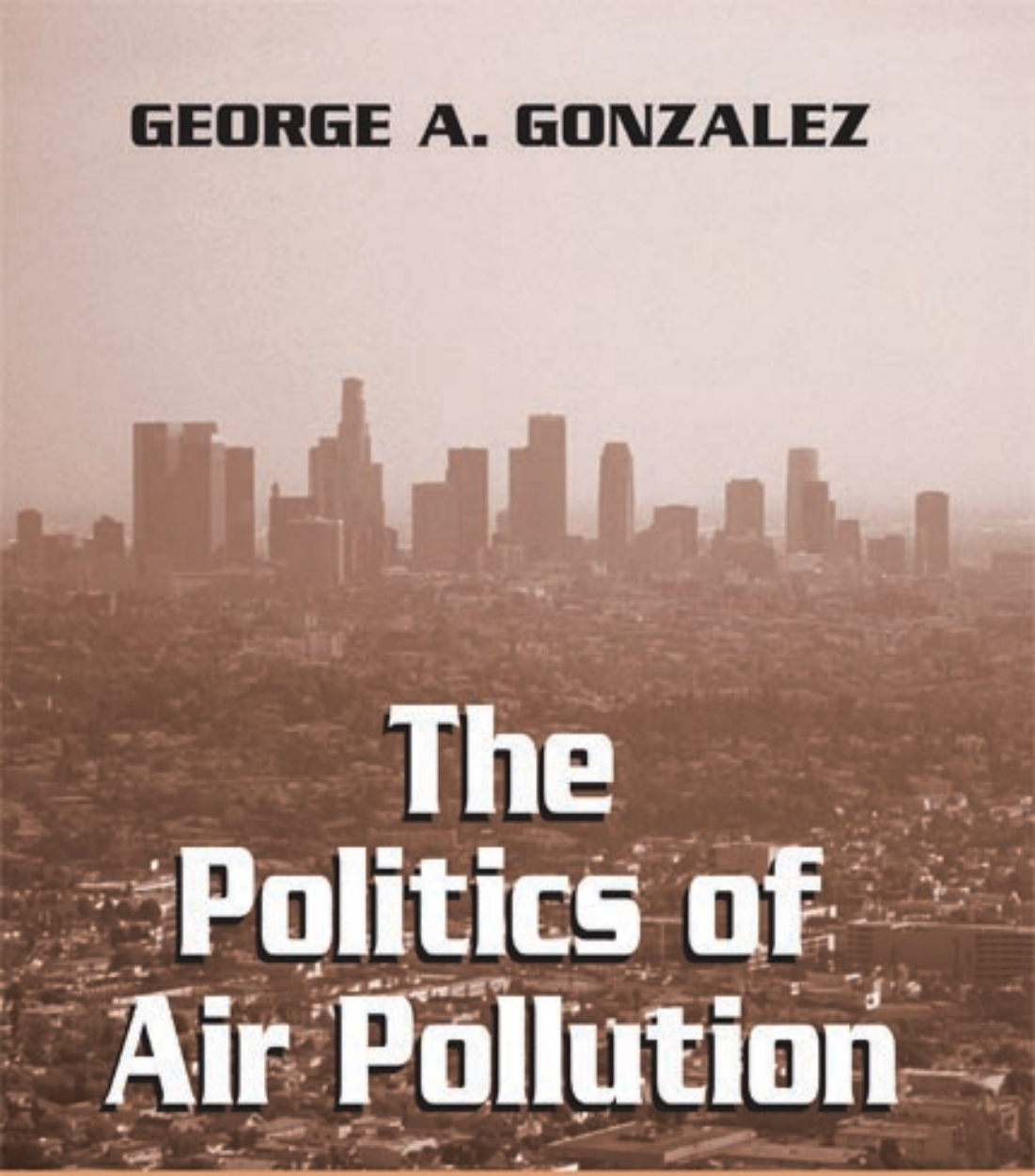
GEORGE A. GONZALEZ



The Politics of Air Pollution

URBAN GROWTH, ECOLOGICAL MODERNIZATION, AND SYMBOLIC INCLUSION

The Politics of Air Pollution

SUNY series in Global Environmental Policy

Uday Desai, *editor*

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Urban Growth, Ecological Modernization, and Symbolic Inclusion

GEORGE A. GONZALEZ

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ONE

Local Growth Coalitions, Environmental Groups, and Air Pollution

IT HAS BEEN over thirty years since the United States federal government enacted sweeping legislation—the Clean Air Act of 1970—to address the acute air pollution that was facing numerous urban areas (Jones 1975). Air pollution emissions nevertheless continue to persist at high levels, with several U.S. urban regions facing seemingly intractable poor air quality (Cherni 2002; Davis 2002; Lee 2004; Hebert 2004). Moreover, global warming has solidified into an accepted scientific fact (Revkin 2001; 2002 June 3; Trenberth 2001). The recent global warming trend is in large part the result of human-made airborne emissions of such gasses as carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide (Christianson 1999; Firor and Jacobsen 2002; Jacobson 2002). Despite this scientific consensus, and the ominous signs pointing to a rapid heating of the globe—e.g., the ongoing melting of the polar ice caps (Revkin 2002 March 20)—U.S. policymakers have not enacted policies to directly abate the emission of human-made greenhouse gasses (Brown 2002; Revkin 2002 Feb. 15). Why, despite strongly worded regulatory legislation and the ample scientific data demonstrating the negative environmental and health effects of air pollution, does the United States continue to experience poor air quality in many urban areas as well as significantly contribute to global warming?[1] A primary reason the United States has not taken decisive action against airborne emissions is because the political energy to abate air pollution in the United States does not flow from a specific effort to protect human health or the environment but from a historic effort to realize wealth from the ownership and sale of land.

David Ricardo (1830) describes the political economy of capitalism as comprising an effort between land owners, workers, and capitalists to capture the economic benefits derived from modern production techniques (also see Foley 2003). The historic conflict over air pollution in the United States is largely the result of landed interests seeking to maximize the value of their land by minimizing the economic harm from airborne pollution. Therefore, as industrial capitalists, in the process of producing and selling commodities to capture profit, emit air pollution, landed elites seek to abate localized air pollution to capture rent from the utilization of their land. Segments of the working class have only been recently mobilized on the issue of air pollution, but this recent mobilization has not significantly altered the terms of the air pollution debate set by large land owners and industrial capitalists. This debate is centered around the deployment of technology to abate localized air pollution (i.e., the "ecological modernization" of production and transportation facilitates).

To analyze the politics of air pollution in the United States, I have deduced from the above theoretical framework a thesis with four interrelated components. Each component of this thesis is original and controversial in its own way:

1. The first component of this thesis is that U.S. air pollution abatement policies are driven by landed interests. These interests take the contemporary form of local growth coalitions—composed mostly of large land holders, land developers, and the owners of regional media and utility firms. Local growth coalitions economically profit from economic growth in particular localities (Logan and Molotch 1987).

My position on the political impetus underlying U.S. clean air policies is not shared by other scholars who analyze clean air politics. They generally hold that U.S. air pollution abatement policies flow from middle-class concerns over the negative aesthetic and health effects of air pollution. In other words, the politics over air pollution is set by most contemporary thinkers within a framework pitting relatively privileged segments of labor (i.e., the middle class) against capital (e.g., Inglehart 1977; Hays 1987; 2000; Stradling 1999).

2. The second part of my thesis is that clean air policies are functional to the operation of the market and to the realization of profit. Political scientists and historians who study U.S. pollution abatement policies have failed to realize this, with some exception (e.g., Dewey 2000), because they exclusively focus on the economic costs absorbed by industrial manufacturers as a result of clean air policies. They fail, however, to consider the economic benefits derived from cleaner air by real estate interests and other profit-driven concerns whose markets are place bound (e.g., regional media outlets and utilities). To the extent that clean air policies reduce air pollu-

tion, such policies contribute to a positive local investment climate, and, in turn, they help locally oriented economic interests realize the profits associated with such a climate.

3. The center of policymaking in the area of clean air is the urban milieu. Researchers who study U.S. environmental politics normally assume that it is the politics and policies at the federal level that are driving events in the environmental policy arena. This is particularly the case with those environmental policies instituted after the federal environmental legislation of the early 1970s (Rosenbaum 1998; Andrews 1999; Graham 2000; Kraft 2001; 2002). Even those political scientists that analyze clean air policymaking on the state and local levels (e.g., Kamieniecki and Farrell 1991; Lowry 1992; Ringquist 1993; Potoski 2001), hold that the federal government is the dominant institutional force in this policy area. Instead, however, as different local growth coalitions have moved politically to mitigate the adverse economic effects of air pollution, it is local and state governments that have taken the political and policy lead on the issue of air pollution. In light of state and local government assertiveness on the issue of air pollution abatement, the role of the federal government has in large part been to provide uniformity in the nation's clean air regime. This is most readily apparent in the politics surrounding the 1990 Clean Air Act and its content.

4. Environmental groups have been symbolically included in the clean air policymaking process. Historians and political scientists either directly argue or assume that environmental groups have a direct and positive impact on the creation and strengthening of air pollution abatement policies at all levels of government. As I will demonstrate, however, contemporary and historical environmental groups have little to do with the current approach to air pollution abatement. Moreover, it is an open question whether environmental groups help determine the present level of regulation assessed on business and industry. Their most tangible contribution to the policymaking process is to provide it with legitimacy.

After expounding on the four facets of my thesis, I conclude this chapter with a detailed overview of the book.

ECONOMIC ELITE THEORY AND LOCAL GROWTH COALITIONS

The first component of my argument is consistent with an approach referred to as economic elite theory (Lamare 1993; 2000; Gonzalez 1998; 2001a; 2001b). Advocates of this view hold that the nation's economic elite are the dominant political force in U.S. society (Miliband 1969; Barrow 1993, chap. 1; Domhoff 2002). Clyde Barrow (1993) points out that "typically, members of the capitalist class [or the economic elite] are identified as those persons

who manage [major] corporations and/or own those corporations." He adds that this group composes no more than 0.5 to 1.0 percent of the total U.S. population (17).[2] This group as a whole is the upper class and the upper echelon of the corporate or business community. The resource that members of the economic elite possess that allows them to exercise a high level of influence over the state is wealth. The wealth and income of the economic elite allow them to accumulate superior amounts of other valuable resources, such as campaign finance, and legal and scientific expertise (Barrow 1993, 16).

My focus on clean air policies, however, prompts me to forward a more refined description of the U.S. economic elite than offered by Barrow. Namely, while the strong majority of the American capitalist class derives its dominant economic, social, and political position from its ownership and control of the means of production and distribution (i.e., capital), there is a significant minority of the capitalist class that derives its wealth and status from the ownership and control of place (i.e., land)(Harvey 1985). Moreover, there are capitalists who, because of the nature of their business, are economically tied to specific locations. These types of businesses are regional media outlets, utilities, banks, real estate agencies, and law firms that are involved in real estate transactions (Molotch 1979; Bowles et al. 1983).

Therefore, the leadership and ownership of most industrial sectors, such as automobile manufacturers (Luger 2000), adopt a largely national and/or international political and policy perspective due to the nature of their economic interests. In contrast, members of local growth coalitions are forced, also due to their economic interests, to adopt an emphasis and outlook that focuses on local political and policy issues. It is because their economic well-being is tied to specific land that members of any given growth coalition are prompted to consider the issue of air quality as it relates to those locations where their economic future is vested.

My central contention is that clean air policies in the United States can only be fully understood by identifying local growth coalitions as dominant political actors who seek to ameliorate air pollution to protect local land values and local investment climates. This, however, is only part of the politics that surround the issue of air pollution. For while local growth coalitions are key actors in addressing the U.S. air quality problem, they are also key actors in its creation. A central reason why air pollution has historically been a problem in the United States is because local growth coalitions seek to attract virtually unlimited amounts of capital to an area—normally regardless of the costs. Moreover, these coalitions have historically promoted the automobile as the primary mode of transportation in urban regions. This form of transportation facilitates large land owners' and land developers' quest for profit (chapter 4 of this book). By conceptualizing clean air regulations as part of a broader set of physical and regulatory infrastructures designed to attract and maintain investment in an area, it becomes apparent

how the U.S. air pollution problem was created and why our response to this problem has taken the specific form that it has—one centered on technological controls.

THE COMPETITION FOR CAPITAL AND CLEAN AIR REGULATIONS

It is a widely accepted axiom among those who study urban politics that cities, broadly speaking, can be most aptly regarded as "growth machines" (Mollenkopf 1983; Logan and Molotch 1987; Jonas and Wilson 1999). In other words, what virtually all students in this sub-field of political science acknowledge is that the desire for investment is a central political feature for almost every locality (e.g., Smith 2001; Savitch and Kantor 2002; Sellers 2002).

Given the importance assigned to local investment, state and local governments are not passive with regard to the potential location of capital investment. Instead, these government entities provide certain economic and political enticements to attract such investment. Schools, roads, and airports, for example, can be seen as overall efforts to attract capital to an area. In the most abstract sense, these government provided amenities are subsidized inputs into the production process (Gough 2000; O'Connor 2002). Additionally, state and local governments will disseminate the symbols and rhetoric necessary to assure potential investors that their investments are welcome and will be afforded political priority (Pred 1980; Eisinger 1988; Savitch and Kantor 2002).

Within this context of competing for capital investment, Paul Peterson (1981) contends that certain politics and policies cannot be engaged in by localities. He argues that locally financed and implemented income re-distributive policies serve as an economic disincentive to investment in a locality, and this is why localities do not generally engage in such policies. Moreover, income re-distribution policies create political uncertainty in a locality for investors. The concern is that such policies might lead to the excessive taxation of their investment and/or profits.

Hence, local and state governments are generally configured to provide the economic and political factors necessary to entice capital to an area. By providing these factors, these governments are helping localities to capture the economic benefits associated with such investments, including local job creation, rising land values, a larger consumer base for firms vested in the local consumer market, and a larger tax base for local government. While the boosters of local growth regularly point to the economic benefits of such growth, it is also accompanied by negative consequences for localities, such as congestion; air, water, and waste pollution; aesthetic blight; rising housing costs; and additional amounts spent on the delivery of public services (Logan and Molotch 1987; Dreier et al. 2001; Gainsborough 2001; 2002; 2003).

By taking into account both the positive and negative effects associated with local growth, we can understand the central axis of U.S. urban politics. There are politics over who is going to attain the benefits of such growth. Economically, the benefits of local growth accrue largely to the local growth coalition in the form of higher profits derived from increasing land values and an expanding consumer base. While Peterson, no doubt, provides part of the explanation as to why state and local governments do not re-distribute the economic benefits of local growth, the other part of the explanation is the ability of members of the local growth coalition to ensure that such governments are primarily configured to attract local investments and largely incapable of re-distributing the economic benefits of local growth (Stone 1989).

With regard to the job growth that accompanies increased local economic growth, Harvey Molotch shows in his landmark study that local rates of economic growth tend to have little effect on the unemployment rates of localities (Molotch 1976). What proponents of local economic growth regularly overlook when they champion local growth is that labor, like capital, is mobile in the modern era (Hernandez 2002). Thus, new jobs created as a result of new investment are just as likely to go to new residents as to natives. Significantly, new investment in a locality is predicated on this mobility and a sufficiently large and educated local labor supply (Barrow 1998; Thurow 2001; Reich 2002).

The negative effects of growth have been an increasing wellspring of political controversies in the urban milieu over the last twenty-five years. Richard DeLeon (1992), for example, outlines how in San Francisco during the late 1970s and into the mid-1980s an electoral coalition was mobilized around preventing growth in the city and the negative consequences of growth. In general, neighborhood groups throughout the country have organized politically to prevent forms of investment viewed as diminishing the quality of neighborhood life (Szasz 1994; Logan 1995; Gould et al. 1996; Ferman 1996; Tesh 2000). In addition, the poor, as well as ethnic minorities, have in certain instances mobilized against the environmental hazards in or near their residential areas (Bullard 1990; Pulido 1996; Schlosberg 1999; Cole and Foster 2001; Rhodes 2003).

Local and state governments have not necessarily been passive in the face of the negatives associated with growth. Certain localities, for example, have rejected proposed investment projects if such projects are viewed as creating too many negative externalities. Such rejections have generally been made by wealthier areas that perceive certain types of investment as inconsistent with the quality of life and high property values in those areas (Warner and Molotch 2000).

State and local governments—to varying degrees—have historically addressed the environmental hazards brought on by the manufacturing and transportation processes associated with capital investment and economic

growth (Tarr 1996; Casner 1999). Statistical analyses have established that in the contemporary era it is those states and localities with the highest levels of economic activity that tend to have the highest level of regulations on water and air pollution as well as on hazardous waste (Game 1979; Williams and Matheny 1984; Lowry 1992; Ringquist 1993; Davis and Davis 1999; Potoski 2001).

With this co-existence between high levels of economic activity and comparatively high levels of environmental regulations, these factors are obviously compatible. This compatibility results from the fact that environmental regulations on pollution rely on technology to abate pollutants (Lowry 1992; Ringquist 1993; Grant 1996; chapters 3, 5, and 6 of this book).

Approaches that rely on technology to abate pollution are compatible with local economic activity and growth in two key ways. First, such approaches do not seek to curb local economic activity or growth to affect lower levels of pollution. This would be the most assured means to reduce pollution. Second, a reliance on technology to abate pollution is politically reassuring to industrial firms. This is because it is these firms that control the development and deployment of such technology. Thus, any policies that rely on pollution abatement technologies rely on industrial firms to develop and deploy this technology. In this way, industrial firms are central in the making and implementation of those policies that utilize pollution abatement technologies (Noble 1977; Davison 2001; Hornborg 2001). For such firms, a reliance on technology to abate pollution is a much more politically palatable approach than one, for example, that would seek to dictate production schedules.

Local Growth and Technological Controls on Air Pollution

The question for researchers is what factors have resulted in policy approaches that rely on technology to reduce air pollution—the specific focus of this study? For while industrial firms are not that adversely affected by such policies, they have no specific interest in initiating air pollution abatement policies, even those that rely upon technology. Researchers generally argue that technology-based air pollution abatement policies are in large part the result of interest group competition (Bryner 1995; Graham 2000). In this competition, industrial firms are on one side, and environmental groups are on the other side (Marzotto et al. 2000). This competition leads to a compromise on technological controls to manage pollution. In this way, air pollution emissions are addressed, which pleases environmental groups and an environmentally minded public, but the imperatives of economic growth and industrial firms' control over production remain largely unaffected. The latter are the primary political goals of industrial producers. Sabatier (1987) holds that this compromise is internalized by these competing interests in a