

# A Systemic Approach to Occupational and Environmental Health

SKIP SPITZER, MA

As the corporate role in occupational and public health receives increased scrutiny, it is essential to recognize that it is not sufficient to identify specific acts of malfeasance or influence, or even to campaign to address them. A more comprehensive and systemic framework for understanding the role of corporations requires consideration of corporate power and its effects as endemic features of national socioeconomic systems and the rapidly integrating global order. The underlying social structures that produce social and environmental problems, and undermine reform, make systemic change necessary. Identifying this “structure of harm” provides important implications for researchers, policymakers, activists, and others trying to address environmental and social problems, particularly with regard to integrating efforts to address immediate impacts with those for longer-term, systemic change. *Key words:* social and environmental problems; pesticides; corporations; corporate power; market economies; social institutions; social change; activism.

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There are signs that public awareness of corporate impacts on society is rising.\* A 1999 industry-sponsored global survey warned that citizens in general feel that protecting the environment and the health and safety of employees are more important corporate responsibilities than making a profit.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, a 2000 *Business Week*/Harris poll noted with some alarm that 40% “agree” and 32% “somewhat agree” that “business has gained too much power over too many aspects of American life.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise, there are indications that progressive movements around the world are increasingly focusing on the role of the corporation, even among liberal groups for which this is new terrain.

As the corporate role in occupational health, public health, and other problems receives scrutiny, it is essential to recognize that it is not sufficient to identify specific

acts of malfeasance or influence, or even to campaign to address them. A more comprehensive and systemic framework for understanding the role of corporations requires consideration of corporate power and its effects as endemic features of national socioeconomic systems and the rapidly integrating global order. The present contribution offers such a perspective, highlighting the need for systemic change and providing a useful picture of the “structure of harm”—the underlying social structures (or institutional arrangements) that produce social and environmental problems, and undermine reform. It also presents implications for researchers, policymakers, activists, and others trying to address environmental and occupational health problems, particularly with regard to integrating efforts to address immediate impacts with those for longer-term, systemic change.

## THE NEED FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Many contemporary social movements are characterized by efforts to resolve particular problems as quickly as possible.† This is, of course, often a direct response to immediate harm or inequality, frequently life-threatening or environmentally catastrophic. It is also a reasonable approach given limited power and capacity.

Relatively near-term, issue-focused public action generally focuses on:

- Educating the public to raise awareness about an issue
- Changing consumer behavior to influence market dynamics (e.g., to eliminate a product or type of production, promote alternatives, or reduce consumption generally)
- Pressuring corporations or other private actors to cease, clean up, or provide compensation for a harmful practice
- Pressuring government for a socially just or environmentally sound policy or other action
- Developing alternatives (e.g., organic farms, local food systems, Community Supported Agriculture programs,‡ micro-lending)

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Skip Spitzer, Pesticide Action Network North America, 49 Powell Street, Ste. 500, San Francisco, CA 94102, U.S.A.; e-mail: <spitzer@panna.org>.

\*“Corporate” refers to any of several types of businesses that exist separately from their owners. A corporation may be in the private or public (government) sector and may be privately or publicly held (i.e., shares of ownership, or stock, are traded publicly). In subsequent usage, “corporate” and “corporations” refer to for-profit corporations in the private sector.

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†There are, of course, others, such as the global Via Campesina, that make immediate demands in the context of calls and action for broader change.

‡In Community Supported Agriculture programs, supporters help secure a farm’s yearly expenses by purchasing shares of a season’s harvest.

Such efforts are frequently successful, sometimes achieving extraordinary improvements in economic welfare, democratic participation, environmental safeguards, and racial, gender, and other rights. For instance, pesticide reformers have achieved bans, restrictions, stronger enforcement, worker protections, reporting systems, research on and use of alternatives, development and growth of organics, international agreements and more. The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), for example, protects human health and the environment by requiring governments to eliminate or reduce the release of certain toxic chemicals that persist in the environment, travel widely, and accumulate in the fatty tissue of living organisms.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, near-term, issue-focused reform efforts are typically frustrated (and in many cases rendered futile) by the dynamism of entrenched power, in several important ways. First, change efforts regularly face an extraordinary range of built-in hurdles in the form of governmental and corporate misinformation, legal action, surveillance, etc.; lack of funding; public apathy, ignorance, and preoccupation; media bias and lack of attention; and the like.<sup>4</sup>

Second, even where public action is successful, at least four kinds of systemic dynamics commonly prevent fundamental change:

1. Shifts in production. Curtailing one harm often results in increases in another. For example, the banning of DDT in the United States led to broad adoption of chlorpyrifos.

2. Innovation. New, risk-posing technologies are continually commercialized. For instance, genetically engineered crops pose serious new problems, including: novel health risks, irreversible genetic contamination, harm to wildlife, corporate control of seeds through new intellectual property rights, biopiracy,<sup>§</sup> and threats to organic agriculture.<sup>5</sup>

3. Co-optation. Alternative approaches are undermined and co-opted. For example, the extraordinary growth of the organic foods sector has led to the growing problem of “industrial organics.” Through growth and acquisitions, U.S.-based Horizon Organics, for example, now controls 70% of the U.S. organic retail dairy market and is fully owned by Dean Foods, one of the top 25 food giants globally.<sup>¶</sup><sup>6</sup>

4. Limited accommodation. Problems that are least challenging to the economic order may change (e.g., leaded gasoline), whereas there is little response on more threatening issues (e.g., carbon dioxide emissions).

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<sup>§</sup>Biopiracy refers to the use of patents and other vehicles to appropriate the knowledge and genetic resources of traditional farming and indigenous communities.

<sup>¶</sup>Industrial organics share many of the environmental and social impacts of the industrial food system generally. Horizon, for example, produces highly processed goods, ships long distances, and undermines local producers.

Finally, systemic dynamics may simply overwhelm reform efforts through the amount of harm they produce. In the United States, for example, about 85,000 chemicals are registered for use—most with no or inadequate testing, with 2,000–3,000 new substances registered every year.<sup>7</sup> The harms and risks of industrial chemicals alone are staggering, yet there is an astonishing array of other social and ecological problems: environmental wounds (such as global warming,\*\* ozone depletion, and species extinction); small-producer hardship (loss of family farms, for example); undemocratic institutions (such as money-distorted political systems and the World Trade Organization); militarism and intervention (from Iraq to Haiti); social ills (such as homelessness, hunger, poverty, crime, and discrimination); and violation of human and animal rights, among many other issues. Is it possible to catch up? How significant are irreparable impacts? At what point do change efforts become too little too late?

Many of those who experience these frustrations recognize that underlying causes and barriers to change must ultimately be addressed. One common reconciliation of the tension between near-term action and underlying causes is the idea that, over time, progress on specific issues will achieve systemic change. This approach is reflected, for example, in sustainable agriculture movement slogans such as “Changing the world one farm at a time.” Some “green” businesses are based on this idea or have adopted it in their advertising, such as California-based Give Something Back business products, which is “Saving the world one paperclip at a time.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, multinationals and others committed to the status quo promote this idea: for example, partnering with low-income housing builder Habitat for Humanity, Dow Chemical declared that it is “changing lives one home at a time.”<sup>9</sup> The efforts behind the “one at a time” concept are often significant. Yet incrementalism, in the sense of cumulative successes fundamentally transforming societies, ignores the actual nature of underlying social structures.

## THE STRUCTURE OF HARM

What then are the underlying causes of harm that must be addressed? Many explanations of the cause of harm overlook that societies are characterized by integrated systems of institutionalized and organized patterns of behavior, values, and beliefs. That is, while factors such as lack of awareness, greed, money, technology, dangerous prime ministers, and uncaring corporations may be intermediate causes of harm, it is important to

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\*\*A recent study concluded that global warming might be twice as severe as predicted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Stainforth DA, Aina T, Christensen C, Collins M, Faull N, Frame DJ, et al. Uncertainty in predictions of the climate response to rising levels of greenhouse gases. *Nature*. 2005; Jan 27: 433.

look at the functioning of a given society as a whole, or what we might call the “structure of harm.”

The literature addressing the fundamental nature of modern societies and the global system is vast.<sup>10</sup> The intent here is not to survey this field or provide a new totalizing theory, but rather to identify basic structural features of harmful societies, drawing primarily on the case of the United States. These characteristics are somewhat generalizable to other advanced market economies of the global North, parts of the global South, and the world system. They are a good starting point for conceptualizing the structures of harm at the root of contemporary social and ecological crises.<sup>11</sup>

### *Corporations Are a Central Aspect of Social Life*

In 1787, fewer than 40 corporations operated in the United States.<sup>12</sup> As late as 1920, there were approximately 314,000.<sup>13</sup> In 2003, there were more than four million.<sup>14</sup> Corporations now account for about 74% of all U.S. production.<sup>15</sup> This means that the core economic decisions (what, how, and how much to produce, using what resources) are largely in corporate hands. Through work and consumption, virtually everyone is profoundly affected by corporations. Corporations are also powerful social actors, affecting virtually every other aspect of social life.

### *Corporations Largely Ignore Social and Environmental Costs*

Corporations are compelled to maximize profit or shareholder value or face elimination by competitors.†† In the United States, officers and managers who do not work to maximize shareholder value are in fact subject to legal action for violating fiduciary obligations to act in the best interest of the corporation.

Focusing first and foremost on profitability means that decisions are explicitly based on consideration of a firm’s own costs and revenues, while costs and benefits to society (or “externalities”) such as pollution or use of recycled materials, are largely ignored. Modern microeconomic theory specifically prescribes this: to maximize profit, individual firms should keep producing units of a product until the unit (or marginal) revenue earned is just equal to the firm’s cost to produce it. Even decisions to spend on community development, charity, and other “corporate responsibility” programs are generally treated as “investments” and limited to projects for which there is a “business case.”<sup>16</sup>

Reagan Administration economist Robert Monks described it this way:

The corporation . . . became something of an externalizing machine, in the same way that a shark is a

killing machine—no malevolence, no intentional harm, just something designed with sublime efficiency for self-preservation, which it accomplishes without any capacity to factor in the consequences to others.<sup>17</sup>

If corporations had to take into account external costs and benefits to society, they would make radically different production decisions.‡‡

### *Competition Creates Economic Concentration*

Competition between firms striving to maximize profit leads some corporations to get bigger than others. Through growth and expansion, mergers, acquisitions, and other consolidation within and across sectors, many corporations have become extremely large, and many industries are now dominated by relatively few producers. Some corporations dominate in multiple industries. For example, the top six agrochemical producers control about 65% of U.S. pesticide market,<sup>18</sup> and four of them are leaders in transgenic seeds. Overall, just 1% of businesses control 80% of U.S. private-sector production.<sup>19</sup>

Concentration leads to remarkable economic and social power. It also undermines the market. While bigger firms may achieve economies of scale, markets retain their self-regulating capacity only when there are many buyers and sellers (such that no one firm can influence prices), few barriers for new firms to enter, and other competitive features.§§

### *Competition Drives Harmful Models of Production*

Competition at the top of concentrated industries continually leads to rapid development and broad adoption of far-reaching new technologies and production practices. For example, agribusiness giants have dramatically transformed agriculture in just the last 50–60 years.

Today food is produced on large-scale, machine- and chemical-intensive farms specializing in single animal products or hybrid high-yield crops—one part of a segmented system involving inputs (such as seeds), farms, storage, processing, distribution, food manufacture and marketing, insurance and lending. Industrial farming deeply disrupts ecologically-based processes of

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††For example, economist A. C. Pigou developed an approach to address externalities in which costs are internalized through producer taxes equal to the value of external impacts. It is important to note that approaches to environmental externalities within mainstream economics emphasize the idea of pricing (if not privatizing) elements of the environment so that externalities become regulated by the market. Although these schemes ignore the impossibility of assigning appropriate values to things like streams and bacteria, they nonetheless support efforts for greater commodification of nature.

§§Note that competition still takes place in less-competitive markets. Highly concentrated markets are generally characterized by oligopolistic competition.

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††Other factors, such as compensation unrelated to profit, may also play a role in driving corporate behavior.

plant cultivation and animal husbandry, by preventing beneficial crop interactions and complementary relationships between plant cultivation and husbandry (e.g., on-farm manure used for fertilization), limiting fertility-enhancing crop rotations, creating uniform targets for pests, and undermining beneficial soil organisms, pollinators, and natural pest predators. These conditions require the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides that further erode soil fertility, kill beneficial insects, and accelerate the development of pest resistance, creating a systemic cycle of increasing reliance on such chemicals. Other impacts include: soil depletion; loss of arable land; energy use; impacts on wildlife; air and water pollution; ozone depletion; global warming; loss of genetic diversity; unhealthy food products; farm-worker abuse and poverty; transgenic seeds; loss of farmer independence; farm failure; and breakdown of rural communities.<sup>20</sup>

Within such models of production, dominant corporations use their ability to influence markets for special advantage over competitors, suppliers, labor, and consumers. For example, consolidation in the agricultural-inputs sector allows providers such as pesticide manufacturers to set artificially high prices for goods and services growers need. Likewise, concentration in commodity markets has led to artificially low farm-gate prices for what growers sell. This is one of the reasons farmers are losing their farms. While technology providers such as pesticide companies market their products as solutions for low profit, technology adoption by businesses in competitive industries (such as farming) provides little lasting benefit. Production may increase, but as a new technology is broadly adopted, overall growth of supply reduces prices, eliminating the new technology's economic benefit.<sup>21</sup>

The general trend of innovation in production has been technologies and practices that greatly increase the use of natural resources and energy (resulting in vast resource depletion and environmental waste impacts),<sup>22</sup> substitute technology in place of human labor, and push the limits of regulation.¶¶ Cases where regulatory frameworks may at best catch up to technology already in commercial use or development include food irradiation,<sup>23</sup> genetically engineered crops, synthetic biology,<sup>\*\*\*</sup> nanotechnology,<sup>24</sup> wireless telephone communications,<sup>25</sup> and the commercialization

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¶¶ "Labor-saving" technology, of course, can result in quality-of-life enhancements, but it also forces independent producers into wage labor, deskills the labor process, maintains a reserve of unemployed and underemployed workers, weakens labor as a class, increases scale of production, and creates barriers to competition, among other important impacts. On labor impacts see: Braverman H. *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

\*\*\*This term describes an emerging field in which biologists genetically reengineer and create new organisms. See: Ball P. Synthetic biology: starting from scratch. *Nature*. 2004; Oct 7;431:624-6.

of outer space for communications, thrill rides, tourism, and other services.<sup>26</sup>

### *Growth is Imperative, Yet Unsustainable*

Free-market economies require perpetual economic growth. Sustained periods without real positive growth are characterized as recessions or depressions. They are marked by decreased business activity, increased unemployment and bankruptcies, lower incomes and demand for goods, and other aspects of economic crisis.

Arguably, the continual growth needed to keep market economies stable, particularly on a global scale, is fundamentally at odds with environmental well-being.<sup>27</sup> A continuous average growth of just 3% annually would mean that worldwide industrial production would double every 25 years—clearly an unsustainable rate.<sup>28</sup> Agricultural expansion alone is projected over the next 50 years to cause unprecedented ecosystem degradation and species extinctions.<sup>29</sup>

### *Corporations Wield Extraordinary Social Power*

As we have seen, corporations maintain decisive economic power. Yet they also exercise wide political and other social influence. In fact, in the United States, a variety of court cases have endowed corporations with rights as "persons" under law.<sup>30</sup> Numerous laws, policies, and international agreements have also granted corporations rights unavailable to individuals.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that many business leaders think about this influence not just in terms of government policy (such as subsidies, infrastructure, tax breaks, privatization, and deregulation), but also on the level of social structure. During the late Industrial Revolution in the United States, to take a stark early example, industrialists faced a severe crisis of underconsumption, with factories producing more goods than the public wanted or could afford.<sup>32</sup> One banker, investor, and government advisor warned: "We have learned to create wealth . . . [but] we have not learned to keep that wealth from choking us."<sup>33</sup> To bolster consumption, industrialists engaged in broad "social planning,"<sup>34</sup> undermining immigrant and working class values of thrift and self-reliance based on insights from the developing field of social psychology (in which one pioneer declared "It is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it"<sup>35</sup>). Through advertising, industry explicitly set about to instill personal dissatisfaction and fear of social censure among the public, based on insights such as "My idea of myself is rather my own idea of my neighbor's view of me"<sup>36</sup> (see Figure 1). These social change efforts gave rise to modern advertising, public relations, and contemporary mass-consumer culture.

Today, systemic analysis and planning takes place in exclusive clubs, private forums, think tanks, casual



## “You always want to leave”

A familiar, pathetic figure—the wife who always gets tired and leaves the party before anyone else. So often it is her own fault.

No woman who has a normal foundation of good health can be forgiven for failing to “stay young with her husband.”

Science offers a simple protection for her health and youthfulness—sane habits of living, sane habits of diet and the *proper* practice of feminine hygiene.

But be sure you get the *facts* about feminine hygiene. Send for the free booklet offered below. It contains the facts and simple directions you must have. It was written for women by a woman physician.

Mail the coupon today. The booklet will reach you in a plain envelope.

Fads in personal antiseptics come and go, but the number of women who use “Lysol” Disinfectant is increasing at a greater rate today than ever before!

Don’t experiment—don’t be misled by false theories—make no mistake—only a poison can kill germs. Send for our booklet now. But in the meantime be safe, be sure. Buy a bottle of “Lysol” Disinfectant today. Complete directions come with every bottle.

Made by Lysol, Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company. Sole Distributors: Lehn & Fink, Inc., Bloomfield, N. J. In Canada, Lysol (Canada) Limited. Distributed by Lehn & Fink (Canada) Limited.

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**Lysol**  
Disinfectant

[1927]

“Lysol” Disinfectant is sold at retail only in the 750cc. bottle packed in the yellow carton.



LEHN & FINK, Incorporated, Sole Distributors  
Department 96, Bloomfield, New Jersey

Please send me, free, your booklet,  
“The Scientific Side of Health and Youth.”

Name.....

Street.....

City..... State.....

Figure 1—Industry in the United States explicitly set out to transform society using advertisements creating fear of social censure. This 1927 ad promotes a feminine hygiene product by attributing interpersonal and social problems to a failure of personal health.

encounters, and other settings. One such venue is the long-standing, all-male Bohemian Club annual gathering, in which George W. Bush, Henry Kissinger, the Chairman of Dow Chemical, and other corporate and political elites were recent participants.<sup>37</sup>

### *Government Safeguards Basic Needs of Industry*

That corporate wealth buys broad influence in law and public policy is well documented and widely acknowledged.<sup>38</sup> Yet much government predisposition toward industry is less direct.

Holders of high office themselves frequently have significant ownership in large corporations and other corporate ties and histories. For example, virtually every member of the Bush cabinet has extensive corporate connections,<sup>39</sup> including former Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman, who was a director of the biotech company Calgene<sup>40</sup> (now owned by Monsanto) and served on the International Policy Council on Agriculture, Food and Trade, a group funded by Cargill, Nestle, Kraft, and Archer Daniels Midland.<sup>41</sup> Many Clinton cabinet members had similar ties.<sup>42</sup>

Governmental bias toward industry is also based on the state's dependence on economic growth as a generator of tax revenues and conditions favorable to perpetuation of political power. This structural position of the state is reflected in a general nonpartisan orientation of government toward ensuring a prosperous business climate, particularly for the largest companies. Clinton Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, for example, reflected this "What's good for General Motors is good for the rest of America"<sup>43</sup> perspective when he said that the good news about economic concentration in agriculture is that it means that "We're strengthening our global competitive edge."<sup>44</sup>

### *Media and Other Institutions Reinforce Corporate Values and Ideas*

Institutions of beliefs and knowledge—such as the mass media, public relations, science, and education—also reflect the exigencies of the corporate system. As with politics, there are direct avenues of corporate influence, including: legal threats; lobbying, flak and other manipulation of journalists; and funding university research, research institutes, and think tanks. In education, corporations provide schools with curriculum, funding, teacher training, advisors, exhibits, and contest programs to, in the words of one industry newsletter, "get them started young."<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, while many acts of corporate influence are orchestrated in-house, the market itself generates goods and services for extending corporate influence. For example, Lifetime Learning Systems develops "corporate sponsored" materials for schools and asks corporations to "Imagine millions of students discussing

your product in class. Imagine their teachers presenting your organization's point of view."<sup>46</sup>

Many mechanisms of ideological influence are less direct. In science, for example, many researchers sit on corporate boards, own stock, or have other financial ties to the companies to which their research relates. One member of a National Academy of Sciences panel on agricultural biotechnology acknowledged, "It would be kind of hard to find [scientists] who didn't have some funding from biotechnology groups."<sup>47</sup>

In media, likely the most important institution of beliefs and knowledge, there are numerous ways in which the structure of the industry passively shapes the range of news and entertainment content. For example, media is itself an extremely concentrated industry and depends on the good graces of business advertisers. Journalists and writers are selected from the ranks of the mainstream.<sup>48</sup> Larry Grossman, former president of NBC News, put it this way: "the press are terribly conventional thinkers . . . and that's why they are there. That's why they reach millions."<sup>49</sup>

The general effect of direct and indirect corporate influence is that the mass media portray the world in ways that are consistent with the basic needs of industry. For example, a recent Associated Press story on biomonitoring††† for pesticides and other industrial chemicals concluded "There's still debate among advocates over which of the 75,000 chemicals to specifically look for when biomonitoring. And even when chemicals are found, there's little an individual can do."<sup>50</sup> In fact, the more significant discussion among advocates is how best to challenge the chemical industry by mobilizing the public with this new documentation of corporate "chemical trespass." A study of sources for U.S. TV network news found such bias across the board, concluding that there is "a clear tendency to showcase the opinions of the most powerful political and economic actors, while giving limited access to those voices that would be most likely to challenge them."<sup>51</sup>

Much debate about news media focuses on the issue of liberal vs. conservative bias. This framing misses the point that what liberal and conservative outlets have in common is that they rarely question the systemic role industry plays in causing social and environmental problems or its extensive institutional influence, or describe what the public can do to change the structure of harm.

### *Patriarchy and Racism*

While the structural features sketched above focus on corporate power, patriarchy and racism are also systemic sources of harm, which interact with the market

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†††Biomonitoring refers to the analysis of blood, urine, serum, saliva or tissue to identify exposure to or the presence of chemicals in the human body.

dynamics.<sup>52</sup> Patriarchy refers to male dominance in a society, a universal condition that predates and is influenced by the market economy. For example, gender relations changed dramatically as industrialization broadly shifted economic production from the home to separate workplaces, and again with the relatively recent mass entry of women into the paid economy.

Today, women in the U.S. workforce face inequalities in pay, hiring standards, working conditions, training opportunities, prospects for promotion, and participation in workplace decision making, as well as segregation in lower-level occupations. These factors lead directly, and through lower social status, to negative occupational health and other impacts. Assessments of “safe” levels of pesticides and other chemical exposures, for example, have typically relied on male subjects and generally ignore women’s greater sensitivity to exposure.<sup>53</sup> For women, patriarchy also results in domestic violence, disproportionate shares of poverty and household work (even when holding a paid job), and other impacts.<sup>54</sup>

Likewise, racism occurs independently of and is influenced by the corporate system. Racism, in the broadest sense, refers to prejudice or discrimination based on race (i.e., perceived physical differences) or ethnicity (i.e., socially defined cultural characteristics), and to institutional discrimination (i.e., differing treatment regardless of individual attitudes about race and ethnicity). Racism plays a significant role in educational, occupational, health, and other disparities. For example, African American, Latino, Native American, and Asian American communities are disproportionately impacted by hazardous waste sites, landfills, incinerators, and polluting industries. In fact, race is the most significant variable associated with the location of hazardous waste sites.<sup>55,56</sup>

### *Culture*

The most general expression of the structure of harm is a dominant culture that reflects and reinforces values, beliefs, actions, and lifestyles that are essentially consistent with the corporate system. A citizenry engrossed by individualism, the mythology of the free market, and the measurement of personal success by wealth, and that is consumption-fixated, inwardly focused, and often unaware and too busy for political engagement, enables business and politics as usual and undermines public action. It is difficult, for example, to mobilize the U.S. public in opposition to court appointments given that, according to a recent national poll, 64% of respondents could not name a single member of the Supreme Court, but 66% could name all three characters used to market Rice Krispies cereal.<sup>57</sup>

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†††A lack of awareness about the judicial system is particularly important in advancing business interests, since corporate rights

### *Global Dimensions*

Of course, the social structures of harm discussed above have important international dimensions. U.S. corporations have remarkable global reach. Exports of goods and services in July 2004 alone amounted to roughly \$96 billion<sup>58</sup> and private investment abroad for 2003 was about \$7.8 trillion.<sup>59</sup> One result of international investment is the ability of corporations as a group to influence public policy in weaker economies on threat of capital flight. §§§

Likewise, the U.S. government pursues a wide range of foreign political, economic, and military policy, often to advance corporate interests. For example, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are mechanisms through which industrial powers are able to influence national policy, principally within the global South. As conditions of lending, these institutions often impose Structural Adjustment Programs, which typically require shifts to export production, slashes in social spending, and other terms that prioritize expansion of markets for foreign firms and servicing debt held by foreign banks.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, corporate rights are globalizing through powerful new international trade and investment agreements such as those of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and a battery of new regional and bilateral pacts. These emphasize “freeing” the market through sweeping limits on regulatory policy, while granting corporations new intellectual-property and other rights and largely ignoring the anti-competitive nature of multinational corporations.

Military policy is also geared toward corporate interests. Extreme lobbying and other influence by the arms industry to promote military spending and shape U.S. foreign policy constitutes a “military–industrial complex,” about which outgoing president Eisenhower warned.<sup>61</sup> Some have argued that this has led to a “permanent war economy,” in which military spending and intervention play a central role in national economic stability.<sup>62</sup> At a minimum, it is clear that in most cases, geopolitical concerns, access to resources and markets, and corporate positioning underlie official pretexts for intervention. In Iraq, for example, the Bush administration brought in business leaders to head up reconstruction (such as former Cargill executive Dan Amstutz in agriculture) and established a neo-liberal

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typically have been advanced through court decisions. For an activist’s summary of such cases see: Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Timeline of personhood rights and powers. Available at: URL:<http://reclaimdemocracy.org/personhood>. Accessed September 22, 2004.

§§§This is also true of national policy in the U.S. (were it to become out of kilter with corporate interests), owing to the high degree of foreign investment in the U.S. (which exceeds U.S. investment abroad).

interim government with U.S. advisers in all departments.<sup>63</sup> U.S. corporations are acquiring reconstruction contracts (more than \$20 billion so far), ownership of Iraqi resources (including oil and water),<sup>64</sup> and intellectual property protections<sup>65</sup> (playing a key role in the corporatization of the nation's agriculture).

Corporate activities overseas, foreign policy, international institutions, and military action profoundly exacerbate social and environmental problems. Looking at just pesticides and the WTO, for example, free-trade rules undermine national policy making and international environmental agreements that might reduce pesticide use, and foster the industrial agricultural model at the center of pesticide-reliant farming.<sup>66</sup>

### *Seeing Structure*

Although social structures are by nature difficult to see, the above sketch should begin to form a picture of key underlying institutional features that are the context of contemporary change making. In sum:

- Corporations are pervasive, economically and socially powerful actors compelled to pursue narrow self-interests in a system that drives economic concentration, generates socially and environmentally harmful models of production and requires perpetual growth.
- Those charged with public policy are fundamentally compelled by corporate influences and the primacy of economic growth to safeguard corporate interests.
- Mass media, public relations, science, education—and the dominant consumption- and wealth-oriented culture as a whole—significantly reflect and reinforce the corporate system.
- Patriarchy and racism are sources of harm that interact with the corporate system.
- Corporate interests are projected internationally through economic, military, political, and other activity, including a rapidly developing trade and investment framework undermining the ability of governments to control corporate behavior.

From this vantage point, strategies for moving beyond near-term, issue-based action can be more easily assessed. For example, it is clear that there is nothing about incrementalism that necessarily transforms the structure of harm.

## **MAKING SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

How can those engaged in near-term, issue-oriented approaches advance systemic change? Fortunately, this is not a matter of “reform or revolution?” It is true that partial victories and reformism can drain potential for mobilization (as when banning residential uses of a

pesticide, while leaving only farm workers and other marginalized communities affected). This is an important strategic point. However, the notion that conditions should be allowed to worsen so that mobilization for systemic change can more readily take place overlooks the fact that in many ways conditions for deep change already exist. One useful reconciliation of the reform/transformation question is to integrate the near-term with the transformative, such that issue-based action explicitly functions to advance systemic change. This approach accommodates the reality of urgent harm that cannot be ignored. It also maintains a focus on concrete entry points for engaging and mobilizing the public. The point, however, is not that both orientations are useful; it is that they can be integrated so that they are mutually reinforcing.

The following are a few practical points for furthering this integration.

### *Building a Broad, Global Movement*

One crucial insight drawn from a structural perspective is that movements must be bigger, multi-issue, and international. Fortunately, if there is anything opportune about the structure of harm, it is that it is emerging as a unifying concern of people and progressive movements around the world. For example, most toxics groups in the United States taking a “NIMBY” (Not In My Backyard) position in the early 1980s developed at least a perspective of the larger context of harm.<sup>67</sup> Today there are truly global movements (such as the anti- or alternative-globalization movement and Via Campesina<sup>68</sup>), processes (such as the World Social Forum<sup>69</sup>), and statements of unity (such as the “Rio Earth Summit Declaration of Principles”<sup>70</sup>)—all of which emphasize common themes of democratic inclusion; environmental sustainability; class, racial and gender justice; diversity; and fundamental change. There are ample opportunities to tie near-term change efforts to the unifying global progressive movement.

### *Making Connections and Deeper Alliances*

Alliance-making based on common near-term goals is an obvious strategy. Yet identifying connections based on a common structural perspective can provide a basis for deeper alliances, fostering new synergies and broader movements. For example, the equitable distribution and growth of organic foods, which often cost more than conventional counterparts, suggest additional reasons for raising prevailing wages. The role of pharmaceutical companies provides a deep connection point for joint action between AIDS and other healthcare activists, opponents of genetically engineered foods, and sustainable agriculture advocates. Issues such as corporate power, intellectual property rights and the production of drugs using

transgenic “biopharm” crops will appeal to target audiences of multiple movements, which can be mobilized in new ways.

Building alliances between labor and other movements is particularly important. Human labor plays an essential role in production and therefore has the potential to disrupt it. This is a special form of resistance, but one that has been plagued by anti-labor policy, union cooptation, and undemocratic practices and narrow focuses by unions. Fortunately, there is a resurgence of the idea of “social movement unionism,” in which the labor movement makes linkages between the workplace, civil society issues, and the larger structure of harm.<sup>85</sup>

### *Solidarity and Agenda Broadening*

Deep alliances require deep solidarity—acts of mutual support that extend beyond a group’s specific mission or objectives. One way to achieve greater solidarity is to reexamine organizational agendas. Most groups with a particular focus are run and supported by people concerned about a wide range of issues. Reconsidering a group’s work in light of the structure of harm can suggest useful restatements of mission that make deep solidarity a more explicit goal, without losing particular focus.

### *Reframing Problems*

Another way to integrate systemic change is to recast the problems a group seeks to remedy. Pesticide-reform groups, for example, frequently make the case that pesticides are harmful and need to be banned or restricted, and that pesticide manufacturers undermine the regulatory process. A broader framing, however, might include that:

- Most of what happens in the food system is based on the decision making of an increasingly small set of increasingly large corporations (such as DuPont, Conagra, Kraft Foods, and Wal-Mart)—which, by design, pay little attention to externalities such as pesticide poisonings, genetic contamination, excessive energy use, abuse of farm labor, and obesity;
- these companies have created an ecologically and socially devastating model of food production and continually develop new technologies that pose new risks or harms (such as biopiracy and contract farming<sup>¶¶¶</sup>);
- government fundamentally works to support the industrial food system, seeing its success as part of the national interest; and

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¶¶¶In contract farming, agribusinesses manage certain aspects of production through highly constrained contracts with farm producers.

- media, public relations, science, education, and other institutions orient the public in support of the industrial food model through incomplete and tainted information, and the promotion of cultural traits (such as the desire for unblemished produce) that are typically antagonistic to campaigns for reform.

Systemic reframing places big-picture issues in plain view, raising public consciousness, identifying connections, and suggesting goals and requirements for long-term change.

### *Integrated Campaigning*

Campaigns are strategic programs of action designed to move targets and other social forces so that a specific set of goals is obtained. A campaign is a highly focused path to a specific victory, often separated from issues outside the campaign frame. Yet there are ways to integrate systemic transformation goals into campaigns.

In integrated campaigning, campaign goals are determined not simply by asking the question “What do we want our campaign to change?” The broader question is “What larger systemic changes do we want to achieve toward which our campaign will move us?” In this way, near-term, winnable goals can be developed that are important in their own right and serve as a foundation for or step to broader change. For example, if the broader systemic goal is to create a national regulatory system based the precautionary principle,<sup>\*\*\*\*72</sup> campaign goals might include:

1. enacting such an approach around a specific local issue, *and*
2. taking concrete steps to position the movement for a national campaign (through building relationships with untraditional allies, creating an international network, developing popular language about the structure of harm, raising awareness about corporate power and the limits of contemporary regulatory systems, and the like).

### *Developing Alternative Institutions*

Just as issue-based change often requires development of alternatives (such as benign methods of pest management), systemic change requires the development of alternative institutions and visions of how societies can be organized to maximize justice and sustainability. There are many intriguing contributions in this area, from alternative global institutions to participatory economics.<sup>73</sup> Yet much more of this work needs to be

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\*\*\*\*In essence, the precautionary principle affirms that regulatory restriction may be appropriate even if causal relationships are not fully established scientifically.

done. What, for example, would a viable precautionary approach to regulation of production really look like? Developing concrete systemic alternatives helps answer legitimate questions about structural critiques, inspires mobilization for near- and long-term reform, helps activists and the public break out of mainstream ideological frameworks, and offers real options when opportunities for deep change occur.

### *Springboarding*

Many projects contribute on a local level to the development of alternative institutions. These include community gardens, local currency ventures, energy-independent homesteads, community-run healthcare facilities, and green and worker-owned businesses. Yet much of this work reflects an incrementalist notion of change, with no or little engagement with movements for systemic change.

“Springboarding” entails using such points of public engagement to raise awareness and support action around the structure of harm. Some community gardens, for example, have displays providing information to participants and visitors not only about the merits of organic production or green space, but also about the problems with the industrial food system, corporate power, and how to join campaigns. Springboarding helps integrate local alternatives with broader movements.

### *Hope*

Systemic change, of course, can be overwhelming, requiring change makers to communicate a sense of hope. Fortunately, there are in fact good reasons to be optimistic. Virtually all societies are highly contradictory and subject to relatively rapid change. Nominally democratic societies provide at least some avenues to influence the balance of political power. Harmful societies invariably generate resistance. Mechanisms of social control are imperfect. Thus, expansion of popular rights and other fundamental change has occurred over decades, sometimes just years. Arguably, there has never been a time of so much popular action worldwide around so many issues stemming from the structure of harm. The global progressive movement has people power, rich capacities, moral positions, and increasingly a structural awareness, common vision, and organization with which to chart a new institutional order in which the earth and popular rights come before the free market.

Ultimately, however, hope is something independent of optimism—something we may therefore always hold and convey. As Václav Havel put it:

Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. . . . Either we have hope or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, and it's not essentially dependent on some par-

ticular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. . . . Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.<sup>74</sup>

Positive systemic change may be daunting, but it is essential. Recognizing this need, understanding underlying structures of harm, and creating an integrated activist practice are some key steps in raising the likelihood and pace of success.

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