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**COMPROMISE**  
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**ENVIRONMENTALISM**



**STEVEN BERNSTEIN**

# **The Compromise of LIBERAL ENVIRONMENTALISM**



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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AGGG	Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gases
BCSD	Business Council for Sustainable Development
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CDM	Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol
CFCs	Chlorofluorocarbons
CHP	Common Heritage Principle
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CTE	Committee on Trade and Environment of the WTO
EC	European Community
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
ENGO	Environmental Nongovernmental Organization
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency (United States)
EU	European Union
FAO	United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization
FCCC	Framework Convention on Climate Change
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
FSC	Forest Stewardship Council
G-7	Group of Seven
G-77	Group of Seventy-Seven
GARP	Global Atmospheric Research Programme
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (WTO after 1994)
GCC	Global Climate Coalition
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)

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GEF	Global Environment Facility
GEMS	Global Environmental Monitoring System of the U.N.—sponsored Earthwatch Network
GHG	Greenhouse Gas
IBP	International Biological Programme
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce
ICSU	International Council of Scientific Unions
IGBP	International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme
IHDP	International Human Dimensions Programme
IIASA	International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPE	International Political Economy
IUCN	World Conservation Union—renamed 1990, formerly International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
JI	Joint Implementation—also known as AIJ: Activities to be Implemented Jointly
LMOs	Living Modified Organisms
MAB	Man and the Biosphere Programme
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PPI	Progressive Policy Institute
PPMs	Process and Production Methods
PPP	Polluter Pays Principle
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCOPE	Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment of ICSU
SSTs	Supersonic Transports
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992
UNCHE	United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 1972
UNCLOS III	1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNCSD	United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNGASS	United Nations General Assembly Special Session to Review Implementation of Agenda 21
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission)
WCS	World Conservation Strategy
WCRP	World Climate Research Programme
WMO	World Meteorological Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature renamed in 1990—formerly World Wildlife Fund



## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**THE GERM OF THE IDEA** that eventually evolved into this book came on the eve of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It was a time of great hope for people who shared a concern over the fate of the global environment, but tempered by uneasiness over the course the summit set for understanding and addressing these problems. Almost 10 years later, the legacy of those ideas and decisions—a legacy I label the “compromise of liberal environmentalism”—remains powerfully in place. It can be found in the ideas that undergird many of the most important and far reaching international environmental treaties such as on climate change and biodiversity, in the policies and programs of international environment and development organizations ranging from the United Nations Environment Programme to the World Bank and throughout the United Nations system as a whole, and in the way powerful non-environmental organizations such as the World Trade Organization—which increasingly finds itself making decisions with potential environmental consequences—try to respond to the demands to accommodate environmental and development concerns in their decisions and policies. Even many nongovernmental organizations rest their proposals for action on this framework, as do many states in their domestic policies.

Given the potential impact of these institutions and policies for the fate of the planet’s ecological systems and human life and health, I thought it crucial to uncover the reasons why states and international in-

stitutions treat global environmental problems the way they do, and the underlying forces of world politics that pushed global environmental governance in this direction. Only with this knowledge did it seem possible to make informed judgments about the prospects for future action, or provide a basis on which to critically assess and debate whether there is a need for deeper change. This task seems even more important today—given the disappointment many feel, despite some notable successes, over progress on the world’s most severe environmental problems since 1992.

The second inspiration for this book came from a frustration, typical among many of my fellow graduate students at the time, with most of the literature on international institutions. It seemed to forget that international institutions are not simply a vehicle through which states cooperate, but that the cooperation they enable is for some purpose or goal. Purposes and goals and the politics that drives them were simply left out of most International Relations scholarship, as if all that mattered was whether an institution formed or not. What it actually did (or did not do) mattered not at all. A new literature in International Relations—which now falls under the label ‘constructivism’—challenged the discipline by bringing politics and common or collective purposes back into the analysis of international institutions. However, it faced heavy criticism initially for being too concerned with big theoretical questions at the expense of adding to our knowledge of important and pressing problems in world politics. My hope is that this book is one in a growing list that responds to this criticism.

I owe a great many people thanks for support, encouragement, constructive criticism, and even inspiration as I developed my ideas. At University of Toronto, Janice Gross Stein, Ronald Deibert, Louis Pauly, Robert O. Matthews, and Craig Scott asked the tough questions and pushed and prodded my work to reach beyond its initial limitations. David Welch merits special mention for what in hindsight must have been a painstaking task; his willingness to read and comment in detail on multiple versions of each portion of what would later become a draft manuscript.

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Homer-Dixon, Richard Herrmann, Andrew Hurrell, Rhona Leibel, Karen Litfin, Miriam Lowi, Richard Matthews, Don Munton, Shaun Narine, Norrin Ripsman, and Lisa Young.

I especially want to acknowledge my intellectual debt to James Busumtwi-Sam whose collaboration on a related project greatly helped my thinking on many theoretical aspects of this book. Our work together at times became so intertwined that he deserves some credit for whatever intellectual contribution is made here. Of course the blame for any errors of fact or judgment are solely my own.

Other people took time out of their busy schedules to discuss their experiences and issues about which they knew far more than me. While the formal interviews directly quoted are listed in my bibliography, I also thank Louise Comeau, Alden Meyer, Peter Timmerman, Jeffrey Watson, and Doug Whelpdale, among others, who talked to me about their research or participation in various international environmental negotiations. I am also grateful to Peter Berry who shared his interview notes on ozone negotiations and research with me. I especially want to thank Louise Comeau and Jennifer Morgan, of the Climate Action Network, for helping me arrange to attend the first Conference of the Parties for the Framework Convention on Climate Change in Berlin, and for giving me full access to CAN's strategy sessions and information.

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All this would have been for nought without the commitment and support for the project from Kate Wittenberg at Columbia University Press. The comments of the two anonymous reviewers she chose helped make the final manuscript a much stronger and more coherent piece of work. I am also grateful to Leslie Bialler and the rest of the staff at Columbia for their

efficiency and professionalism in ushering a first-time author through the arcane editorial process.

Parts of the argument and evidence developed further here appeared first in “Ideas, Social Structure, and the Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism.” *European Journal of International Relations* 6 (4) (December 2000):464–512, and are reproduced with permission from Sage Publications and the European Consortium for Political Research.

This book would never have been written without the unwavering support and inspiration of my partner and wife, Linda White. Her painstaking scrutiny of virtually every word I have written related to this project made it a far better product than I ever could have produced on my own. She constantly pushed me to clarify my ideas, asking the fundamental questions about my work that others would not. I dedicate this book to her.

Steven Bernstein  
Toronto, Canada  
January 2001

# **The Compromise of LIBERAL ENVIRONMENTALISM**

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

We cannot say with certainty how much longer mankind [sic] can postpone initiating deliberate control of his growth before he will have lost the chance for control. We suspect on the basis of present knowledge of the physical constraints of the planet that the growth phase cannot continue for another one hundred years. Again, because of the delays in the system, if the global society waits until those constraints are unmistakably apparent, it will have waited too long.

—*The Limits to Growth* 1972

The concept of sustainable development does imply limits—not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth.

—*Our Common Future* 1987

**FEW TRULY GLOBAL** concerns have held the potential to transform substantially the nature of global politics and society. Contenders might include the fear of nuclear annihilation or advances in technology and telecommunications. The former arguably has transformed the nature of conflict between the major powers, while the latter have made possible exponential increases in economic transactions across vast distances, enhanced the spread of culture, and enabled vast changes in the patterns of interaction between a wide range of actors on the global stage.

Looking back thirty years, one might have predicted that the concern over the state of the global environment could similarly transform global politics. Responses to such concerns have called for a whole new notion of planetary rather than national security and thrown into question the assumption of competing interests of states or the ability of such units, or the sovereign state system they comprise, to manage global problems. Furthermore, a growing awareness of environmental problems and ecological in-

terdependencies has led many to question the wisdom of conducting global economic relations as if they were independent from the ecological systems that sustain life on the planet.

The early ideas that informed international attempts to manage the Earth's resources supported such transformations. The philosophical statement of planetary concern commissioned for the first global environmental conference—the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972—included calls for a “loyalty to the Earth” that recognized planetary interdependence of all life, the adoption of global (as opposed to national) responses to environmental problems, and massive changes in over-consumptive lifestyles of the wealthy. *Only One Earth*, as it was called, also criticized existing international institutions for lacking a sense of planetary community and commitment (Ward and Dubos 1972). High-profile studies such as *The Limits to Growth* took an even tougher stand against overconsumption and warned that growth in population and production could not continue on course without leading to the collapse of social and economic systems (Meadows et al. 1972). No one expected revolutionary changes to occur overnight, but an assumption continues to prevail that as the international community pays more attention to environmental problems, we will move gradually toward a more ecological understanding of our world and humankind's place in it. At the least, our responses to environmental problems themselves will lead us in an ecological direction.

This book examines whether indeed that is the case. It does so by detailing how international concern for the global environment moved from these initial formulations to the current concern with “sustainable development,” and what form of international governance “sustainable development” entails. This evolution of environmental governance takes on added significance when one considers that environmental issues finally reached the mainstream of international relations in the early 1990s only when they took this form.

Whether or not sustainable development constitutes a truly transformative idea, international lawyers and political scientists note that the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro institutionalized ideas associated with this new conception of environmental governance. Some call it a “paradigm shift” to a new international law of sustainable development from previous formulations of both an international law of the environment and of development.<sup>1</sup> Others argue that the Earth Summit “succeeded in formulating an umbrella regime in the field of sustainable development” that will continue to shape specific responses to environmental problems well into the future (Sjöstedt et al. 1994:5). These institutionalized ideas arguably

embody the most significant shift in environmental governance over the last thirty years. Not only did they bring environmentalism into the mainstream of international governance, but they did so by reformulating environmental concerns in the context of a liberal international economic order. In that way, sustainable development does mark the institutionalization of environmental concern, but not as originally envisaged.

Instead, the compatibility of environmental concern, economic growth, the basic tenets of a market economy, and a liberal international order is now conventional wisdom among many policy makers, diplomats, and a large number of nongovernmental organizations throughout the world. It is easy to forget that this formulation of the environmental problematique differs substantially from those dominant when the first concerted efforts at wide-scale global responses to environmental problems began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. From the perspective of those earlier efforts, focused on the negative environmental consequences of unregulated industrial development and suspicious of economic growth, the shift in environmental governance is a remarkable and a largely unforeseen departure. Why, then, when the international community finally took environmentalism seriously, was it only considered in the context of an economic program that not only encouraged growth, but actually demanded it? Why did international environmental governance evolve into what I will call the compromise of “liberal environmentalism?”

These questions are too often overlooked in academic and policy work overwhelmingly focused on the quest to design better institutions to manage the Earth’s resources or respond to immediate and pressing problems.<sup>2</sup> This omission also points to a serious gap in the literature on international institutions more generally. Dominant strands of the rational institutionalist “regime” literature, for example, generally ignore the question of which values cooperative outcomes promote, because they focus primarily on the functional requirements of cooperation or on institutional design and effectiveness.<sup>3</sup> Such studies neglect to address the prior question of why some norms get selected over others, thereby defining international problems and guiding appropriate behavior in particular ways. Even studies that take a more overtly sociological approach have so far failed to adequately address this question. Whereas they provide mounting evidence that international norms and institutions may not only regulate behavior, but can also define state identities and interests,<sup>4</sup> few studies address the prior question of which norms get promoted or prevail over others in the first place.

This shortcoming is particularly evident in the literature on environmental institutions.<sup>5</sup> While research on the creation, design, and effective-

ness of international institutions addresses crucially important questions, such studies generally lack a critical examination of what kind of governing norms institutions embody or why those norms came to dominate global environmental governance. Rather, an assumption often pervades the mainstream academic literature that any cooperation on environmental problems means progress toward a more ecological international order. A critical examination of the evolution of environmental norms shows that assumption to be overly simplistic, even faulty. Overcoming such lacunae in the literature deserves greater attention from scholars interested in the kind of international order that institutions actually promote.

In response, this study orients itself more toward what Robert Cox calls “critical theory.” An exercise in critical theory need not invoke complex methodological or epistemological challenges to how scholars ought to go about understanding the world, a wholesale rejection of explanatory theory, or a radical interpretivism associated with some forms of post-positivist analysis. Rather, it simply poses the question differently than those involved in research on the important tasks listed above. As Cox puts it, “Critical theory stands back from the existing order of things to ask how that order came into being, how it may be changing, and how that change may be influenced or channeled. . . . Its aim is the understanding of structural change” (Cox 1992:3). In this spirit, I set out to answer two questions about international environmental governance: How did the current form of international environmental governance evolve since the first major international environmental conference in 1972? And, why did it evolve into liberal environmentalism while other alternatives fell by the wayside?

## **THE EVOLUTION OF INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE**

In the first half of the book, I detail the main empirical argument that norms of environmental protection have gradually converged with liberal economic norms in international environmental governance since 1972. The institutionalization of “sustainable development” at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED or Earth Summit) legitimated this convergence toward what I label liberal environmentalism.<sup>6</sup> This normative compromise predicates environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of a liberal economic order. It also enabled