

The Greening of Political Science: Growth Pains and New Directions

By Philip Brick

“The great ecological issues of our time have to do in one way or another with our failure to see things in their entirety. That failure occurs when minds are taught to think in boxes and not taught to transcend those boxes or to question overly much how they fit into other boxes.”
—David Orr¹

Over the past decade, interdisciplinary programs such as gender studies, global studies, and environmental studies have proliferated quickly across the American academy. One study showed that the number of environmental studies programs at four-year colleges and universities doubled between 1990 and 1995, and more are still being added.² Political science departments frequently find themselves at the center of these new programs, and courses in environmental politics are often in high demand among students. The complexity and persistence of environmental problems is finally forcing the academy to recognize the importance of interdisciplinary research and teaching. Consider the case of global warming. It is impossible to discuss this issue intelligently from the perspective of any single discipline. Political scientists might illuminate certain facets of the debate, such as how national and international political structures create few incentives for policymakers to aggressively address the issue.³ But however important such insights might be, they are far too narrow to even begin to encompass the complexity of the climate change issue, which requires literacy in the discourses of other disciplines, including environmental economics, atmospheric research, and environmental ethics. After decades of suspicion

in the academy about the intellectual rigor of interdisciplinary approaches, the persistence of complex environmental problems, and simply the rapidly growing cohort of scholars engaged in environmental research and teaching, is driving increasing acceptance of such approaches.

From climate change to species loss to hazardous waste and risk assessment, the scientific, social, and moral complexity of environmental issues is a virtual invitation to engage in interdisciplinary research and teaching. How well have political scientists responded to this invitation? How swiftly and how deeply has the “greening of the academy” occurred in our field? Does the explosion of courses on environmental topics in political science departments across the nation suggest that a new subfield of our discipline has emerged, or is environmental politics merely an extension of existing subfields of the discipline? More substantively, how have courses in environmental politics changed as environmentalism has moved from a protest movement into the everyday fabric of contemporary life?

Although there is no way to definitively answer such questions, a useful window into how scholars conceptualize environmental politics is the syllabi for courses they develop in the field. Syllabi are primary texts: they are brief, distilled documents that illuminate what professors think is essential knowledge in the field, and why that knowledge is important. They are also a useful window into how scholars see themselves as educators, which raises still more questions. What do professors hope to accomplish by teaching in the environmental field? Do environmental educators see themselves as part of a larger social movement, or do they prefer to fashion themselves as detached analysts of it? Finally, it is reasonable to ask how well courses in environmental politics are likely to prepare students for their future lives as environmental professionals, activists, and citizens.

For this essay, I reviewed over 40 environmental politics syllabi, collected by research assistants and editors at *Perspectives on Politics* from professors at universities and smaller colleges nationwide. (Syllabi are listed at the end of this essay). The sample is made up almost entirely of courses at the undergraduate level,

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but it includes syllabi from both lower and upper division courses. Although the sample was not gathered scientifically, I believe it is broadly representative of similar courses nationwide. Whether or not syllabi are representative of the field as a whole, however, is another matter. Professors don't always teach what they research and write, but rather, what they think students should know. So the observations I make below are only intended to reflect the state of our field as we communicate it to our students.

On the whole, the state of the field is mixed. On the one hand, the syllabi exemplify the exponential growth and diversity of environmental politics as a teaching field. Although it is perhaps too early to suggest that environmental politics has emerged as a coherent subfield in the discipline, scholars of environmental politics are united in the belief that environmental issues raise questions that expand our notions of what is political to include the interests of all living things on the planet. On the other hand, however, the syllabi also demonstrate that instructors with a relatively narrow understanding of politics continue to dominate the field. This understanding sees politics primarily as a matter of institutional actors, processes, and outcomes. Such a perspective, as important as it is, may limit our ability to delve deeper and more critically into the complex array of cultural, social, scientific, and political ideas that make up contemporary networks of environmental power, and resistance to that power. To access these networks and their points of resistance, we need to help our students learn to approach environmental problems more critically. Hopefully, a broader approach will inspire both instructors and students to explore the complexities and ironies inherent in most environmental problems, thereby opening pathways for more creative teaching, learning, activism, and citizenship.

The Emerging Field of Environmental Politics

Society has been so altered by environmentalism it is easy to overlook the distance of thirty years backwards in time to the nascent social movement that it was, and forward again to the mature evolution of science and law that it has become. —Deborah Lynn Guber⁴

Environmental politics is a young and eclectic field: there are few standard or classic texts, nor is there any specific set of grand theories or seminal historical debates that are *de rigueur*



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for any course in the field. As Michael Maniates warns his students on the first page of his syllabus, “We’re in for a ‘sloppy’ time of it, largely because the struggles we’ll be studying do not line up into neat categories. Instead, they run across several spectrums, each with their own ideological and epistemological orientation.” Yet however eclectic the field may be, there is little doubt that the greening of political science has happened apace with the well-publicized greening of the sciences and the humanities.⁵ Consider the long (and surely incomplete) list of topics addressed in the reviewed syllabi in Table 1.

It is possible that nearly every aspect of human political behavior has at least some environmental dimension, and scholars have begun to explore these dimensions with ever greater vigor in the last decade. We can expect the field to expand still further as new scholars seek to find their own niche. The rapid expansion of the field is an astonishing development, especially when one considers that as late as 1996, political scientist Michael Kraft, a well-known environmental educator, could lament that environmental issues were “peripheral at best” in the comparative, international, and theory subfields.⁶

Although the rapid growth and acknowledged eclecticism of academic inquiry into environmental politics might set off alarm bells in more traditional corners of the discipline, I believe these are encouraging developments. The eclecticism of the field reflects the highly interdisciplinary character of environmental problems themselves, as well as the need for a wide variety of approaches to encompass and understand

Table 1
Topics and Approaches in Courses in Environmental Politics

Environmental Problems: Politics and Policy	Political Approaches	Environmental Ideas and Practices	International Environmental Issues
Deforestation	Actors and Institutions in American Politics	Recycling	North-South Relations
Acid Rain	Environmental History	Green Consumerism	Globalization
Stratospheric Ozone Depletion	Public Administration	Sustainability	Sustainable Development
Species Loss and Biodiversity	Political Economy	Bioregionalism	National and International Security
Hazardous Waste Production and Disposal	International Political Economy	Civic Politics	United Nations Conventions on the Environment
Nuclear Energy	Political Culture	Environmental Justice	International Regimes
Common Pool Resources (air, oceans)	Social Movements	Deep Ecology	
Open Space and Public Lands	Race, Class, and Gender Politics	Social Ecology	
Industrial Policy	Comparative Politics	Political Ecology	
Energy Policy	Environmental Planning	Environmental Ethics	
Population Policy	Symbolic Politics	Ecofeminism	
Transportation Policy	Executive and Legislative Politics	Backlash against the Greens	
Water Policy	State and Local Politics	Environmental Education	
Food and Agriculture Policy			
Risk Assessment			
Property Rights			
Science and Technology			
Religion			

them. It also reflects one of the key strategic successes of the environmental movement: to inject environmental awareness into almost every aspect of everyday life. As William Chaloupka writes, “Green politics has succeeded as well as it has, in part, because it covers a very diverse field . . . it is a breathtaking list. It covers “how was work today,” “what are we having for dinner,” and “what are we doing this weekend”—all at personal, community, national, and global scale.”⁷ Indeed, environmental inquiry has attracted the interest of scholars from nearly every subfield of our discipline.

The array of topics covered in these courses demonstrates how environmental issues provide excellent opportunities for teaching and learning about politics. From my experience, today’s students have an interest in environmental issues that is so deeply ingrained that, at times, it almost seems genetic. This makes it easier to get students interested in learning the mechanics of political processes, from interest group dynamics to bureaucratic, legislative, and legal practices. For theorists, environmental issues add new dimensions to long-standing debates about relations between humans and nature, the meanings we ascribe to nature, and the lessons we take from it. Political theorists are also keenly interested in the challenges environmental degradation poses to democratic life, and the possibility that green politics could be a harbinger of democratic renewal. For scholars of international relations, the seriousness of environmental problems demonstrates the limits of state sovereignty and the growing importance of international norms, regimes, and organizations. Comparativists use environmental issues to highlight challenges of sustainable development, North-South inequal-

ities, and the growing hegemony of neo-liberal economic and political ideologies.

Given the ubiquity of environmental courses in political science departments nationwide, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that a new subfield of political science has emerged, even if it is not yet institutionally recognized in graduate program requirements or as a category for academic jobs advertised in the field. But what constitutes a subfield? Why has our discipline chosen to segregate certain questions and modes of inquiry from others? Consider the field of comparative politics. Isn’t “comparative” little more than a convenient label for an eclectic array of courses that focus largely on political development and political institutions across political cultures? Environmental politics is similarly eclectic, and it is certainly as broad a field as comparative politics; if current trends continue, greater general acceptance may only be a matter of time. New sub-disciplines emerge when scholars recognize that they have more in common with those working in a yet-to-be recognized area than they share with colleagues in their traditional sub-discipline. At professional conferences, for example, there are not only more and more environmental papers and panels, but they are also beginning to be organized not as a subset of traditional subfields, but as their own sections in standing equal with political theory, international politics, comparative politics, et cetera. For example, the Western Political Science Association just added a new section, “Environmental Political Theory,” because its regular section on “Environmental Politics” was becoming too large and unwieldy. The annual meeting of the American Political Science Association regularly hosts dozens of papers on environmental topics in the “Science, Technology, and Environmental Politics” section.

Another indicator of where the study and teaching of environmental politics stands is the degree to which scholars agree on what makes environmental politics distinctive. What, specifically, does environmental politics contribute to the study of politics more generally? To a striking degree, scholars and teachers of environmental politics share a sense that environmental issues are different from other political issues, both in scope and in importance. Many believe that environmental issues reach well beyond classic political debates about the distribution of benefits and burdens among competing human interests. In this view, environmental issues take us a step beyond mere anthropocentric conceptions of politics: they call into question the very compatibility of our political and economic systems with the natural systems that sustain all life. As Carol Hager writes in her syllabus, “debates over pollution, for example, tend to raise far-reaching questions about the relationship between economic growth and quality of life, the distribution of political power, and humankind’s relationship to nature.” Many instructors are convinced that environmental problems present scholars with unique challenges, requiring distinctively integrative and interdisciplinary approaches.

Arguably, there are many political problems that are equally urgent and multidimensional. What is interesting is that many environmental scholars simultaneously see their field as both integral to most social problems and prior to them. For example, we can agree that the persistence of poverty in both rich and poor countries is a complex and urgent issue; environmental scholars will point out that any political approach to poverty must include an analysis of its environmental causes and consequences. They will also note that the problem of poverty becomes irrelevant if we ruin the natural life-support systems upon which *all* life depends. In short, classic problems of human political life (freedom, equality, justice, et cetera) are moot if we are all dead. From this perspective, environmental politics radically expands the boundaries of the political, from questions of the here and now to questions of the future of all life on planet Earth. Although I believe this perspective to be problematic, it is a shared understanding of politics that captures the imagination of many environmental scholars and links them together in an expansive vision of political life and purpose.

At the same time, the field remains young, and it may be too early to claim that those who study environmental politics have carved out a distinctive subfield. Most courses in environmental politics were introduced fewer than ten years ago, and this first wave remains tied to traditional subfields. Judging just from the topics and readings assigned by instructors, it was relatively easy to put most syllabi into existing subfield categories. Clearly, most instructors now teaching courses in environmental politics were not trained specifically in the environmental field. Instead, they bring their original fields of training to environmental issues. Only a handful of professors are teaching courses that defy easy linkage to traditional subfields. These courses, perhaps, hint at the kinds of questions that scholars of environmental politics will address in future years. I consider this possibility later in the essay.

One reason why environmental politics remains unrecognized as a subfield is more complicated, touching upon how instructors understand themselves as scholars and teachers. Environmental politics, correctly or incorrectly (mostly incorrectly), continues to be seen as an “advocacy field” in the academy, and perhaps not worthy of subfield status. Many instructors are indeed drawn to the field because they sympathize with environmental causes, and they make this clear in the text or subtext of their syllabi. How should we think about the “advocacy” charge as the field progresses? In the next section, I argue that this concern is over-inflated, and not new. But it should not be dismissed either. Instead, it is an opportunity for teachers and scholars to look at their own motivations for research and teaching in the field, and consider how these fit with their environmental convictions, whatever they might be.

Teaching for Understanding or for Transformation?

The most important institutional effect of policy analysis is its surprising tendency to inhibit political initiatives, thereby reinforcing the status quo.
—Hank C. Jenkins-Smith⁸

When articulating the reasons for their courses, professors continue to grapple with age-old questions about motivation and objectivity. Is the purpose of inquiry to understand the world as it is, or to change the world? This tension is not unique to environmental politics. International relations scholars, for example, have wrestled with this tension since Thucydides. Scholarly interest in international politics has coalesced sometimes around a desire to understand international phenomena, but sometimes also around a sense of urgency to address the threat of increasingly destructive wars, especially in the late twentieth century. Similarly, many scholars enter the environmental field because they share an analogous sense of urgency in the context of widespread environmental degradation. In the syllabi, statements that follow “the purpose of this course is . . .” are particularly interesting windows into how scholars wrestle with these intellectual commitments.

Most statements promise simple knowledge: “The purpose of this course is to provide you with knowledge of environmental politics and the formulation and implementation of environmental policy in the United States,” or “the objective of this seminar is to acquaint students with the major issues, theoretical frameworks, political institutions, and strategic arguments involved in international environmental policymaking.” These statements dodge the question of why knowledge of environmental politics is important or even interesting, though presumably instructors hope to convince students that it is both. Other instructors have more programmatic goals. The introduction to a course in “Green Politics” at Macalester College states, “the principal question to be addressed is how environmental advocacy groups can organize themselves to most effectively address and solve the significant environmental problems facing this country.” Another instructor explains an upper level seminar in Global Environmental Politics in this way: “I

offer this seminar because I believe that struggle (now occurring and yet to come) to decide who bears the brunt of environmental threats to human well-being and who pays to do away with them offers novel, expanding, hopeful opportunities for individuals—working alone and in groups—to make a difference.”

This activist orientation, although its acknowledgment is rare, opens the field to criticism from several directions. First, it draws the attention of scholars who are suspicious of applied scholarship, which to them is evidence of inappropriate bias. As Michael Soulé and Daniel Press (somewhat indignantly) write, “The perception of subjectivity in environmental studies is pervasive, notwithstanding the existence of many other kinds of applied work in the academy, from schools of engineering, agriculture, and medicine to the contract military research performed in ‘pure’ disciplinary departments.”⁹ To be sure, there are many areas of political science where research and teaching is oriented toward applied settings, such as education policy, voting behavior, or international security. In these cases, it is unwarranted to assume that scholars in these fields are necessarily pro-education, pro-voting, or pro-security. Yet, there is something about the study of environmental politics that inspires such assumptions. Perhaps this reflects the meteoric rise of new ideas about the environment, which only a generation ago were associated not with mainstream thinking, but with social movement groups intensely critical of existing arrangements of social and economic power. Or perhaps environmentalism remains a place where radical and utopian ideas, from bioregionalism to voluntary simplicity, stir controversy and political imagination. This stands in marked contrast to the “end of history” malaise that seems to infect what remains of the traditional Left after the collapse of socialism in the late 1980s and the rise of global neo-liberalism in the 1990s.

It is perhaps not surprising then that research and teaching in environmental politics has attracted the attention of conservative critics who worry that environmental courses in the academy are nothing more than activist training camps. Indeed, a few of the courses I reviewed had this general flavor. One instructor even produced a special “Oilmen in Charge” edition of his syllabus, which included explicit criticism of the Bush Administration’s environmental record in its preface. But usually, conservative worries are not well grounded. Most instructors really try to walk the tightrope between scholarly inquiry and activism with a third formula that recognizes the activist impulse, but puts critical inquiry first. One instructor introduces his course this way: “This course focuses more on the political than the technical aspects of environmental problems. You will not learn to evaluate the technical merits of various solutions. You will, however, develop an appreciation for the complexity and interconnectedness of environmental problems, which in itself is a prerequisite for proposing workable solutions.”

Moreover, it is a serious mistake to think of environmental ideas as the province of either side of the partisan aisle. Environmental values have been embraced across the political spectrum, a fact that Republican pollsters are in the habit of reminding their sometimes wayward candidates. Many syllabi

include analysis of ideas typically associated with conservative causes, such as private property rights, devolution, market-based conservation incentives, deregulation, and so on. One course was organized with an explicitly conservative orientation, embracing regulatory reform to prevent “unnecessary rigidities and costs, creating incentives for delays, obstruction, and litigation,” most of which are presumably caused by what the instructor sees as “unwarranted political intervention” by environmental groups. The course goes on to promote alternatives to “command and control” regulation, including the “government supervised self-regulation” favored by the current Bush administration.

Whatever one’s political persuasion, the tension between understanding and activism in courses on environmental politics is not as serious as it initially appears, nevertheless it still affects how others perceive the field. This may change, however, as scholars new to the field come to understand that the most interesting dimensions of environmental politics go well beyond the narrow confines of partisan politics. Already, many professors encourage their students see a course in environmental politics as an opportunity to critically examine, perhaps for the first time, how they think about environmental problems. As John Freemuth warns his students: “One final but very important point: since many of you have strong opinions about the environment, I expect a few passionate harangues at the beginning of the course. As the course progresses, these harangues should give way to *critical* analysis, both of the books we are reading, as well as the premises behind your own positions.” Similarly, another instructor writes, “I’m struggling with what I perceive to be a need to help the students . . . temper their enthusiasm, sometimes anger and frustration, with development projects and ideology, with a more critical, analytical understanding of the issues. I’m looking for ways to help them see how more informed and critical analysis of issues helps improve the quality of the engagement.” Certainly, a more critical understanding of existing power structures, including those produced by the environmental movement itself, will serve our students well, whether they eventually choose to walk the hallways of powerful institutions, or if they join groups whose mission is to change those institutions. Either way, one must know power to wield or resist it effectively. And if one is to know power, a certain measure of critical distance is absolutely essential.

Following (and Challenging) the Environmental Script

It’s a contingent world out there, and we’d better be light on our feet.
—William Chaloupka¹⁰

However, achieving that critical distance has been quite contentious. For example, in a seminal volume of environmental criticism, *Uncommon Ground*, environmental historian William Cronon assembled an array of scholars from many disciplines to tease out fundamental questions raised by the growing awareness that nature is not static, but rather dynamic, both ecologically and politically.¹¹ In any other field, suggesting

that changes in cultural norms and dominant social values can be traced to changes in power relations and shifts in modes of production would, by the mid-1990s, likely have provoked more yawns than yowls. The response from the environmental community to the Cronon volume, however, was immediate and vehement; accusations that academics were providing aid and comfort to environmental enemies were common.¹² Even though this debate was arguably the most important event in environmental political theory in the last decade, it barely registers in the syllabi. Instead, most courses in environmental politics follow a more time-honored script, which proceeds almost as if environmental categories were written in stone; as if the growing body of critical literature about environmentalism (represented most conspicuously by the Cronon volume) did not exist.¹³ This script can be summarized as follows: Human activities have created environmental problems of crisis proportions, the dimensions of which can be known either on the basis of scientific evidence or through authoritative interpretations of nature. Hope, however, is not lost: an array of institutional and technical solutions is available to address environmental problems, if we would only commit the necessary resources to them. The script is a melodrama (usually a tragedy) in three acts: crisis, knowledge, and solution (or lack thereof). Let us consider each.

First, most courses begin by assuming that environmental problems are at the point of crisis, requiring urgent attention. Although many courses do question the veracity and urgency of environmental claims, this seems like a half-hearted effort to provide balance in the classroom by giving equal time to the constant trickle of iconoclasts who suggest that environmental problems don't exist or are dramatically overstated.¹⁴ These make for good classroom debates, but it is clear where most in our field stand: human systems of production, consumption, and meaning are degrading the quality of our land, water, and air, and are perhaps endangering the very systems upon which all life depends.

Second, most courses are either explicitly or implicitly grounded in environmental epistemologies. In matters of pollution and toxic waste, scientific evidence is given the leading role in environmental policymaking. Hazards, in other words, can be defined on the basis of scientific data and evidence. In this context, "politics" happens largely after hazards are defined, and is reduced to Laswellian questions such as "who pays?" and "who benefits?" In questions of natural resource conservation, nature itself is assumed to offer a clear set of policy imperatives, from preserving biodiversity to preventing global warming. Put simply, if the environmental movement has succeeded at anything in the past few decades, it has been its ability to normalize appeals to the environmental sciences and to environmental interpretations of nature as the foundations of environmental policy, and this is well reflected in the way we present environmental problems to students.

Third, most courses outline the array of actors, institutions, policies, and procedures that embody largely technocratic solutions to environmental problems. They focus, in other words, on formal institutions of environmental governance at the

national and the international level. Armed with an understanding of these institutional arrangements, students are expected to debate the feasibility and merits of proposed policy alternatives. They are often asked to write position papers, engage in in-class debates, and so on. Instructors seem content to assume that these kinds of debates are sufficient to probe the depths of environmental political questions.

Although their numbers remain small, a few instructors are beginning to depart from this script. It is too early to suggest that an alternative is emerging, but a few of its themes are becoming clearer. Environmental problems will continue to be understood in urgent terms. But at the same time, scholars will probably shift more of their attention toward understanding how environmental problems are constructed as social and political phenomena. Why do some problems receive priority over others? What strategic moves and countermeasures explain these priorities? How does social power, particularly in the context of race, class, and gender, frame and shape the environmental agenda? Why should environmental problems take precedence over other matters of grave concern to humankind? This is not to suggest that environmental problems (global warming, species loss, et cetera) are not serious, and that they do not demand our attention—they are and they do. My point is that climate change, for example, is not a "problem" until it is so defined *politically*. Climate change by itself is only the possibility of changes in temperatures around the globe. This possibility only becomes a problem when combined with political ideas and social values, which deserve much more critical examination than they typically receive. Only a few instructors, it seems, recognize and teach the politics of global warming from this perspective.

In addition, a growing chorus of scholars is beginning to question the scientific and normative foundations of environmental claims. There is more and more skepticism that political disputes can be solved by calls for better scientific information or by appeals to the moral authority of nature. Perhaps not coincidentally, it is the instructors of courses specifically designed to address the interplay of science and politics who understand this best. As Stephen Meyer of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wrote in his syllabus, "politics often dictates acceptance of tradeoffs and compromise among divergent values and interests, where purely science-based and engineering-based analyses would suggest more 'elegant' solutions. In essence we try to explain how and why solving real-world environmental problems differs from solving engineering problem sets." Steve Breyman at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute takes this a step further by suggesting that scientific knowledge is itself political: "The technical and scientific manifestations of problems like soil erosion or acid rain are but symptoms of problems rooted in human and institutional behavior governed by economic systems, ideology, social norms, values, laws, politics, and policies."

Finally, although there is merit in discussing technocratic "solutions" currently available, the new script places little faith in them. Instead, environmental problems are increasingly understood as locations of ambiguity, uncertainty, and irony. More and more, paradox will be the hallmark of environmental

politics. Several examples illustrate this point. The gasoline additive MTBE, for instance, has been shown to dramatically improve air quality, but it is also now proving to be a persistent pollutant in local water supplies. Now what? In natural resource politics, great value is placed on biodiversity, perhaps best summarized by Aldo Leopold's first rule of intelligent tinkering with nature: save all the parts. But what happens when saving one species puts others in peril? In the Pacific Northwest, for example, there is growing concern that flourishing populations of protected bald eagles are putting great blue herons at risk.¹⁵ Or what happens when environmental values collide, such as the tension between aesthetic concerns and renewable energy in the massive wind power project proposed off the coast of Cape Cod? What happens when concerns about species loss conflict with parallel commitments to social justice in disadvantaged human communities? We will be seeing more and more of these paradoxes and conflicts in coming years. Picking our way through these uncertainties and ironies is an invitation to look at environmental politics in a new way, recognizing that most environmental issues are not problems awaiting technocratic solutions, but rather windows into the complex state of the contemporary human condition.

Empowering Environmental Teaching and Scholarship

[There is] a slow motion collision between the recent greening of the curriculum, with its naïve hope that more knowledge about global ills will make students feel powerful, and a deepening "browning" of college students' sense of the politically possible.

—Michael Maniates¹⁶

How well does the current script serve our students, and will the new script, if it emerges, prove any better? Almost certainly, a student taking any course I reviewed would emerge with a better factual understanding of the basic actors, institutions, and policy processes of environmental governance, both at home and on the global stage. But I have the nagging sense that something is missing. In studying formal political systems, students are encouraged to seek *analytical* distance—to set themselves outside these systems and analyze them as if they were well-oiled (or squeaky) machines. What's missing, in my view, is that students are not really challenged to seek *critical* distance, where the subject of critical inquiry is both the political system and the self. Consider the following questions, which typically appear in courses on American environmental politics and public policy:

How has the American political system responded to environmental challenges such as air pollution, water pollution, species loss, et cetera? If action has been insufficient, why is that? What might be done to improve governmental capabilities to respond to such problems? What role do interest groups (environmental organizations, business groups, et cetera) play in the policymaking process? What is the proper role for government on environmental issues? Should regulation take a back seat to free market approaches?¹⁷

Forgive me for saying so, but I can't imagine a duller set of questions to put to my students, and this is not because these

questions are uninteresting, uninspired, or unimportant. Rather, the problem is that these questions do little to move students beyond where they already are intellectually. Environmental educator Nancy Quirk summarizes this well: "most undergraduates come to college with a full faith in scientific management, simple truth, and the ability of experts and interest groups operating in conventional theaters of power to chart a course for society."¹⁸ In other words, our courses tend to conceptualize politics as happening on a stage, with students in the audience who are supposed to watch the show and then offer reviews in a paper the next morning. Approaching environmental politics in this way is like trying to explain a Grateful Dead show by describing only what happens on stage. In fact, what's arguably most interesting about Grateful Dead shows (alas, now only a memory) is how the events encompass both stage and participating audience. Yes, the political stage is important, but politics is also about value acquisition and value conflicts that are not necessarily expressed or performed on that stage. Much of what we understand as "environmentalism" involves explicit ethical commitments to nature and a certain role of humans in that nature. Understood this way, environmental politics is less about regulatory policies or transboundary problem-solving than about moral commitments and the shifting boundaries of the public dimensions of those commitments. As John Freemuth writes in his syllabus, "Most of the conflicts over the environment are value conflicts at their heart." Why don't we spend more time in our courses deconstructing and re-assembling these value conflicts? If politics is, at least in part, about the authoritative allocation of values, it makes sense to focus on political processes involved in this allocation. But at the same time, we should also look into the myriad (and largely invisible) ways in which these values are acquired and practiced in the first place.

To do so, scholars of environmental politics might pay more attention to mechanisms of power, normally a key concept in the study of political science, but absent in many courses about environmental politics. Most scholars, however unwittingly, fashion environmental politics as a politics of resistance to power, not as a politics of power itself. But over the last generation, environmental ideas have moved from the periphery to the mainstream and have become infused with remarkable cultural power and resonance. Thus a lively and critical examination of environmental *ideas and practices*, in the context of an examination of power, is an opportunity to engage students in re-examining values and practices they previously held as beyond reproach. From my experience, this makes for exciting teaching and learning. So a course might begin with an extensive investigation of the concept of power from a variety of perspectives, from pluralist to radical to postmodern. Then key environmental ideas such as biodiversity, wilderness, limits to growth, sustainable development, biocentrism, and others might be explored, keeping in mind questions such as: How are these issues framed and packaged for public struggle, and who is privileged in these struggles? Well accepted environmental practices such as recycling, green consumerism, boycotts, and other political activity might be

examined. Or a course could be organized explicitly around an analysis of environmental political discourses. As theorist David Schlosberg puts it, “The purpose of this course is to map, examine, and analyze various discourses that have emerged in the realm of environmental political theory. Each of these discourses has a particular view of the crisis at hand, and in response each may encompass positions on nature itself, human-nature relations, political institutions, economics, political culture, and citizenship.”

Such an approach requires students to critically disassemble ideas that they have probably never found reason to question, as most grew up with Dr. Suess’s *The Lorax* and probably several “recycle or die” indoctrination sessions in their earlier education. One might worry that situating environmental ideas and ethics relative to power might make students more jaded and apolitical than they already are.¹⁹ But I have not found this to be the case. Good students are thrilled to learn that what they thought was firm is, in fact, contingent. For many, it can be a real epiphany. I have found that where students see everything as slippery and contingent, they also recognize that anything is possible as well. Examining one’s own ideas about the environment encourages students to become participants, not onlookers, in environmental political discussions, a goal that many instructors say they share, but their approach tends to discourage.

There are exceptions, of course, to these general criticisms and suggestions. Many instructors do design exercises to get students directly involved in environmental politics. A course at Northern Arizona University, for example, asks students to analyze the Flagstaff community’s land use planning vision document. This experience connects students to the local community, and helps them learn how to become active in local politics. Another instructor took advantage of his school’s location in the Pacific Northwest to organize his course around a single issue, salmon recovery, which included a field trip to a dam on the Snake River and meetings with various activists. This approach allows students to reach deeply into the complexity of an environmental issue in its many dimensions. Focusing on a single issue is not as narrow as it might first appear; the salmon issue has causes and consequences that are both national and global. Many environmental issues are similarly expansive, so instructors from any region of the country should have no trouble identifying appropriate issues close to home.

Finally, I encourage instructors to take advantage of resources in their nearby communities. Every community has environmental problems, and where there are problems, there are citizen activists, government officials, and business leaders working on them. These people make wonderful guests in the classroom, and they are delighted to share their experiences and expertise with students. If possible, take a day with students in the field to visit a local sewage treatment plant, tree farm, landfill, stream restoration project, or the local planning office. The experience will not only help bring environmental issues to life for students, it will also show them the wide variety of ways to become involved with environmental work. Environmentalism isn’t just for activists any more.

This simply reinforces the message that more and more professors will try to convey to their students: environmental politics is an exciting field that is more than just a detached analysis of the institutions and processes of government. Environmental issues demand that we ask fundamental questions about how we live our lives, how we think about the world beyond ourselves, and how we imagine our obligations to future generations as well. It is difficult to think of a better context in which to share our passion for politics with our students.

Notes

- 1 Orr 1996, 11.
- 2 Maniates and Whissel 2000.
- 3 See, for example, Hempel 2000.
- 4 Guber 2003, 1.
- 5 Collett and Karakashian 1996.
- 6 Kraft 1996, 235–67.
- 7 Chaloupka 2002, 113–40.
- 8 Cited in Maniates 2003, 48.
- 9 Soulé and Press 1998, 402.
- 10 Chaloupka 2002, 130.
- 11 Cronon 1995.
- 12 These are collected in Soulé and Lease 1995.
- 13 Other important volumes in this literature include Luke 1997 and Merchant 2003.
- 14 The two most sophisticated texts in this genre are Easterbrook 1995 and Lomborg 2001.
- 15 Hunt 2003.
- 16 Maniates 2003, 129–47.
- 17 Kraft 1996, 240. The questions listed are intended as a composite of questions typically asked in the reviewed syllabi.
- 18 Cited in Maniates 2003, 136.
- 19 This is a legitimate concern, especially in the context of how Paul Loeb describes the widespread reticence that today’s students approach politics and political activism. See Loeb 1994, 101–14.

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