identified throughout modern history in the Western World.

ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSES

As in other aspects, environmental policies often operate according to a set of ideologies and associated rhetorical devices and we call them environmental discourses. Discourse analysis comes in many streams, and some of the influential works include Herndl and Brown’s (1996) *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*, Bruelle’s (2000) *Agency, Democracy, and Nature: The U.S. Environmental Movement from a Critical Theory Perspective*, and John Dryzek’s (1997) *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*. All streams look into human-nature interaction and role of the institution. However, Dryzek’s description focuses more on social-economic changes in society and can better describe the policy action of institutions. According to Dryzek (1997),

environmental discourse has its roots in a departure from the current industrialist structure of society, and the departure itself can be rapid and dramatic or slow and gradual. Dryzek classified the movement into reformist and radical, which describes the change in social terms, and prosaic and imaginative, which describes the change in political-economic terms. Hannigan (2006) describes the four dimensions as the following: prosaic points to largely maintaining the current political-economic structure while imaginative seeks to redefine the political-economic structure and to dissolve old dilemmas through departure from traditional industrialist discourses; meanwhile, reformists tend to adjust the status quo in society and radical aims for a thorough transformation of the social structure and a complete departure from industrial society.

For analysis, we can place different discourses under the two dimensions matrix and get a basic characteristic of the discourses. The major and prevailing discourses in the current political world include Environmental Problem Solving, Sustainable Development and Green Radicalism. Each of these discourses suggests a different pace of change induced in industrial society. Figure 2 shows the orientation of the different pace and the associated discourses.

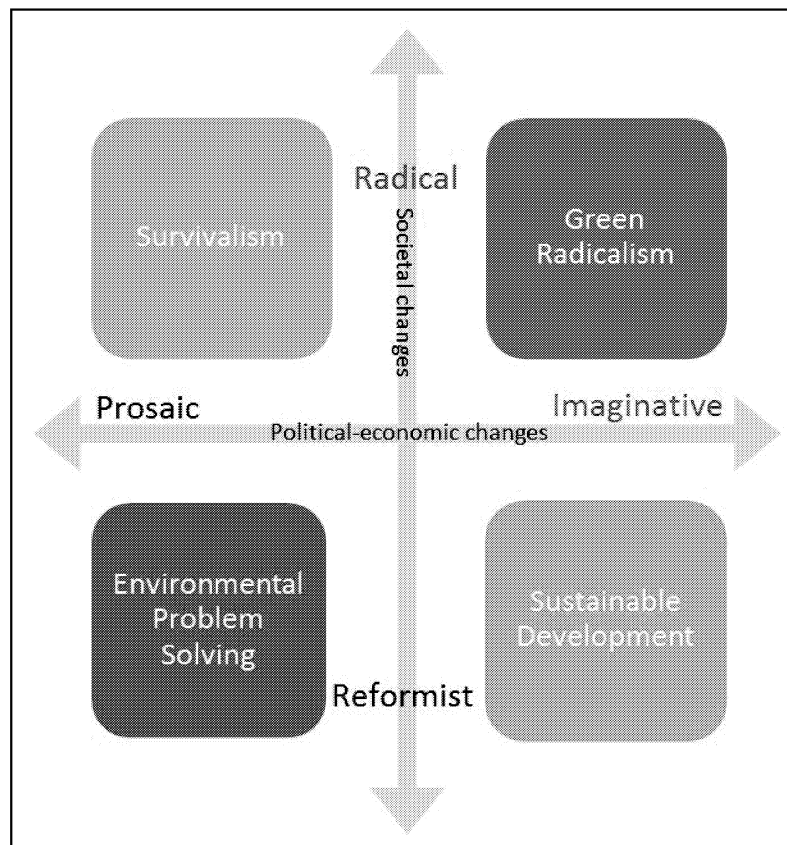


Figure 2 The matrix showing the classification of different environmental discourses (Dryzek, 1997)

Environmental Problem Solving

Environmental Problem Solving is an assemblage of discourses which includes administrative rationalism and democratic pragmatism. The assemblage assumes that human-nature interaction generates a range of conflicts, and that the institution as the leading agent should tackle these conflicts as a problem solver. As the discourses have their roots in the current social-institutional structure, it naturally takes on a reformist and prosaic approach to societal change in environmental matters. Taking a mild stance on the environmental movement, the two discourses included in environmental problem solving are reluctant regarding radical changes in the social and political-economic structure. By embracing the traditional liberal capitalism of the industrial society, the two discourses assume the nature as a source of resources which is subject to human control.

Administrative Rationalism

Administrative rationalism, as the name suggests, is a discourse with the institutional body taking up the lead, assuming that the environment can be managed by humans and environmental problems can be solved through policy and action. Under administrative rationalism, as the institutional body lacks knowledge on the environment, they turn to experts and the scientific community for technical advice. Public interest does play a role here, but is treated as a unified and relatively static entity that the government can study.

Democratic Pragmatism

Democratic pragmatism is a modified version of administrative rationalism and shares some of the main ideologies under the umbrella of environmental problem solving. However, there are distinctions between the two, and the most significant one comes in the changing role of the institution and the key agents on which they rely. Administrative rationalism focuses on the people and the interaction between the various agents. These agents contribute to the debate in forming a public interest. Public interest in this sense is quite different from that considered by administrative rationalists; democratic pragmatists consider public interest as diverse and constantly changing. Different interests compete and cooperate, and public interest is the final product of the interaction. This discourse believes that the public interest is the main driving force for well-being, and that environmental problems can be solved by pursuing public interests.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a discourse that tries to pair environmental issues with social economic growth. The discourse attempts to address all environmental issues in an all-inclusive social-economic-environment framework in which all aspects can be taken care of without sacrificing any sides of the framework. In other words, the ultimate goal would be economic growth that is environment-friendly and socially just. Occupying the quadrant on the reformist and imaginative side on the Figure 2 matrixes, sustainable development aims to fine-tune the current social system while redefining the political-economic structure. The reformist side of the discourse is shown by inheriting the capitalist society and subordination of nature under human use. The imaginative side of the discourse comes in pursuing a bottom-up approach in the political network, and perceives that environmental protection is not in direct conflict with the economy. In this sense, the power structure is shifted from state to local level, with different actors working together for the public good.

Ecological Modernization

Ecological modernization and sustainable development are seemingly different, but on the environmental movement spectrum, they share the same ground. The concept of ecological modernization has its roots in incorporating environmental issues within the capitalist structure, which aims for environmental reforms in social practice (Mol and Sonnenfeld, 2000). The basic principle of ecological modernization is based on the idea that pollution means inefficiency in the production system and, therefore, pollution reduction is profitable (Christoff, 2000). The discourse focuses on partnerships between the institution, business, social and environmental actors which are motivated by public interest. Since partnerships between actors are suggested here, ecological modernization shares some similarities with sustainable development in terms of social and policy network. In other words, the discourse combines the technical fix with social reforms under the motivation of public good.

Green Radicalism

Green radicalism loosely comprises various discourses that share the fundamental characteristics of a push for a thorough transformation in both the political-economic and the social realm. Although it occupies the radical and imaginative spectrum on the matrix, green rationalism, a stream of green radicalism, aims to achieve change through political movement in the industrial-capitalist political system. Like green radicalism, green rationalism is not a single entity but a loose description of discourses that share a similar ideology. As Dryzek (1997) pointed out, green rationalism includes a wide spectrum of ideologies ranging from the statist Realo greens and eco-socialists to the quasi-anarchist social ecology. Under the umbrella of green rationalism, the main ideologies include perceiving nature as equal to humans in the human-nature interaction, acknowledging the global limit of resources, and involving agents at all levels ranging from individual to collective. To some extent, green rationalism is taking

sustainable development further by encompassing equality, justice and environmental well-being while revolutionizing the culture and social structure embedded in modern society.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

In the 1970s, the United States was regarded as a pioneer in environmental policy making (Schlosberg and Dryzek, 2002). At the same time, the looming environmental crisis led the environmental movement in sweeping across the developed world (Hannigan, 2006). After several decades of development, the policy directives in the developed world are very different from those of the last century. In the last century, environmental problem solving has been the dominant discourse in environmental policies, intending to resolve environmental issues without tampering with the status quo. The institutional response to environmental problems comes in a set of instruments or practices that quantify nature and the human impact on it. These instruments or practices set the guideline for policy response from the institution. In the case of the United States, the government still has a tight grip over environmental policy. Environmental policy making in the United States has been and is still clinging onto federal standards and technology-based permits (Andrews, 1997). Political and societal change to embrace environmentalism was stagnated during Bush's conservative administration, when the government saw environmental regulation as a burden to the economy (Scholsberg and Dryzek, 2002). The key impact of the conservative administration is the United States' withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol.

In the United Kingdom, environmental policies are formulated by close-knit communities of civil servants and expert advisors (Bailey, 2007). Within the political framework, industry groups have typically enjoyed a privileged position over environmental ones (Lowe and Ward, 1998). However, things began to change in the 1990s when environmental groups start to form strategic alliances with industries to find overlaying common interests (Bailey, 2007). Prior to the 1990s, the bureaucratic structure formed the basis for administrative rationalism in the environmental policy-making process. In the twenty-first century, the participation of other actors is becoming more common in the policy making process in the United Kingdom. In the case of the emission-trading scheme that was introduced in 2002, the industry was consulted in the design of the scheme, then it was further revised on consultation with industry, academics, environmental groups and traders (Bailey, 2007). The involvement of different actors in policy making has shifted the United Kingdom from administrative rationalism toward democratic pragmatism.

In the case of Germany, environmental policy leans toward incrementalism due to its government structure, which has produced a legalistic, corporatist and consensual policy culture (Bailey, 2007). The policy style in Germany in the past was often lead by strong legislation which then extracted voluntary agreements from industry groups, maintaining a guiding influence for the industry (Bergmann, Brockmann and Rennings, 1998). The institution having a decisive guiding power over the industry builds the basis for the administrative rationalism policy style in Germany. In the late 1990s, a sudden change in policy style was initiated by the Green Party, which made its way to parliament and formed a governing coalition with the Social Democrats (Bailey, 2007). The government has also turned to more flexible policies while engaging in a more egalitarian dialogue with non-state actors (Mol, Lauber and Liefferink, 2000). The changes in the 1990s are an indication of the policy style shift from administrative rationalism toward democratic pragmatism and, to some degree, green rationalism, with the Green Party now playing a role in the institution.

Influence of the prevailing discourses

All three cases have a different pace on the level of political and societal change in addressing environmental affairs. The developed countries seem too fond of the concept of sustainable development and tend to mention the concept in environmental policy addresses. However, sustainable development is currently an ambiguous concept, not an achievable goal. At most it can be translated into a loose set of benchmarks for assessing the sustainability of policy address in terms of environmental regulation and social development. The more realistic form of change that is variable to the capitalist society would be ecological modernization. The key concept in ecological modernization is aiming to restructure the capitalist economy along more environmentally sound lines by addressing the environmental issues directly into the economic system (Hajer, 1995). In some aspects, ecological modernization can be considered as a weak form of sustainable development, as they are both derived from economic models of growth in the context of limited resources (Hackett, 2006). The practicability of the discourse comes in offering a road map for institutional bodies to follow by picking the low-hanging fruits first (Eckersley, 2004). Ecological

modernization comes in two streams, from a weak form which focuses on technical fixes and institutional tools to a strong form which is more ecological and egalitarian (Gibbs, 2000). Weak ecological modernization is a preferred choice for institutions as it requires no adjustment to the structure of the political economy, which is likely to face less political resistance (Hajer, 1996). The weak form itself is limited for pushing a more sustainable society, as it relies on technical fixes and institutional tools which largely neglect the other ecological and trans-boundary environmental issues. Having the low-hanging fruits first does open up a window for a more open-minded policy address which makes way for strong ecological modernization. Schlosberg and Dryzek (2002) argued that the problem in the environmental movement in the United States is that radical green movements could help turn weak into strong ecological modernization, but are no help in the absence of the weak form. The same goes for sustainable development; some argue that ecological modernization can never replace sustainable development as ecological modernization is silent on the issues of social justice and equality (Langhelle, 2000). However, ecological modernization lays the foundation of energy and material efficiency for sustainable development, which also pursues social justice at the local and global level. Given the relative stagnation in the environmental movement in the developed world, ecological modernization deserves more attention; it might light the way for industrial societies to achieve greater sustainability.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work described in this paper was fully supported by a grant from the FCLU Sustainable Urbanization Research Fund of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, R.N.L. 1997, "United States" in *National environmental policies: a comparative study of capacity-building*, eds. M. Jänicke & H. Weidner, Springer-Verlag, .
- Bailey, I. 2007, "Market environmentalism, new environmental policy instruments, and climate policy in the United Kingdom and Germany", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 97, no. 3, pp. 530-550.
- Bergmann, H., Brockmann, K.L. & Rennings, K. 1998, "An economic approach to environmental agreements. Experiences from Germany", *ENVIRONMENT AND POLICY*, vol. 12, pp. 157-178.
- Brulle, R.J. 2000, *Agency, democracy, and nature: The US environmental movement from a critical theory perspective*, The MIT Press.
- Christoff, P. 2000, "Ecological modernisation, ecological modernities" in *The emergence of ecological modernisation: integrating the environment and the economy?*, ed. S.C. Young, World Bank Publications, , pp. 209.
- Draelants, H. & Maroy, C. 2007, "Institutional change and public policy" , *KNOWandPOI Literature Review Report*.
- Draelants, H. & Maroy, C. 2007, "A Survey of Public Policy Analysis", *KNOWandPOI Literature Review Report*.
- Dryzek, J.S. 1997, *The politics of the earth: Environmental discourses*, Oxford University Press.
- Eckersley, R. 2004, *The green state: rethinking democracy and sovereignty*, The MIT Press.
- Gibbs, D. 2000, "Ecological modernisation, regional economic development and regional development agencies", *Geoforum*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 9-19.
- Hajer, M. 1996, "Ecological modernisation as cultural politics", *Risk, environment and modernity: towards a new ecology*, vol. 253.
- Hajer, M.A. 1995, *The politics of environmental discourse: ecological modernization and the policy process*, Oxford University Press, USA.
- Hannigan, J.A. 2006, *Environmental sociology*, Psychology Press.
- Herndl, C.G. & Brown, S.C. 1996, *Green culture: Environmental rhetoric in contemporary America*, Univ of Wisconsin Pr.
- Langhelle, O. 2000, "Why ecological modernization and sustainable development should not be conflated", *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 303-322.
- Lowe, P. & Ward, S. 1998, *British environmental policy and Europe: politics and policy in transition*, Routledge.
- Mol, A.P.J., Lauber, V. & Liefferink, D. 2000, *The voluntary approach to environmental policy: Joint environmental policy-making in Europe*, Oxford University Press, USA.
- Mol, A.P.J., Sonnenfeld, D.A. & Ashford, N. 2000, "Ecological modernisation around the world: an introduction", *Ecological modernisation around the world: perspectives and critical debates*, , pp. 3.

Schlosberg, D. & Dryzek, J.S. 2002, "Political strategies of American environmentalism: inclusion and beyond", *Society and Natural Resources*, vol. 15, no. 9, pp. 787-804.