

Environmentalism and the treadmill of production

[Education](#), [Sustainability](#)



The “ treadmill of production” model (Schnaiberg and Gould 1995) suggests that nature and natural resources will be intensively exploited by economic interests which will resist the imposition of environmental protection for regulations, because it seriously inhibits their operations or reduce their profits and will be supported by political elites dependent on growth and revenue generated by these economic interests. Some of the reasons why states’ policies of building dams are similar: a perceived higher priority on economic development than on environmental conservation by officials and political leaders at all levels. China’s plans to build more hydro-electric hubs have recently sparked a war of words about national priorities. Opponents claim it will tear apart the delicate social and environmental fabric with little benefit to locals, if there is any. They have recently circulated a petition urging the government to release studies of the dams’ environmental impact and allow greater public debate. Chinese conservationists say officials’ reluctance to release the environmental impact studies may conceal moves to revive the dams and stifle debate about controversial projects.

Conversely, supporters argue that building more dams will bring electricity and jobs to the remote corner of China and therefore have more financial sources for betterment of the environment and that China’s environment can be protected only if the country first spreads economic growth. It is not uncommon that many people think that to really protect the environment in China, the locals must escape from poverty to prosperity. And at present the only viable measure to take is developing hydro-electricity. To me, this is no doubt a difficult case, but I find it hard to accept such a major project without some outside involvement. The “ treadmill of production” model has pointed

out that the global economic system and modern development have disempowered the local, threatening and limiting the sustainability, democratic accountability, and autonomy of local development. True enough, China faces hard choices between economic development and environmental protection. But too often, lack of public participation has encouraged officials' eagerness to make their stamp with large engineering projects while dismissing environmental concerns completely. As discussed by Schnaiberg and Gould, modernism, which aimed to bring about the emancipation of people from their restrictive traditions through science and technology, has created an economic system which has served to disempower people by making them more dependent and vulnerable to a global system which sacrifices the sustainability, self reliance, and democratic possibilities of their locality. China, including governments of other states, ought to rethink the balance between economic growth and environmental protection. Weber perceives modernity as a process of achieving rationality. Yet he also concerns about the "iron cage" where people are trapped in a larger system of institutions and values that define their situation of individuals in the modern world. He uses "iron cage" to describe situation of individuals in the modern world. And he points out once capitalism became powerful, it took on a life of its own. The natural environment is falling victim to it as the iron cage becomes more and more almighty.