

Greening the Campus:  
Contemporary Student Environmental Activism

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In November 1992, the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) issued a report entitled “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity.” Written by UCS Chair Henry Kendall and signed by 1,700 of the world’s leading scientists, including the majority of Nobel laureates in the sciences, the report’s admonition was conveyed in the strongest terms:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.<sup>1</sup>

As Ross Gelbspan has documented, warnings issued by the UCS and similar groups were met with a well-funded and orchestrated corporate campaign of fake science, scaremongering, and political smearing that effectively killed off efforts to address human beings’ collision course with the planet’s natural limits.<sup>2</sup> Nine years after the UCS issued its stark alarm, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) unequivocally confirmed UCS claims concerning the unsustainability of contemporary industrial civilization’s growing levels of greenhouse gas emissions. Carbon emissions have continued to rise notwithstanding both the IPCC’s report and the “World Scientists’

Warning.” The world, and, in particular, wealthy industrialized nations such as the United States, must reverse course dramatically if cataclysmic environmental collapse is to be avoided. Measures such as the Kyoto Protocol (1997), which essentially seek to cap emissions at unsustainable levels, fail to address the coming crisis adequately. Indeed, recent estimates conclude that developed countries will have to cut their emissions by at least 70 percent over the next thirty years if temperatures are to be kept from rising above the danger point of two degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels.<sup>3</sup> This is clearly a massive task, one that will require a dramatic reorientation of both the material and ideological underpinnings of developed and industrializing countries.

As those responsible for training the scientists, entrepreneurs, and opinion-makers of tomorrow, educators in general and institutions of higher learning in particular have a critical role to play in this race to save the planet for habitation by human beings and other species. Despite its important role as our society’s primary site of credentialization and putative moral pillar of our culture, academia has been disappointingly lethargic and tepid in its response to the global climate crisis. As James Gustave Speth lamented recently, in spite of the gravity of climate change, “there is no march on Washington; students are not in the streets; consumers are not rejecting destructive lifestyles; Congress is not passing far-reaching legislation...”<sup>4</sup> Over the last several years, however, a student environmental movement has grown up that promises to inject a heightened sense of urgency into academia’s discussion of environmental issues and thereby to fuel a much-needed renaissance of the environmental movement in the United States.<sup>5</sup> This paper profiles several of the most prominent student environmental initiatives of recent years, highlighting the organizing success of groups such as Energy Action and the California

Student Sustainability Coalition while also interrogating the limits of their campaigns. Despite their shortcomings, grassroots student initiatives are one of the most hopeful developments during a period when global climate change, resource wars, and the many other forms of contemporary ecological degradation that are robbing young people of their collective future are being challenged by all too few voices.

Events such as the melting of the polar ice cap and the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina have recently helped to galvanize a student movement around climate change. One of the organizations to take the lead in this regard is Energy Action, a group founded by students from Temple University and the University of California.<sup>6</sup> The principle initiative undertaken by Energy Action thus far is the Campus Climate Challenge, a project that aims to organize students on college campuses and in high schools across North America to convert their schools to 100 percent clean energy policies.<sup>7</sup> Energy Action steering committee member and co-founder Kim Teplitsky argues that her generation has realized that “unless we deal with [climate change], most other things won’t matter. The progressive movement as a whole is moving this way. Global warming is also a social justice and human rights issue, and offers way for all progressive groups to come together because it affects everything.”<sup>8</sup> Since the inception of the Campus Climate Challenge in the spring of 2004, 324 institutions have signed the pledge to convert to sustainable energy.

Radical pedagogy played an important role in sparking the Energy Action initiatives at campuses such as Temple. Indeed, Kim Teplitsky argues that progressive teaching methods were fundamental to the climate challenge initiative, since it was in an environmental studies class in which her professor allowed students to follow their own

research passions that she first began researching wind power as a possible alternative energy source for Temple.<sup>9</sup> According to Teplitsky, “the most valuable classes and lessons were those where students could think about the meaning of education in relation to world around them.”<sup>10</sup> For a young activist such as Teplitsky, education that is oriented to contemporary social challenges, including that of climate change, offers a tonic to the forms of insularity and de-politicization that have become endemic in contemporary US society. As she puts it, “people are buying bigger houses and shutting the doors tight.”<sup>11</sup>

Teplitsky is quick, however, to challenge the notion that contemporary students are apathetic. Young people, she stresses, feel overwhelmed by the many severe challenges confronting them and often lack a sense of how to effect concrete change: “they care about many things but don’t know how to make an impact.”<sup>12</sup> Environmental activists, it is true, have responded to the campaign of fake science and the refusal of public figures to face climate change using apocalyptic rhetoric that can be numbing, leaving potential young activists with a sense of the futility of engagement given the impending collapse of natural ecosystems. As Mark Hertsgaard underlined in a survey of the contemporary environmental movement, the surge of grassroots environmental activism, in which the student movement has played a key role over the last several years, is notable for eschewing such gloomy rhetoric in order to focus on economically attractive solutions to environmental problems.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, is the genius of the Campus Climate Challenge, which offers a tightly focused campaign around which both students and forward thinking faculty and administrators can rally. Given the dramatic escalation in energy costs over the last several years, support for alternative energy can

be pitched to penny-pinching college and university administrators as an economic no-brainer as well as a potential publicity bonanza for their institutions.

Perhaps the most significant success in this drive to make colleges and universities sustainable has been the California Student Sustainability Coalition (CSSC) campaign around a resolution calling for a system-wide mandate for all new and renovated UC buildings to be constructed to LEED silver standards or higher and to use 50 percent renewable energy, half of which is to be produced onsite through solar generation.<sup>14</sup> CSSC began their drive during the 2002-2003 academic year with a campaign co-organized with Greenpeace that took the motto “UC Go Solar” as its organizing slogan. During this year, CSSC gathered thousands of student signatures in support of the initiative to green the entire UC system using solar power. According to the CSSC, “the resolution called for a system-wide mandate for all new and renovated buildings to be constructed to LEED Silver standards or higher and to use fifty percent renewable energy, half of which must be produced onsite.”<sup>15</sup> In June 2003, the Board of Regents passed the policy unanimously. Following this success, however, Greenpeace moved on to organize other campuses, leaving CSSC “with no money, no coordinator, and limited means of communication.”<sup>16</sup> While these losses obviously set CSSC back, the organization regrouped, building a UC based network pursuing a series of significant projects, including projects around curricular transformation and transportation infrastructure.

Not only did the CSSC campaign call for work with every student government of every campus in the vast UC system, but it also required cooperation with the UC Office of the President and with the UC Board of Regents. In order to achieve victories, in other

words, student environmental activists have had to learn how to win and sustain the support of powerful figures in their college and university administration. This is often quite a challenge given the myriad drains on administrators' attention and funds as well as the rapid turnover of the student population. As Audrey Chang underlines in her account of the campaign to develop a comprehensive set of sustainability guidelines for building at Stanford University, adopting a collaborative approach to the administration has become a key strategy for young activists.<sup>17</sup> According to Chang, her group was able to gain administrators' attention and support because, "our group was diverse, with representation from various fields; we were persistent; we concentrated on personal contact; we took a professional and cooperative approach."<sup>18</sup>

In tandem with this focus on pragmatic change and on garnering support from key players, the student environmental movement is notable for its emphasis on coalition building. Departing from the model of elite, Washington-based environmental lobby groups, Energy Action and similar groups are part of a coalition of twenty-eight organizations based on both institutions of higher education and local communities. Many of the students currently engaged in the environmental movement have benefited from programs established by groups such as the Center for American Progress, which aim to train and mentor young activists while also helping them establish the kinds of organizational networks that will empower their local efforts to effect change.<sup>19</sup> Particularly important in this regard, according to Kim Teplitsky, is the contemporary student movement's emphasis on issues of environmental justice. Established organizations such as the Sierra Club have been paying lip service to the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on people of color and poor communities since the

emergence of the environmental justice movement over a decade ago, but Teplitsky stresses that the student movement has consciously sought to address such issues by reaching out to marginalized youths: “we’re trying to focus on getting money to communities where it hasn’t been to help youths who’ve been marginalized. We’re always thinking of training and bringing leaders into movement.”<sup>20</sup> Given the lily-white, well-heeled character of the mainstream environmental movement’s leadership, such initiatives to empower diverse leadership cadres of the future are particularly important.

Transformation of the environmental footprint of institutions of higher learning is only one component of a much broader change in the culture of academia that the student environmental movement is seeking to promote. In addition to such material changes, the student movement is pushing for a revolution in the content and process of education. Although environmental studies programs have been around since the late 1960s, they tend to have a relatively isolated profile as special departments that attract a small if highly motivated portion of the student body. There are few colleges and universities in which issues of sustainability and the environment are a part of the core curriculum. As a result, students are often able to progress through the final stage of their formal education with little or no consideration of the impact of human beings in the ecosystems that support life on Earth. In a direct challenge to the compartmentalization of the disciplines, groups such as the California Student Sustainability Coalition have struggled to establish student-driven courses on sustainability such as the Education for Sustainable Living Program.<sup>21</sup> ESLP courses, organized through local UC campuses, are grounded in autonomously organized groups in which “students form action research teams in partnership with guest lecturers, faculty, administration, and community members to

implement tangible change.”<sup>22</sup> In addition to seeking to promote novel interdisciplinary forums, student activists tend to push curricular reform beyond issues of content alone to transformation of the educational process through experiential learning. The hope is that pedagogical projects that prod students to deploy their knowledge in real-world contexts will “inspire participants to internalize the concept of sustainability, and carry it in practice beyond academia into a greater society.”<sup>23</sup> In addition to such wholly student-directed projects, of course, increasing opportunities for course work in environmental studies are being made available across the curriculum through initiatives such as the Ponderosa Project, a faculty development program begun at Northern Arizona University that is now emulated around the country.<sup>24</sup>

Surprisingly, curricular reform has been just as difficult to implement as diminution of academia’s heavy physical ecological footprint. Temple University student activist Josh Meyers, who helped design a course on environmental studies for the university’s honors program, describes the difficulty in garnering funding for such interdisciplinary courses.<sup>25</sup> Meyers recalls a federally funded course on nuclear energy that was taught at Temple during the 1970s; with nine professors from different fields in the classroom at once, students were able to hear lively debates about energy policy. When federal funds ran out, however, “the administration killed it.”<sup>26</sup> Little has changed since then. In fact, the professors who lectured for the interdisciplinary honors course Meyers helped design all worked *gratis*. Unless an institution is lucky enough to snag a significant external grant, there tend to be relatively few revenue sources for the kind of interdisciplinary teaching initiatives that issues of sustainability inherently raise. Even impressive, multi-year programs such as the Ponderosa Project aim to place educators in

dialogue with one another only *outside* the classroom. As a result, each newly developed course offers a fascinating but necessarily fragmentary snapshot on the topic of environmentalism.<sup>27</sup> Scientists still don't really talk to humanities scholars, and vice versa. Students intent on understanding both the ideology and the science that drives environmental degradation consequently face significant hurdles.

In addition, Josh Meyers notes that the kind of experiential learning embraced by organizers of the Education for Sustainable Living Program is very difficult to implement. For Meyers, "the course didn't have an action incentive. How do you grade effort?"<sup>28</sup> Not only was it difficult to create workable action incentives for students, who are more grade-driven today than ever given the difficulty of landing good jobs upon graduation, but, Meyers argues, few students seemed willing to break out of an academic mindset in which education is attached to individual credentialization rather than collective social transformation.<sup>29</sup> As a result, in the course he helped design, almost all of the students elected to write a traditional academic paper rather than carrying out some sort of practical environmental project in the poor community where Temple is located. Yet despite these problems in implementing a radical environmental pedagogy, Meyers is quite sanguine about the future of the environmental movement on campus. Reacting to a Thomas Friedman editorial on the silence of students in the face of climate change, he notes that students now see switching to an environmental studies degree as a canny career move. This undoubtedly has something to do with the "green washing" strategies of major corporations such as Wal-Mart, which is moving to cut its waste stream, but, for Meyers, is more significantly related to a general transformation of consciousness in the

U.S. As he puts it, “even if we don’t have a government willing to take the lead on climate change, people are catching on.”<sup>30</sup>

The obduracy of disciplinary fragmentation may catch some idealistic student activists by surprise, but can only be seen as an inherent characteristic of a system calibrated to meet the needs of a society organized by the dictates of capital. In his history of higher education in the US since the late nineteenth century, Stanley Aronowitz notes that the main task of higher education has been to transmit technical knowledge to students.<sup>31</sup> The vocationalization and fragmentation of higher learning has intensified dramatically over the last thirty years as academic research has become increasingly commodified. Today, corporations exert significant control over the research agendas of many public and private institutions, leading not only to serious ethical concerns about scientific experimentation but also to significant disincentives to questioning the short-sighted, bottom-line mentality that tends to drive corporations. While molecular biologists have metamorphosed into corporate CEOs, their unfortunate relations in the less remunerative branches of the humanities have been squeezed of funding and have seen the control they once exercised over their institutions through faculty democracy eroded by administrative centralization and the corporate-style downsizing of the teaching staff. Unless and until student activists begin to challenge this trend toward academic capitalism, they are unlikely to find their hunger for a transformative sustainability curriculum slaked. While particular administrators may be content to indulge in experiments in interdisciplinary pedagogy, in other words, the underlying structural trend is away from such holistic approaches to education. Although a tight focus and pragmatism have undoubtedly been boons to the fledgling student

environmental movement, student activists need to see these trends towards academic capitalism, which are so inimical to their long-term goals of fostering sustainability within academia, for what they are and to find ways to challenge such trends.

The limitations of pragmatism will also inevitably need to be confronted in the realm of material transformation, the arena in which they would seem to be the strongest. While it might make immediate sense to sell clean energy initiatives to university administrators using economistic, non-ideological arguments about saving money, there is no guarantee that such steps will help save the planet in the long term. For, if universities are increasingly run along corporate lines, student activists need to be aware of a basic truth expressed with inimitable clarity by Rachel Carson in 1963: the increasing reduction of nature to factory-like forms of organization in the interest of rapid economic returns lies behind our worst ecological problems.<sup>32</sup> The ecological tyranny of the bottom line pertains just as much in academic capitalism as it does in other sectors of the corporate world order. As a consequence, there is little to guarantee that savings recouped through campus green building programs will not be plowed right back into energy-consuming and waste-producing university expansion programs. Indeed, Jevons' paradox would seem to predict precisely such an outcome: according to Jevons, "increasing efficiency in using a natural resource such as coal only results in increased demand for that resource, not a reduction in demand ... because improvement in efficiency leads to a rising scale of production."<sup>33</sup>

Given the severe ideological climate in the contemporary US, it is perhaps not surprising that young environmental activists should seek to avoid musty grand narratives such as a critique of capitalism. Today, getting a green roof installed on a university

chemistry building, a campus-wide recycling program up and running, or even some locally grown crops served in the local dining hall constitutes a pioneering victory. That said, student leaders in the environmental movement are certainly aware of some of the contradictions of capitalism. For them, the environmental crisis is also an employment crisis. As Kim Teplitsky puts it, “People in youth movements tend to be much more radical than adults. Our generation is seeing our job prospects collapse, so we know about it.” Yet in the next breath, she goes on to suggest that government rather than capitalism is the problem: “Capitalism is part of the solution. The government is not supporting renewables; it’s happening through the market. Our biggest problem is corrupt governments, corporate welfare, and the support of dictatorial regimes.”<sup>34</sup>

Teplitsky’s perspective is clearly shaped by the reactionary policies of the Bush regime, which has represented the central obstacle to progressive environmental action on both a national and a global level since she and her cohort cut their activist teeth. Yet there is a strange unwillingness or failure to connect our reactionary political circumstances to the dynamics of neoliberal accumulation on display in Teplitsky’s comments.

Young activists like Meyers, Chang, and Teplitsky demonstrate impressive instincts for coalition building and for forging pragmatic reform. In the coming years, they and other student leaders will throw their considerable energies into making universities a model for society in general, fighting the next generation of coal-burning power plants, and tackling environmental justice issues in the communities where universities such as Temple are located.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, they will certainly play a fundamental role in reviving the environmental movement in the U.S. As important as such campaigns are, however, given the potentially catastrophic effects of global climate

change, the student environmental movement needs to confront the world-devouring expansionist logic of the capitalist system itself.<sup>36</sup> Without such a critique of the foundations of the environmental crisis, the student environmental movement runs the risk of engaging in the form of evasion and denial that characterizes much contemporary discourse on “sustainability.” As the acerbic critic James Howard Kunstler suggests, this discourse amounts to little more than “a delusion that we can keep the interstate highway system, Wal-Mart, Walt Disney World, and all of the other furnishings of the drive-in utopia running on biodiesel and used french-fry oil.”<sup>37</sup>

Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://deoxy.org/sciwarn.htm>. Accessed September 22, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ross Gelbspan, *The Heat is On: The Climate Crisis, the Cover-Up, and the Prescription* (New York: Perseus, 1998) and *Boiling Point: How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists and Activists are Fueling the Climate Crisis – and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster* (New York: Basic, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> See “The Future Starts Here: The Route to a Low-Carbon Economy,” a report published by Friends of the Earth and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change. <[http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/low\\_carbon\\_economy.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/low_carbon_economy.pdf)>. Accessed September 22, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> James Gustave Speth, “The Globe Is Warming. Why Aren't We Marching?” *The New York Times* (February 24, 2006): A22.

<sup>5</sup> One indication of the impact of this movement may be found in a recent special issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* focused on the issue of sustainability on campus. See, in particular, Scott Carlson, “In Search of the Sustainable Campus: With Eyes on the Future, Universities Try to Clean Up Their Acts,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.9 (October 20, 2006), A10.

<sup>6</sup> The Energy Action Coalition’s website is < <http://www.energyaction.net/main.>> Accessed September 27, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For details concerning the Campus Climate Challenge, see <http://climatechallenge.org.>> Accessed September 27, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Kim Teplitsky, Telephone interview, June 15, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The classic work in this regard is Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). For a more satisfying critical analysis of the sources of contemporary depoliticization, see Gars Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy* (New York: Wiley, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Teplitsky interview.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Hertsgaard, "Green Goes Grassroots: The Environmental Movement Today," *The Nation* 283.4 (July 31/August 7, 2006): 11-18.

<sup>14</sup> For more details, see the California Student Sustainability Coalition's website at <http://sustainabilitycoalition.org/main/?q=node/3>. Accessed 11/28/06.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Audrey Chang, "The Development of Stanford University's Guidelines for Sustainable Buildings: A Student Perspective," in Bartlett and Chase, 177-196.

<sup>18</sup> Chang, 182.

<sup>19</sup> Teplitsky interview.

<sup>20</sup> Teplitsky interview.

<sup>21</sup> For more details, see the Education for Sustainable Living Project website at <http://www.eslp.net>. Accessed September 27, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Education for Sustainable Living Program mission statement. See <http://www.eslp.net>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> For an account of this initiative, see Geoffrey W. Chase and Paul Rowland, “The Ponderosa Project: Infusing Sustainability into the Curriculum,” in Bartlett and Chase, 91-106.

<sup>25</sup> Josh Meyers. Telephone interview. July 28, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> For a sense of this fragmentariness, consult the Piedmont Project curriculum website at <<http://www.scienceandsociety.emory.edu/piedmont/curriculum.htm>> Inspired by the Ponderosa Project, the Piedmont Project retains disciplinary walls despite its otherwise impressive emphasis on integrated learning.

<sup>28</sup> Meyers interview.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Cited in John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review, 2002), 24.

<sup>33</sup> Account of Jevons’ paradox drawn from John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> Kim Teplitsky interview.

<sup>35</sup> Teplitsky interview.

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed theoretical anatomy of the systemic character of environmental crisis, see Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (New York: Zed, 2002).

<sup>37</sup> Scott Carlson, "A Social Critic Warns of Upheavals to Come," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.9 (October 20, 2006), A19.