

***ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS SINCE LOVE CANAL:  
HOPE, DESPAIR & [IM]MOBILIZATION?***

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**I. THE HERITAGE OF LOVE CANAL: COMPETING ASSESSMENTS** This

conference seeks to understand the circumstances of Love Canal in a 20-year retrospective. In my remarks, I argue that the shape of the U.S. environmental movement since 1978 bears a somewhat contradictory relationship to the Love Canal mobilization of citizens two decades ago. Some social scientists view the Love Canal "uprising" as the first 'hurrah' of a populist campaign to reshape the American industrial landscape. In this perspective, the U.S. environmental movement became infused with new energy from the mobilization of citizen-workers. In contrast to the elitist nature of the previous environmental movement, the new grass-roots movement would be grounded in the everyday concerns of 'everywoman' in 'everycommunity'. For the first time, the groundswell of public expressions of concern about environmental protection would be matched by an public actions of working-class and minority participants.

I want to argue that the Love Canal mobilization and its consequences may actually have generated more impediments than supports for national and regional environmental movements in the past two decades. These impediments revolve around three dimensions that I see in the Love Canal story:

- (1) a new focus on human health concerns, and a diminished concern with ecosystem protection;
- (2) a complex set of local issues that contextualize local movements, which makes it difficult for such movements to coalesce with and strengthen national and regional environmental organizations; and
- (3) a process in which rising fear and despair are the hallmarks of much local mobilization, as much as new forms of anger and radicalization which propell future activism.

From my more complex perspective, I see Love Canal as ushering in some energies that led to the extension of federal legislation on toxic wastes, though with rather limited enforcement support. But Love Canal also frightened citizens away from politically confrontations that were necessary to support the environmental movement's drive for broader federal and state regulation of both industrial wastes and energy use. Moreover, it sometimes encouraged a myopic concern for local economic and health protection efforts that undermined many environmentalist efforts at changing the American domination by the forces of what I have called the *treadmill of production* (Schnaiberg 1980, 1994, 1997; Schnaiberg & Gould 1994; Gould et al. 1996)

## **II. COMPLEX NARRATIVES FROM LOVE CANAL: THE LOCALIZATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS**

In the social science literature, the struggle around removing toxic wastes from Love Canal in the late 1970s has been viewed as a new form of empowerment. Others have viewed Love Canal mobilization as only a limited success, with many remaining social and mental health injuries for the participants. To some extent, both groups viewed Love Canal mobilization as a grass-roots movement formed by local citizens. Lois Gibbs and her local supporters activists initially mobilized in a new form of *popular epidemiology* (Brown & Mikkelsen 1990 (1997), cf. Pellow 1997). They sought to create a new narrative about the health hazards created by careless local disposal of industrial toxic wastes. The subsequent development of the dumpsite area brought families and schools in contact with these wastes, which families initially experienced as personal troubles (Mills 1959). Lois Gibbs and her neighbors sought to turn this into a social issue, to move the focus beyond the individual family into a collective problem. Having defined this new social problem, they then sought to bring local, regional, and national scientific, political and economic resources to bear upon it. Thus, they pioneered in both the definition of the problem, and in the process of creating some solutions to it.

Even in the characterization of the Love Canal activists as highly successful, though, social scientists and political analysts have characterized such success in two quite different ways, however. One group viewed this as the initial model for NIMBY movements. The detritus of modern industries were to be put anyplace, but Not In My Back Yard! Environmental activists saw these locally focused and narrowly targeted citizen groups as myopic and unsophisticated in their ecological analyses -- and self-centered in their objectives. Unlike the self-concept of many of the environmental reformist and radical activists (Schnaiberg 1973, Gould et al 1993), they claimed that NIMBY participants did not claim to "love humanity in general" or to "love ecosystems in general".

Yet Andy Szasz (1994) has eloquently stated that this was a mischaracterization. This caricature of the motives of local movements failed to trace these movements and participants as they matured beyond their initial emergence. Szasz acknowledged the initial narrow vision of early activists such as Lois Gibbs at Love Canal. But he stressed the intellectual and political growth of these local leaders, who started from a fairly myopic and naive perspective (some of which was broadened by family contacts with SUNY-Buffalo faculty with environmental concerns). Leaders such as Lois Gibbs stretched themselves to learn far more about both ecological structures and political-economic structures. As one highly visible consequence, Lois Gibbs went on to form the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes (CCHW). For a decade, CCHW shared the insights from the Love Canal struggle with hundreds of other communities. Indeed, in some ways CCHW presents a very positive model of sustainable resistance (Gould et al 1993) to the political dominance of economic growth policies over the conditions of community life in the contemporary United States (Longworth 1998).

Other environmental analysts see this local movement as falling short of the ideal notion of citizens "thinking globally but acting locally". These prescription for environmental activism emerged in the 1980s, during which consciousness about global

environmental problems rose higher in both media and scientific agendas. My own perspective (Gould et al 1996) is that citizen-workers acting locally were frequently inundated with local resistances. Many never had the discretionary time or energy to address problems that underlay regional environmental problems, let alone national and global ones. Gibbs and her CCHW movement did indeed branch out to some extent, in part because they found few local resources to allay their health problem. As both Levine (1982) and Gibbs (1983) both note, though, much of Gibbs' outreach for regional and national support was sporadic, ill-planned, and often ineffective. Nonetheless, this outreach and national publicity did help create a more favorable political climate for Superfund legislation (but far less for its enforcement details). Movements acting at the nation-state level seem to have had more impact. Their success was often built in conjunction with local alliances, on the one hand (Gould 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994; Gould et al 1996), and under the rubric of international agreements (Gould et al 1995).

Twenty years after Love Canal's mobilization, I think that our understanding and appreciation of local environmental movements is mired in utopian and dystopian perspectives. The utopian view sees Love Canal as the template for local movements that lead in the 1980s and 1990s to a diffuse environmental justice movement and environmental racism arguments. The dystopian view sees Love Canal as an ineffectual sideshow, which failed to mobilize sufficient national regulation to deal with toxic wastes in a systematic and predictable way. My own perspective is that Love Canal itself is a sufficiently complex case that suggests that neither of these assertions about the "coat-tails" of Lois Gibbs's and the other local movements has much validity or insight to offer about "environmental movements".

I offer in evidence the far more complex narratives that my colleague Adam Weinberg (1997a,b) has systematically traced for a variety of local organizations in the Chicago metropolitan area. With the support of the local Sierra Club, these groups attempted to use the Community-Right-to-Know provisions of the 1986 Superfund

reauthorization. This reauthorization was itself one of the by-products of the activities of Love Canal activists. Weinberg has outlined what makes local movements powerful in getting their views at least heard, if not necessarily acted upon. These include the capacity to process information, staying power, and connection to political actors with knowledge of political processes. The detailed historical accounts of Lois Gibbs herself (Gibbs & Levine 1982) and Levine (1982) suggest how erratic and tenuous were the Love Canal participants' capacities on each of these planes.

Moreover, most detailed participant observers of other grass-roots organizations also note the fragility and uncertainty of the local capacity, as evidenced in my colleague David Pellow's (1997) account of an environmental justice movement organization in Chicago. Indeed, as a "model" or "template" for local organization, neither Love Canal nor any other example of a local movement seems to reduce the uncertainties for other local movement organizations (Gould et al 1996). As I will note below, it is only from a distance and with considerable abstraction that social scientists seem to envision what "the lessons of Love Canal movements" have been for the broader environmental movement.

I suggest that local movements are extremely *contingent* forms of mobilization. They arise in such diverse and complex local political-economic and social terrains that generalizations about them are quite risky. I offer below some competing viewpoints of whether and how local movements actually led to "populist radicalism" (Szasz 1994).

### **III. COMPETING EFFECTS OF LOVE CANAL MOBILIZATION: RADICALIZATION OR RETREAT?**

Andrew Szasz (1994) has argued forcefully that Love Canal created a new cultural "icon" about the risks and local reactions to toxic wastes. Moreover, he argues that, starting with Love Canal, media viewers were increasingly exposed to routinized and condensed scenarios of local troubles with toxic wastes -- sometimes condensed to as

little as 90 seconds of TV time. From this and other thoughtful accounts, he sees Love Canal as opening up a new form of populism -- a populist "radicalism" growing out of local toxic waste episodes and the generalized fear and loathing of organizations associated with this waste.

My own perspective is that Szasz has noted one important outgrowth of the media coverage of Love Canal -- including the pervasive and persuasive images of boarded-up houses and distraught local activists. Moreover, it is certainly true that Lois Gibbs herself was dramatically changed by her exposure to indifferent industry representatives, as well as political representatives at the local, state and national level. She was certainly empowered, and went on to help empower other communities struggling with their local problems, through the CCHW. Yet there were multiple reactions to this common set of circumstances that Gibbs and her neighbors experienced.

For me, one of the most enduring features of Love Canal was the grass-roots awareness that their fates were unimportant to political representatives, and to public health scientists whose mission was to objectively reduce public health hazards. Early modern environmentalists had quickly realized the disinterest (or antipathy) of industrial managers and investors in local citizens -- leading to the slogan of the late 1960s of "Sue the bastards!". The implication was that the political and judicial wings of government were more accessible to citizens than was the market. Yet the Love Canal experience was a devastating exposure for Love Canal activists and residents to the indifference and even malevolence of political and scientific actors, who failed to protect "the community".

Paradoxically, as Sheehan and Wedeen (1993) have eloquently argued, there has been a long history of unprotected workplace conditions. Both government regulators and industrial "hygienists" collaborated to dismiss and disguise serious toxic workplace hazards (Dietz & Rycroft 1987). Yet Love Canal stands as a kind of benchmark for citizen-workers to understand that **communities** could be as hazardous as workplaces, and that no agency of the state was a reliable ally in their struggle to protect the health of

their families. I think this is an important departure from previous experiences of contemporary environmental activists. For the first time, the risks of pollution were directly related to the health of individual citizens. "Environmentalism" was redefined here to refer to the hazards to the species *homo sapiens*, and not to some exotic or cute animal species facing decline or extinction.

Indeed, one of my lingering doubts (Schnaiberg 1992) has been whether the newly-emergent local movements such as Love Canal's was actually an *environmental movement* rather than a *health movement*. To the extent that it focused on human health primarily, I would argue that the environmental movement coat-tails of the Love Canal movement were very short. A backstage factor in Gibbs' movement is the key advisory and tutorial role played by her brother-in-law Wayne Hadley. A biologist at SUNY-Buffalo (Levine 1982: 30-32), Hadley schooled Gibbs in the outlines of ecological systems and processes. As an ardent environmentalist, he also schooled her in political-economic realities. To some extent, this *cosmopolitan* factor in Gibbs's development may have paved the way for CCHW to develop linkages with nominally similar groups in other communities.

But most of these groups were not well tied into the network of mainstream environmental movements and sciences (Gould et al 1993) as Gibbs had become. Thus in many communities, the local protests were more like the caricatured NIMBY types -- with narrow and parochial health concerns only. Both Szasz (1994) and I (Weinberg et al. 1995,1996) agree that even this limited consciousness had some political impact, because of the growing resistance of communities to siting both toxic and non-toxic waste landfills in their communities (Portnoy 1991). Moreover, more recent *environmental justice* movements (Pellow 1997) are much closer to the form and focus of CCHW. They have a strong racial-inequality component that is in some ways a substitute for the strong social class-inequality focus of Gibbs' movement (Gibbs/Levine 1982, Levine 1982). By contrast, the National Toxics Campaign and its precursor, the National Campaign

Against Toxic Hazards (Szasz 1994) has been far more tightly linked to other environmental movements.

To recap, I agree with Szasz and others that Love Canal mobilization helped raise new public and media concerns about the human hazards associated with toxic waste dumpsites. But I disagree with his assertion that this **generally** increased the populist radicalization of those who participated in such local movements. Gibbs herself noted the unrelieved and uncompensated anguish of even the "successful" residents of Love Canal, who were relocated to protect their health. Thus, I believe it is an open question still about whether the intervening 20 years have seen radicalized citizen mobilization against both industries and political agencies who neglect public health, as **the** outcome of Love Canal. I see much suggestion that the terrors that Szasz (1994) noted, amplified by the media coverage, has led to a retreat from politics for many citizens-at-risk from toxic waste.

Among other poignant testimonies are the losses of beloved family pets, who were deemed too hazardous to have around in the temporary locations to which residents were moved. Similar problems have been noted by Brown and Mikkelsen (1997) in the leukemia cluster in Woburn, Massachusetts. The failure of the political-legal system to protect Woburn residents has been documented most graphically in Jonathan Harr's *A Civil Action* (1995). In ways that parallel the earlier movie *Silkwood*, about the possible retribution against the whistleblower Karen Silkwood, it will be interesting to see how the forthcoming film will influence potential publics for local and national environmental movements. The net effect of the extensive and intensive litigation that Harr documents has been a loss for Woburn citizen-workers. Will this be an encouragement or discouragement of future local environmental movements?

I also have a methodological explanation for why Szasz and I disagree on the degree to which Love Canal mobilization produced or failed to produce new *populist radical* movements. Many exponents of the radicalization argument build their case

upon a *retrospective* analysis of movement activists. That is, they look at a movement organization such as Gibbs' CCHW, and their narrative is something like : "See how this housewife and apolitical citizen became galvanized by her frustration with local and regional political actors, as well as industry groups? See how she spearheaded a nationwide diffusion of such radicalism!"

This is in sharp contrast with the research of Adam Weinberg (1997a,b) and David Pellow (1997), who followed a *prospective* research design. Each became associated with emergent local environmental and environmental justice groups. They then followed what happened over time to these emergent organizations, and to their members. In technical research design terms, they studied the issues of subject *mortality* and *history* in quite different ways than did researchers such as Szasz. When Weinberg and Pellow followed their respective organizations, they found that the frustration and despair that radicalized someone like Lois Gibbs far more typically led other participants to retreat from these political conflicts. In common parlance, they choose to "switch" rather than "fight" -- or to take flight rather than to stay and fight local political and economic leaders (Schnaiberg 1986).

Thus, many of the local movement organizations are short-lived, because of the attrition of members, who drop out of the organizations and often move out of the communities undergoing local struggles. To some extent, this may be less true of environmental justice/racism movements, because minority groups still have fewer mobility options. Moreover, because of their perceptions of widespread racism, they initially expected little support from the dominant political and economic institutions (Krauss 1993). Many members of these groups start with a more radical orientation to local health hazards, and retain it throughout the conflict. Yet as Pellow (1997) has noted, even such movements have considerable attrition of members.

One of the intriguing issues surrounding such movement decline and attrition is suggested in the recent analysis by Nina Eliasoph. She studied a variety of local activists

and groups, and discovered the widespread avoidance of political discourse in public, a kind of retreatist "political etiquette". While many of the actors she studied offered quite radical and populist analyses in their individual interviews with her, their social groups worked to avoid political discussions. They could mobilize a discourse around the need for "community" and "family" values and structures -- but they created a void, a deliberate apathy about the political landscape that negated such values. I suspect that when we study many local toxic waste and environmental movements, we will find much the same process has been ongoing. One of the reasons that curbside recycling has become so diffused in the last decade in the United States is that it has effectively become depoliticized -- it is seen as a win-win situation. Our own analyses (Weinberg et al. 1995, 1996, 1999; Schnaiberg 1997) suggest that the political dimensions of who loses in recycling are quite real, but largely dismissed by both activists and social analysts who hoped recycling would "bring us all together".

My net assessment is that Love Canal did indeed create new distrust of governmental agencies and industrial representatives. It is certainly true that this led to far more activism in resisting the building of both new toxic waste incinerators and waste dumps (Szasz 1994). Moreover, there has also been more local activism resisting the creation or expansion of **non-toxic** waste landfills which in turn has redirected public and political attention to post-**consumer** curbside recycling, rather than to post-**production** toxic chemical recycling (Weinberg et al. 1995, 1996, 1999; Gould et al 1996: ch.4). But it does not seem that this has led to much critical movement attack on business-as-usual (Stretton 1976). Nor is there evidence of communities shifting towards any form of a socially- and environmentally-sustainable community.

The tasks of daily living, even in the face of tragic health consequences of toxic wastes, absorb much of the energy and time of citizen-workers. This is even more the case in the past 20 years, where stratification has increased more in the United States than in any other globalizing industrial society (Longworth 1998). Even in the current period

of national economic growth, we still largely have a trickle-down economy, in which working men and women have to struggle at subsistence or below-subsistence wages. Where do they get the energy to simultaneously analyse and attack the political economic structure of the global growth economy. In many ways, as Longworth (1998) reminds us, the national political parties in other industrial societies have carried the social welfare banner in the face of global challenges. In the United States, in contrast, we have imposed still more burdens on the working and even the middle class. Yet we still expect individuals in voluntary associations to do what an organized "green" or "progressive" party has been politically created to do in other democracies.

#### **IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS: MORE POLITICS, LESS SOCIAL MOVEMENT?**

In closing, let me note that Germany has its first potential governing alliance with a green party. Perhaps that is the legacy of Love Canal -- the need for rethinking our political structure, and not just our voluntary **non-governmental** organizations. As Richard Longworth (1998) has eloquently stated, the U.S. is the most unequal industrial society in terms of its policies supporting global economic development. It is also the one with a conspicuous and enduring lack of a progressive political party. As a result, there has been little dispute between Republicans and Democrats over the political and social desirability of "free trade" and "economic growth" (Schnaiberg & Gould 1994).

Interestingly, following Longworth's analysis, as globalization has put increasing pressure on European and Japanese welfare states, they have tended to put into power socially progressive regimes. In the United States, in contrast, social scientists have largely seen change as coming through the political pressures of social movement organizations. Among the latter, it seems fairly clear that national political pressures from local toxic waste movements constitute only a fairly weak "trickle-down" of political empowerment and industrial change.

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