

## Whose Environmentalism?

Sahotra Sarkar,  
Section of Integrative Biology,  
Department of Philosophy,  
University of Texas at Austin,  
Austin, TX 78712 -1180.

### 1. Introduction.

*Break Through* is an entertaining and welcome elaboration of the arguments of Shellenberger and Nordhaus' (2004) "Death of Environmentalism" which are now somewhat more compelling by being developed in greater detail. They argue that many of the "environmental" and socio-political issues that drive progressives to political advocacy are interdependent. Lowering U.S.-produced car emissions, desirable if you want to control climate change, is difficult to achieve because of the already high production costs of U.S. cars.<sup>1</sup> Unions resist such moves because even higher production costs will likely lower profits and may well drive companies and jobs overseas. But U.S. production costs are high partly because employers are responsible for workers' health insurance costs (unlike, for instance, Japan where the state covers these costs). Thus, environmentalists should be organizing for socialized health care as part of their concern for environmental welfare. From examples such as these N&S (this order reflects the order of authors in *Break Through*) argue that environmentalists should step back from single issue politics and develop a broad vision of what they want for the future. Without such a broad vision, tackling runaway global problems of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term "American" is intentionally not being used to refer only to the United States.

magnitude of climate change will be impossible. Finally, N&S argue that developing such a broad vision should include an explicit elaboration of fundamental values that environmentalists endorse. Here, according to N&S, environmentalists should learn from the strategy by which U.S. neoconservatives came to power, harping on values such as smaller government, fewer taxes, a large military, and traditional families. Progressives must provide their alternatives in a vernacular that touches individuals' self-perception of their own interests. Note that the process of formulating a comprehensive vision will require much more than listing the individual issues traditionally promoted by environmental organizations. Organizing around single environmental issues, N&S argue, has only led to one failure after another in recent U.S. political history. Environmentalists have no vision any more, no agenda with any chance of political success. (For all the inflated rhetoric surrounding N&S's work, both due to them and their critics, this is all that constitutes the "death" of environmentalism.)

Where *Break Through* goes beyond "The Death of Environmentalism" is in elaborating an explicit account of the origin of "environmental" values. The "environment," as they understand the term, is a luxury good. In the US, "environmentalism" only emerged in the 1960s after a decade of rapid economic growth led to the disappearance of material needs such as food, shelter, and security.<sup>2</sup> Environmental concern is thus not part of the politics of the poor, it is not the politics of resistance championed by many of those rooted in the political struggles of the South (see below). This is the position I wish to challenge. N&S's arguments are based on two

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<sup>2</sup> That these needs largely disappeared for US *whites* is perhaps a plausible claim—see Kismaric and Heiferman (1996); see, however, Harrington (1962) who documents the extent of poverty still remaining in the United States, even after accounting for race.

pieces of contentious theorizing they accept uncritically. First, they presume Maslow's hierarchical theory of human needs and, worse, they assume that environmental values reflect "higher-order" needs. Second, they presume Inglehart's distinction between materialist and postmaterialist values, and uncritically accept his thesis that environmentalism is central to a shift from "from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety, toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression and the quality of Life (Inglehart 1981, p. 880)." Once you follow this route, as Guha (2000, p. 98) has noted, environmentalism becomes "a phenomenon peculiar to the rich nations of the North, a product of the move toward 'postmaterialist' values among the populations of North America and West Europe." Ultimately, all the problems that I note below with N&S's analysis all arise from a single fundamental assumption: that environmental needs are postmaterial. That assumption is central to how N&S use both Maslow's and Inglehart's theses. That assumption will be examined in some detail as we reconstruct the conceptual frameworks used by self-styled environmental movements of the South.

However, I will not use this occasion to provide a general theoretical critique of Maslow's hierarchy of needs or of Inglehart's interpretation of materialism and postmaterialism, though neither account is compelling, even in the Northern context (Martínez-Alier 2004). Rather the critique of N&S will be mainly empirical, based on the experience of Southern struggles for material improvement. Theoretical issues are not avoided as I elaborate the conceptual frameworks used in the South, especially in Section 2, which documents how, for "subaltern" ecological movement environmental needs are basic material needs of sustenance and safety. In the process this section

also documents the extent to which N&S's arguments have not only been anticipated, but elaborated with more theoretical sophistication, in writings about these movements. Section 3 then argues that these ecologies constitute “environmentalism” by any reasonable construal of that term even though that term, in the usage relevant here, only goes back to the 1970s. What N&S are criticizing is one strand of environmentalism within the US, not even environmentalism in all its guises in the North, let alone the perhaps more robust environmentalism of the South. Section 4 points out that, in the changing world of today, the South cannot be quite as easily silenced as N&S implicitly assume by ignoring its independent agencies in their analysis. What happens in Brazil, China, and India, for instance, is as crucial to the future of climate change as what happens in the North. Those who believe that political activism in the South will continue as jaded reflections of the politics of the North are living in a dream world. In Section 5 I end by noting that subaltern concerns are also relevant to the North (as recognized by various environmental justice movements but denied by N&S). Nevertheless, there is some value in N&S's positive agenda for the future and I try to end on a positive note.

## **2. Subaltern Ecologies.**

As noted in the last section, a crucial claim of *Break Through* (and also of “Death of Environmentalism”) is the recognition of the interdependence of ecological concerns with socio-political problems at all scales, from the microeconomic to the macroeconomic, from individual aspirations to national dreams. Ecological problems are thus—to use some old-fashioned jargon which N&S would probably eschew—*structural*,

and cannot be resolved by mere tinkering which leaves the economic base untouched. Ecological progress must be achieved in tandem with social progress, the satisfaction of human aspirations for better lives. According to N&S, one consequence of this interpenetration of ecological and socio-political concerns is that there is no distinct category of the “environment” around which a distinctively “environmental” movement can be created. Further, N&S go on to argue, it is a mistake to separate humans from nature; rather, humans are part of nature.

All of this is welcome. But, so far, there is nothing remotely new. Those who call themselves “social” ecologists, primarily from the South, have long been making the same—and relatively obvious—points. Partly to avoid confusion with followers of Murray Bookchin in the North, but mainly to underscore the heterogeneity of their analyses and practices, even though they are all rooted in a recognition of the salience of power asymmetries, I will refer to this group of environmentalists as “subaltern” ecologists. When N&S rail against Northern environmentalists’ arrogance in the Amazon, they were preceded by Diegues (1998) and Martínez-Alier (2004), among many others. When they take Lovejoy and Terborgh to task for insensitivity towards local needs and aspirations, they were long preceded by Guha, first in his highly influential critique of radical American environmentalism (Guha 1989a), and more recently in his indictment of “authoritarian” biologists (Guha 1997). I have previously pointed out the shoddy politics of some prominent conservation biologists from the North (Sarkar 1996) and have also noted that the category of “the environment” is besought with problems (Sarkar 1999, 2005).

The term “subaltern” was initially popularized in the 1980s by the Subaltern

Studies collective, a group of South Asian scholars loosely united in a project to write history “from below” (Ludden 2002), emphasizing the heterogeneous politics of popular resistance to subordination, typically at a local level. These protests were sometimes what we would now call ecological, and Guha (1985) was an early contributor to *Subaltern Studies* though he later disassociated himself from the original project (Guha 1995). Guha characterized his own project as “social ecology” and placed it in continuity with a tradition that, in the Indian context, went back to the 1940s (Mukerjee 1942; Guha 1994). Martínez-Alier (2004) uses “political ecology” in much the same way though others often use that term to describe research that is less accepting of the use of scientific ecology as an analytic tool. Nevertheless, the choice “social ecology” was unfortunate, at least in a Northern context, because of its association with the work of Bookchin.<sup>3</sup> Recently, Guha (2006) distinguished (without explanation) “subaltern social ecology” from other forms of social ecology though all forms continued to deal with the asymmetries of power. Featherstone (2007) emphasized “heterogeneous associations of humans and nonhumans” as characteristic of what he called “subaltern political ecologies.” Both Guha (2000) and Martínez-Alier (2004) have used “environmentalism of the poor” to describe what is here being called subaltern ecology.

Several themes are shared between all these approaches and, in common with them, “subaltern ecology” will be used here to describe movements and analyses that:

- (i) recognize the interpenetration of socio-political and non-human environmental factors in determining the state of habitats and livelihoods;
- (ii) draw on both (non-human) ecological and social determinants to produce salient

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<sup>3</sup> This is not intended as a critique of Bookchin’s project but, rather, only to note a difference.

facts;

- (iii) endorse heterogeneity and contextual delimitation in the choice of analytic techniques from the ecological and social sciences;
- (iv) view struggles over “nature” as reflecting struggles between human interests in society at large;
- (v) agree with ecofeminists that women play a distinctive role in most social organizations, and therefore, in struggles around them;
- (vi) explicitly contest the asymmetry of power relations in those struggles; and
- (vii) include equity, justice, and ecological sustainability and enrichment as goals of the these struggles.

There is no claim of fidelity to the original Subaltern Studies project. That project has long been mired in postmodern cultural criticism with questionable relevance to any political project, let alone ones that require contact with the empirical world (such as ecological policy formulation and implementation).<sup>4</sup>

Returning to N&S’s claims, four questions confront us about this list of criteria: Are there movements that satisfy the criteria listed above? Should progressives endorse these movements? Do these movements reflect material needs? Do these movements constitute environmentalism? The last question will be taken up in the next section—it requires a nuanced discussion of terms related to “environment” and what they are supposed to do. The first question will be answered by a discussion of three well-known examples. (Limitations of space prevent a discussion of many others [see below].) The

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, given the way in which the original project has changed, “subaltern” may prove to be an unwise choice of term, carrying unhelpful connotations linking it to a specific fashion of cultural criticism. However, Guha (2006) and Featherstone (2007) provide partial antecedents and it will suffice for the purpose of this essay.

descriptions of these examples will emphasize issues of equity, justice, and power asymmetry which should suffice to answer the second question. Throughout, there will be explicit attention to the third question since it is central to N&S's claim that environmental values are postmaterial.

For lack of space, I will restrict attention to three Southern movements, from three different decades and continents, which stand out and have been so widely studied and debated that they will not require extensive exposition:

- If any single movement contributed most to the recognition of the significance of subaltern ecologies, it was the Chipko movement in the Indian Himalayas in the 1970s (Guha 1989b). The movement was initiated by local peasant women who acted to prevent deforestation by timber contractors authorized by the state Forest Department. Local residents (correctly) posited a connection between deforestation, subsequent erosion, and a devastating flood in 1970 which, accompanied by landslides, killed a large number of people and cattle besides destroying much property and most of the local communications infrastructure. Also at stake was the control of forest resources, including timber and resin, on which the agrarian local economy critically depended. (Later, the focus of some participants would broaden to target limestone mining and hydroelectric projects that were also destructive of forests.)
- The struggle against deforestation by the rubber-tappers of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union in the Brazilian Amazon in the 1980s is of almost iconic significance for subaltern ecologies, having been analyzed and re-analyzed perhaps as often as the Dead Sea scrolls (Revkin 1990). It is perhaps expectedly

discussed in some detail by N&S (pp. 50 -64). Pitted against the rubber-tappers and their charismatic leader, Francisco Alves Mendes Filho (better known simply as Chico Mendes), were ranchers bent on clearing the forest, and supported by the state. Mendes was assassinated by ranchers in 1988, a crime that helped focus international attention on the destruction of Amazonian rain forests. Mendes' struggle was for the survival of the rubber-tappers' livelihoods, not some possible post-materialist abstraction such as biodiversity. N&S and I do not disagree on the interpretation of this example. But N&S miss the point that it is typical of subaltern ecologies, if our vision is not myopically restricted to the United States—I will return to this point in Sections 4 and 5.

- In the 1990s, the struggle of local groups against transnational oil companies in the Niger Delta was equally well-covered internationally. Shell, backed by a corrupt military dictatorship, was confronted by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) demanding increased autonomy for the Ogoni people, a fair share of profits from the extraction of oil from their traditional lands, and, finally, remediation of *pollution* (a concept that N&S strangely disparage) from oil-extracting activities (Okonta and Douglas 2003). The last was particularly important because it had led to the usual health problems from chemical exposure as well as the collapse of local fisheries. What shocked the world was the execution of nine MOSOP leaders on trumped-up charges in 1995 without any semblance of a fair trial; those murdered included internationally prominent Nigerian author, Ken Saro-Wiwa.

In the next section we will return to the question whether these movements should be

viewed as environmentalist. The crucial point is that any attempt to interpret the goals of these movements as postmaterial is pathological. For the Chipko movement, the goal was to prevent landslides and floods and to protect access to very tangible forest products such as timber and resin. For the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union the goal was continuing extraction of rubber. For MOSOP fish productivity was at stake, besides health, and a fair share of monetary profit. In none of these cases were the goals luxury goods satisfying "higher-order" needs. Rather, they were matters of rudimentary physical and economic survival and the maintenance of health. None of this should come as a surprise: marginal rural peoples in modern economies are often those who depend most critically on material resources directly extracted from natural (that is, non-human) sources. Protecting these material resources is often a matter of health and illness, life and death. There are many other such examples—Peet and Watts (1996) and Guha and Martinez-Alier (1998) provide a useful entry to the literature.

### 3. But, Is this Environmentalism?

In discussing the Brazilian rubber-tappers, N&S tellingly characterize Chico Mendes as a "labor and community organizer, not an environmentalist" (p. 51). It is being implicitly claimed here that one cannot be both a labor and community organizer *and* an environmentalist. Now, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "environmentalism," when it means "concern with the preservation of the environment," only dates back to 1972, and the term "environmentalist," used in the same context, goes back to 1970.<sup>5</sup> However, the first edition of Dasmann's (1959) pioneering

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<sup>5</sup> <http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>; last accessed 05-Jul-08.

textbook, *Environmental Conservation*, goes back to 1959. It is probably true that the peculiar cultural conditions of the United States led to the introduction of the terms “environmentalism” and “environmentalist” in the 1970s; it is also true that words shape our thoughts. Nevertheless, the concerns that motivate environmentalists (and environmentalism) are of much older vintage. In the 1950s, Dasmann saw his work in continuity with the much older tradition of natural resource management. Cross-culturally, concern for these resources go back centuries, sometimes millennia (Grove 1995; Sarkar 2005). Synchronously, such concerns also transcend cultural boundaries: conscious natural resource management by traditional societies is ubiquitous, though by no means universal or always successful (Gadgil and Berkes 1991).

Let me deal with two potential objections and, in the process, provide an operational definition of “environmentalism.” First, N&S point out that Mendes did not call himself an “environmentalist” when he started, and adopted that idiom only when he saw it as a way to garner international attention and support for his movement. To a more limited extent, the same can be said of participants in the Chipko movement and MOSOP. The relevant point is that it does not matter. What is at stake is whether the goals explicitly followed by participants of these movements qualify as “environmentalist” as the term will be defined below. These may well be environmental movement even though they were not described as such by participants or contemporary observers and only reinterpreted as such by later analysts. An analogy will be helpful: wildlife managers before 1986 were typically protecting biodiversity even though that term was yet to be invented. If we were to be entirely limited by the vagaries of terminology, there was no concern for biodiversity before the mid-1980s when the

term was invented (Sarkar 2005).

Second, N&S emphasize that humans are part of nature (and they are obviously correct): consequently, according to them, any concept of “natural” or “environmental” values independent of humans is supposed to be incoherent and a figment of environmentalism’s sloppy ideology. Nevertheless, there remains an operational distinction between entities (things and processes) that are mainly the result of human action and those that are not. This distinction is a matter of degree, and global change induced by humans, especially climate change is making it even more blurred.<sup>6</sup> There is a distinction between Jakarta and Antarctica, between Manhattan and the Gobi Desert. The operational distinction is ethically salient. Suppose we accept some responsibility for what we do as a species (which is admittedly controversial, unlike the acceptance of personal responsibility). Then we are not ethically culpable for things beyond our control (such as asteroid impacts), and less culpable for things that are only partly our fault (such as hurricanes, assuming that climate change can be linked to extreme weather events, which remains controversial) than for those for which we are entirely responsible (such as urban sprawl). The difference matters not just practically, but philosophically.<sup>7</sup>

I will define as “environmental values” those that promote the persistence and

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<sup>6</sup> This is what McKibben (1989) glibly bemoans as the end of nature.

<sup>7</sup> The point about philosophy is worth making because N&S continually remind us to take philosophy seriously.

enhancement of non-human natural entities.<sup>8</sup> “Environmentalism” is the promotion of such values. This definition does not require environmental values to promote *only* the persistence and enhancement of non-human natural entities; they may equally promote human welfare. Environmental values include biodiversity; but they also include productivity of the land or fisheries. You can be a labor and community organizer *and* an environmentalist. As was Chico Mendes.

The subaltern movements discussed in the last section clearly fall within the rubric of such an environmentalism. Moreover, this definition is not idiosyncratic: it is N&S’s characterization of environmentalism that is myopic, a point to which I will return in the next section. What N&S have focused on, but apparently not recognized, is a long-simmering internal debate within environmentalism. There is indeed not much in common between subaltern movements and a peculiar type of Northern environmentalism represented in *Break Through* by conservation biologists Jared Diamond, Thomas Lovejoy, John Terborgh, and E. O. Wilson, who are typical of those targeted by Guha (1997) as “authoritarian” biologists. These figures belong to a generation of biologists who drew their inspiration from ideologies such as deep ecology which see humans as separate from nature, attribute intrinsic value to non-human nature, and denigrate what they call “humanism.” In sharp contrast, subaltern ecologies see humans integrated within nature and the advocacy of environmental values as central to the pursuit of human well-being. I have argued against deep ecology elsewhere (Sarkar 1999, 2005) and N&S’s additional criticisms are on the mark. But this

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<sup>8</sup> We could just as easily call these “natural values” with the proviso that “natural” is being operationally construed as the non-human part of nature. I have discussed these environmental values in detail in Sarkar (2008), pointing out that it is surprising how little explicit attention there has been to their elaboration.

is a debate within environmentalism. Indeed, in recent years, it has become a debate within conservation biology, even within the United States (Margules and Sarkar 2007; Maguire and Justus 2008).

Where does this leave us? If what is supposed to be important about N&S's analysis is that they do not want environmental values to be categorically separated from all other values, they are saying nothing new. If it is that they are supposed to have recognized the interpenetration of social and "natural" structures, subaltern ecologists and many others (including traditional Marxists) have long taken that to be obvious. Like N&S, they have also taken the pursuit of human welfare as central to any progressive agenda. Finally, if N&S are suggesting that environmental values are postmaterial values, the discussions of this section and, especially, the last provide ample contrary evidence.

#### **4. The Reach of the South.**

It would be incorrect to suggest that N&S write from a Northern or even a Eurocentric perspective. In fact, their perspective is much narrower than that, reflecting nothing more than the U.S. experience, and of limited relevance even in that context (see the next Section). It will presumably come as a surprise to them that, by 2000, India had the largest environmental movement in the world (Calvert and Calvert 1999, pp. 2 -3) and there is no reason to suggest that the numbers have changed significantly.<sup>9</sup> It would be idiosyncratic for me to deny the global reach of the U.S. economy, or the extent to which the United States contributes to global warming and

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<sup>9</sup> Citing no evidence they claim the contrary (p. 29).

has flouted every global environmental consensus during the George W. Bush era. The United States is important. Nevertheless, the age of complete U.S. economic dominance of the world is ending, and its age of dominance in theorizing about environmental (or other) politics is long gone (to whatever extent it may have existed). And there is more to environmentalism in the United States than what N&S seem to admit.

N&S emphasize the rising importance of China and India noting, for instance, that China may well have already surpassed the United States as an annual producer of greenhouse gases (though, *per capita*, there is still no comparison). What they miss is that India at least has a vast *environmental* constituency, as increasingly do many other regions from the South including Indonesia, México, and Brazil (see Diegues [1998]). The aims of many of these Southern environmental movements, as the examples of Section 2 show, cannot reasonably be interpreted as postmaterial in any sense. From subaltern perspectives, social progress requires attention to the environment. The environmentalism of the poor is part of the politics of resistance and progress, whether progress is defined in terms of economic, political, or social development.

In other words, for subalterns there is no plausible way to essentialize a nature independent of human presence. Nor can a subaltern analysis plausibly require a return to an untouched nature which never existed in historical memory. By and large (and I am unaware of any exception), subaltern environmental movements are never about nostalgia: beyond survival, they are about progress. The separation of humans from nature and back-to-untouched-nature nostalgia which N&S criticize as the defining tenets of environmentalism are not even available throughout all of the North.

Europeans, too, like all others living in the so-called “Old World,” do not have available the wilderness myth of untouched nature: they live in cultural landscapes fashioned over millennia by their ancestors.

It is by now well-known that the wilderness myth of untouched nature is a contextually specific U.S. social construction (Cronon 1996) though there are some parallels from Australia (Plumwood 1998). In the United States, these wildernesses were home to the First Nations for centuries, sometimes millennia. They were created as wildernesses by the forcible removal of the First Nations and an erasure of their history (Nabhan 1995; Cronon 1996; Sarkar 1999; Spence 1999). Subaltern ecologists have long argued that wilderness preservationism is an ethically dubious enterprise (Guha 1989a) and not ever to be conflated with biodiversity conservation (Sarkar 1999, 2005). When N&S make the separation of humans from nature and back-to-untouched-nature nostalgia as integral parts of environmentalism, their concept of environmentalism is myopically restricted to one part of that movement in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

In response, N&S can plausibly argue that they are intentionally restricting their attention to the United States: their goal is to revitalize ecological politics in the United States and their definition is intended only to capture what passed as environmentalism in the political discussion there since the 1970s when the terms, “environmentalist” and “environmentalism” were introduced. It is worth noting, in this context, that the second half of their book, where they lay out their positive agenda, focuses exclusively on the

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<sup>10</sup> This is also true of their discussion of environmental justice movements—but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

United States.<sup>11</sup> Those who think that the United States will have to lead the global response to environmental (or other) problems, including inevitable climate change, will find N &S's focus unproblematic—I must confess I am a skeptic.

It is questionable whether their project is of as much global significance as they claim for it. Unlike several European countries, most notably Germany, the United States has never had a politically-relevant Green Party (except in 2000 when it helped elect George W. Bush by nominating the self-serving Ralph Nader as its presidential candidate). Since 1976, when the National Forest Management Act was passed, the United States environmental movement has achieved little that is notable. N&S say just as much but, whereas they interpret these failures as the death of environmentalism, I interpret them as a shift of environmentalist innovation away from the United States to other regions of the world, especially the countries of the South.

Moreover, the arrogance of U.S. conservation biologists demanding habitat preservation in the South with no concern for human rights and aspirations—and this is a point that N&S also emphasize—has made U.S. environmentalism suspect almost everywhere in the South. (The behavior of U.S.-based international conservation non-governmental organizations [NGOs] continues to give reason for additional skepticism, as Dowie [2005] has recently documented.) By 1987, when the Brundtland Commission introduced the idea of sustainable development (WCED 1987), the U.S. model of environmental protection had already been internationally rejected. By the time of the 1992 Rio Convention on Biodiversity, it had become almost entirely irrelevant, even

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<sup>11</sup> It also routinely delves into philosophy—it would have been a better book if N&S had not succumbed to that temptation.

though the Convention contains one intellectually incoherent reference to “wilderness” as a type of ecosystem (Annex I).<sup>12</sup>

Now, N&S explicitly acknowledge not only the fact that global problems such as climate change cannot be addressed without agreement from China and India but also that progressive politics requires social justice in the South. What they fail to realize is that, if individual liberty is one of our values, these social problems cannot be resolved without attention to environmental conservation for those at the bottom of the economic and social order—the subalterns—because they are critically directly dependent on the continued extraction of environmental resources. Subaltern movements are typically based on individuals and local groups demanding control of their environmental resources and, often enough, though not always, sustainable harvesting of these resources. These are not postmaterial demands. They are material: timber, resin, rubber, fish, clean water, clean air—recall Section 2. The relevant point is that environmental groups in the South are typically aware of these problems. The environmentalism of the poor is still environmentalism: to define it away using some U.S.-based criteria, especially discredited criteria, is arrogance at worst and whimsy at best. Today, even the big U.S.-based big international conservation NGOs, such as Conservation International, theoretically embrace the material agendas of subaltern groups though it remains questionable whether this embrace is little more than propaganda.

N&S clearly do not wish to limit the scope of their program to the North, let alone the United States. One of the virtues of their book is their insistence that we think and

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cbd.int/convention/convention.shtml>; last accessed 07-07-08.

*act globally.* Their willingness to address the development and other material concerns of Southern countries also differentiates them from the overwhelming majority of the U.S. environmentalist establishment. Unfortunately, their analysis of the South is restricted to criticism of that establishment's approach to the problems faced by Brazil. At no place in *Break Through* is there serious engagement with the environmentalist discourse of the South, especially the environmentalism of the poor, that is, the flourishing subaltern ecologies discussed in Section 2.

## 5. Final Remarks.

Though N&S sometimes seem to believe otherwise, not only does there remain poverty in the United States but the poor continue to bear a disproportionate burden of traditional *material* environmental problems such as pollution (Gay 1994). These problems may well be less severe than they were three decades ago but the “other America” lives on. We need not invoke extreme cases such as far Appalachia. In Austin, Texas, where I live, Interstate Highway 35 traverses the city center along a north-south axis. To the east live much of the poor and most African-Americans and those of Latin American descent. The west abounds in affluence. The east is where the city recycles its waste and air quality is worst; the west is where the city’s justly famous parks and recreational areas are mostly situated. Patterns like this are found across the United States.

In other words, environmental justice movements have legitimate concerns that are churlishly dismissed by N&S simply because the correlation between pollution and race remains controversial. But, leaving aside race, while there has been no nation-wide

statistical analysis (to the best of my knowledge) of poverty and the spatial distribution of environmental protection, there is ample anecdotal evidence to make a correlation between environmental ill-being and economic class quite compelling. Power asymmetries, driven by economic or other cultural factors, make subaltern ecologies relevant to the United States even though the litigational traditions of the United States have typically required that modes of resistance be quite different from those of the South and elsewhere in the North (Gay 1994). However, in Texas it even took civil disobedience by an uncompromising female shrimper, explicitly patterned on Southern struggles, besides conventional legal action, to fight corporate pollution and the destruction of fishing livelihoods in Lavaca Bay (Wilson 2005).

We seem to be left with some awkward conclusions. N&S ignore the subaltern environmental movements of the South, not because they are unaware of these movements or because they fail to recognize their global relevance in an increasingly inter-connected international economic and ecological regime, but because of their U.S.-constrained myopia about what constitutes *environmentalism*. They seem entirely unaware of the rich analytic traditions of subaltern ecologies which have been used to interpret and refine these Southern movements. There is unwelcome arrogance here: a refusal to learn from the environmental analyses developed in the South. N&S also ignore work from the North outside the United States (for instance, Martínez-Alier's [2004] work on the environmentalism of the poor). Even within the United States, their gratuitous dismissal of environmental justice movements leads them to be blissfully non-cognizant of the continued interpenetration of environmental activism and progressive politics at home.

My criticisms are intended as friendly. *Break Through* is a welcome contribution to environmental discourse and I will try to end on a positive note. Issues of economic and other power asymmetries that have long been raised by subaltern ecologists have rarely been explicitly addressed by the mainstream U.S. environmentalist establishment. (Even the critiques of Guha [1989a], perhaps the best-known of the subaltern theorists, have only occasionally been acknowledged outside academic circles.) In spite of being explicitly dismissed by N&S, even the U.S. environmental justice movements would also benefit from expanded attention from the establishment. To the extent to which N&S have brought these issues centrally within the attention frame of the U.S. environmentalist establishment, they have made an important contribution to progressive politics even though I remain skeptical of most of their claims of originality.

It should be obvious that I have no disagreement with one of N&S's central claims: ecological problems cannot be adequately addressed if the environment is conceptualized as disentangled from the human cultural and socio-political enterprise. No policy can be implemented successfully if it does not address human aspirations, including aspirations for economic self-betterment. N&S argue for this thesis on pragmatic grounds; I would add that there are equally compelling ethical grounds for such a tempered anthropocentrism (Sarkar 2005). However, this does not mean that there is no value in maintaining an operational distinction between the human and non-human environment (or nature). It would have benefited N&S's analysis if they had embraced this distinction: it may have led them to make better sense of what motivates "mainstream" U.S. environmentalists, how they conceptualize nature when they frame

policies and strategies. Moreover, as I argued earlier (in Section 3), the distinction is ethically salient which necessarily makes it relevant to political contexts.

N&S are also to be especially praised for emphasizing the need to think and act globally, to see interconnections between urban poverty and deforestation in Brazil, between toxic oil extraction in Ecuador, and developing wind power in Nantucket. They are correct to urge that environmentalism move away from the politics of place which is little better than the politics of race. (They could have gone further and have reminded readers of the ultimate exemplar of an integrated politics of place and race: the Nazi nature protection legislation of 1934 and 1935 [Biehl and Staudenmeier 1995; Ferry 1995; Sarkar 2005]. But I suppose that they had self-imposed limits on how controversial they were willing to be!)

I also agree with N&S that climate change is inevitable (and already happening) and that we should be debating ways in which we must (and can) adapt to it. Emission control regimes may well be unsound policy; rather, resources wasted on poorly performing controls may be better spent to develop cleaner technologies which would make carbon-based fuels economically irrelevant. Like N&S, I would suggest that governments invest heavily in such technologies.

Finally, I strongly endorse N&S's call for a discussion of values that environmentalists should endorse and agree with them that these must include values that U.S. environmentalists have traditionally shunned, for instance, economic well-being and access to health care. But I would like to see the discussion of these values be more sophisticated than what N&S have offered, and for this discussion to address power asymmetries and to embrace at least minimal requirements of distributive justice.

Otherwise, I fail to see how any such politics could be progressive. I fully agree with N&S that progressives need a positive agenda for political change.

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