CARNEGIE COUNCIL
*The Voice for Ethics
in International Affairs*

Teaching Environmental Values
Interview with Tony Lang
Anthony F. Lang, Jr.

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CARNEGIE COUNCIL: Why did you set up a faculty development seminar on environmental ethics at the College of the Holy Cross last week? And how does one incorporate the environment into a curriculum on ethics and international affairs?

TONY LANG: I have always been interested in the ethical dimensions of transnational movements in international affairs. These movements, which are in between states and people, are becoming increasingly powerful, and some of the most powerful are the environmental ones.

I wrote a paper two years ago about the 1999 WTO Seattle protests. It was interesting to think about where the protestors there came from, and whom they represented. They seem to speak with a very strong moral voice, and you couldn't disagree with them because they have a single-issue agenda that says, "This is right, and you can't disagree with me." This type of agenda makes these groups both attractive to some people and disruptive to others. They speak in terms of ethics but it is not clear how they are productively moving the process along.

In our last session at this workshop, Maria Rodrigues presented a paper on the role of transnational groups in protecting the Brazilian rainforest. Maria believed that these groups don't really represent anybody; they assert their agenda even though it can be against the will of the communities on the ground. And these groups are supposedly protecting these peoples' way of life. There are all sorts of dilemmas that get raised because their agendas do not necessarily represent the will of the people.

CC: Did those environmental groups have any legitimacy at all?

TL: They are not much worse than many other environmental groups. Maria's lecture also discussed how some of the transnational organizations operated. Some of these groups urged the World Bank to stop funding a huge redevelopment project in that region. However, the groups were not actually in Brazil; they were there to assess what was happening, but they lobbied the World Bank to stop giving money to Brazil. This got the local crew pretty upset, but at the same time (and this came out in the discussion) they were advocating a cause that most people support—not destroying the rainforest.

This is a classic moral dilemma. You have two good ends that are being pursued: protecting the rainforest and protecting the livelihood of the community. But at present, this clash does not seem like it will be resolved in a way that is constructive to anybody.

Later we stepped back to discuss some philosophical ideas of environmental ethics, followed by social science descriptions. How do you evaluate different values in the international system? Meaning, how do you find out what people value when it comes to the environment?

CC: Can you give me an example of some of these philosophical questions?

TL: Well, to provide some background, environmental ethics as a field only arose in the 1960s and 1970s; it is not as old as most philosophical schools of thought. It resulted from a couple famous writings, including Peter Singer, who wrote on animal rights, and Lynn White, who wrote an article in the 1960s about how we should refute the Western religious assumption that humans need to dominate nature and instead step back and embrace nature. Another person who was very important to this emerging movement was Rachel Carson. Although she was not a philosopher, her book *Silent Spring* about how pesticides were destroying the environment had a huge political effect in the 1960s. There is also an older book by Aldo Leopold called the *Sand County Almanac*, and the final chapter, titled "Land Ethic," discusses the need to change our view of nature. All of these books represent applied philosophies, but they arose from people who were observing what was happening in the environment, not from

philosophical debates. The environment was being destroyed, and philosophers stepped back and said, "hey, we can look within our resources to think about these problems."

Two environmental philosophers presented at the seminar: Andrew Light, who teaches at NYU, and Bryan Norton, who teaches at Georgia Tech. Both are two of the leaders in the philosophical approach to return environmental ethics to an applied version. In the meantime, they suggested that the major debate to environmental philosophers is the debate between anthrocentrism and biocentrism. The former looks at environmental ethics and asks how the environment can help human beings. The latter looks at the environment as an entity that has a right in it of itself; it does not matter how it affects human beings. The first concept is easy to understand because that is how we consider ethics -- what is the relationship of the environment to human beings, and how does it help or hurt human beings. Conversely, others argue that you should look at the environment and biosystems as the fundamental unit, and there are various gradations of this. Peter Singer, for example, says you should value all beings that feel pain; this does not include ants, because as far as we know they don't feel pain, but it does value dogs. Others suggest you should value the whole environment in some way, and give it a value to prevent harming the whole environment.

Another presenter from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops discussed environmental ethics from a religious context. He argued that most people were arguing from the perspective of a Western religion, especially Christianity and Judaism, that have an irreconcilably dominant view of nature.

CC: Did anyone bring in the perspectives of other religions such as Buddhism?

TL: We had a participant named Paul Harris from Hong Kong who made the case that it is inaccurate to present Eastern religions as favoring nature more than Western religions. He used China, which has horribly bad environmental policy, as an example. You can attribute its environmental policy to Communism on one hand, but he said people don't draw on Confusicianism, Buddhism, or Hinduism to refute those public policies; they basically allow them to continue. Another example is Japan and the idea of Japanese gardens. Harris made the case that the Japanese like nature but only if it is very contained and not if it is overwhelming.

CC: Like the Bonsai.

TL: Exactly. Nature is embraced if it can be shaped, controlled, and observed, but not if it is wild.

CC: Stepping back a little bit, do you believe environmental ethics should be part of the ethics and international affairs curriculum? How should it be integrated, and how does it overlap with more traditional topics in the field of ethics and international affairs?

TL: There are lots of different ways to teach it in the context of international affairs. One of the problems in the environment is agency, which is a classic ethics and international affairs issue. Who set the values and who are the legitimate actors in this area? Do we look at states, individual peoples, or movements? The environment is particularly interesting because states, even though they sign treaties that seek to protect the environment, act according to their own national self-interest. If the state is acting according to its own national self-interest, is it going to seek to protect the environment somewhere else? What about cross-border environmental problems, like pollution and global warming?

Another area where it can be integrated is human rights. There are a lot of people writing about rights premised on the individual level being the most important whereas the biocentric approach would suggest human rights are not as important as protecting nature as a whole, whatever that entails.

Another is global justice. There is a large environmental justice movement that is trying to make the point about how the worst environmental degradation areas exist in the poorest communities. Even in the United States, African American communities live near power plants where pollution is usually the worst. So it is in the poorer areas where environmental problems are often most prevalent -- this is a result of rich people protecting themselves. This issue hence becomes a social justice issue.

There is less of an overlap with the military stuff. However, the U.S. military can override any environmental regulation in the conduct of its military exercises and basing if they don't want it to interfere with its training, which I don't agree with--I think it's silly. However, that's the argument they are making now.

CC: What about the local versus the international clash?

TL: There is a great example of that in an article written in *Ethics & International Affairs* by Dan Smith, a former Carnegie Council fellow. His article on place-based environmentalism, which I think is one of the best articles *Ethics & International Affairs* has had, argues that in America, environmental appreciation is linked to aesthetics. This developed in the 19th century when people started to view nature as something pleasant to look at. He looks at art history and suggests that prior to the 1830s, 1840s, 1850s, nobody painted natural scenes. They painted very human constructed scenes, because nature was a scary, bad thing. Then, he makes the case that this led to

eco-tourism.

CC: Like Niagara Falls, for example.

TL: Exactly. Go and see Niagara fall and go appreciate its awesome sublime beauty. And then he points out that this has led to the dilemma that local American environmentalists are much more interested in protecting particular places. He uses New England's Northern forest as an example of a tourist area that is made to look pretty as it is an area people want to see. This prevents the American environmental community from dealing with international issues, he argues -- Americans have nothing to say about climate change because it is too vast and does not help them protect their place. So that's one aspect of the local/international dilemma.

CC: One of the findings of Joanne Bauer's book on the environment is that for environmentalism to succeed politically, it has to be tied to other agendas. This is also true for human rights and other ethical concerns; they have to have some kind of practical appeal.

TL: I think that's right. This came up in another discussion -- how you need to link environmental issues to other agendas to bring about a change in public policy. But also, what does it mean to value the environment? You can value something in terms of economic value or aesthetic values. There are different ways in which we can value things, which is called value theory.

Which leads to the second half of the seminar, which was about finding environmental values and using social science methods to figure out what people value in particular. The presentation on this really worked well. We had a Brazilian woman named Solange Simoes from the Michigan World Value Survey, a large multi-year social science project from the University of Michigan that looks at values around the world. She ran the environmental project there named and talked specifically about their methodology. Social science methods, in terms of discovering values, are really hard, because how do you get at how someone really feels about something? Is it just a subjective feeling? How does it affect someone's behavior? How do you measure that? There are all sorts of interesting and difficult social science issues about how to measure value.

There was another participant who noted that you couldn't simply say to someone, "Are you in favor of the environment?" because everyone will say yes. So what researchers have to do is to ask a different question; nobody is going to say that they want to rape the environment.

CC: How much knowledge of science is needed, and how do you avoid the perils of junk science?

TL: Another Brazilian at the seminar, Maria Lemos, who teaches at the University of Michigan, looked at what role science should play in environmental public policy. She looked at a case in Brazil where they built this big meteorological institute that supposedly was going to give accurate scientific information about drought in a certain region in Brazil, which would help farmers predict when to plant. In fact, it turns out that this data was not very accurate, and that local methods of figuring out when to plant were much more effective. So here's an example of science, rational science, being wrong, whereas local forms of knowledge were correct.

In the United States, you have conservatives arguing that scientists that believe in climate change are wrong and bad and on the other side, those who believe in climate change are saying the Bush administration is using junk science to advance its political agenda. It is unclear how to evaluate this. We had some scientists at the conference who did not even know how to engage in the debate—their job was not to speak to public policy but to investigate scientific problems and come up with scientific answers. They kept saying, "Tell us what to do, tell us what are responsibilities are to public policy, because we don't know how to engage in this debate."

CC: From the educators view, is there a fear that you might be spreading false information, albeit with good intentions, because you do not understand the science?

TL: That is something the ethicists talked about. However, they operate on trust; they trust the information they receive from different scientific sources. So there is no answer to your question; it remains a dilemma. It is unclear how much scientific knowledge you need to have, especially in cases where all the scientific information is not in yet, e.g. global warming.

CC: It's not only that, it is a question of how severe the effects might be.

TL: One interesting topic in this area is something called the precautionary principle, which states that public policy should be based on the fact that if there is any chance of change, it might harm he environment. You can see the contrast in approaches to this principle in the ways Germany and the United States approach environmental policy. Germany's argument is that if there is any scientific evidence that indicates that there is climate change and it is caused by X factors, we should act against those factors. In contrast, in the United States, public policy has not accepted the precautionary principle. You The climate change debate in particular is interesting because the ICCC [International Commission on Climate Change] was created as the scientific body on this subject and it publishes its results every few years. They have published two or three reports but every time

they do there is still a lack of clarity and controversy.

Another interesting concept is that of causation. How do you figure out what caused to something else. I mean, what caused the hole in the ozone layer? There are millions of factors so figuring out the primary ones is really complicated.

CC: Is there a big difference between the environment and other areas that we talk about at the Council? For example, with human rights, you have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a set of certain principles or standards that if not upheld, we can say is a human rights abuse. With the environment, we don't even have that kind of consensus.

TL: There is not as strong of a consensus but there have been two or three major environmental conferences that have generated treaties. Not everyone goes along with them but they are out there. It does not mean, like any international law, that just because it is not always being followed it does not exists.

CC: How much of it is enshrined in international law?

TL: It is enshrined to a much lesser degree than human rights law because it has been around for only the past 30 years; human rights has been around for 60 or 70 years.

CC: Since it is accepted that the biggest environmental problems are caused by everyone and affect everyone, the concern naturally leads to the idea of needing some kind of international or global framework.

TL: Well, the interesting thing about the environment is that it does not affect everyone equally. Let's imagine you are a wealthy American and you can move yourself to some place that is relatively benign environmentally. Compare that with a farmer in China or a migrant worker in Beijing who is forced to live in a city that is polluted. The more difficult issue is that if I am an environmental activist working for whatever organization, how representative am I of everybody's interests, beliefs, or values? This is a core problem with democracy. If I am pursing good public policy, even if people don't want it, should I continue to pursue it, even if it is, in a sense, anti-democratic? You could say these people are just dumb and they don't know what is good for them, but it's still not democratic. So many of these environmental groups are not democratic; nobody gets a vote in Greenpeace, other than the leaders of the organization. You can have a vote by paying [donating] or not paying, but that is really your only ability to control the organization -- you really have no say on the day-to-day public policy decisions. So there is a real anti-democratic nature, which is not necessarily bad, because it has enabled them to get things done and make good changes in the world, but it's still problematic from an ethical point of view.

CC: A benevolent dictatorship...

TL: Exactly, but there is another issue there. First of all, it's not clear what is good for everybody. If we could just take all our garbage somewhere else, it would be better for us but not for the receptors. The environmental justice movement argues that it is unfair to dump these problems on some but not on others. So the same kind of problems economic justice activists discuss have resonance in the environment movement.

CC: Do you think the power center of the environmental movement will move from these unrepresentative transnational groups to something like the United Nations or other democratic body?

TL: I hope that happens. However, what would have to change is the state system. The rights agenda developed in such a way that states were the ones that ended up being the protectors of rights while also being the violators of rights. This issue becomes tougher with some of these global environmental problems. I also don't want to make these transnational groups sounds that bad. I think they are a way in which some people can engage in politics; if you join the ruckus society, they teach you how to protest and you can go protest WTO meetings, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

CC: Do you have any recommendations on good resources or teaching techniques for educators who would like to add an environmental component to their curricula? More basically, do you think the environment should be taught as part of the curricula for ethics and international affairs? Do you think the environment merits having its own course?

TL: I think both; any course on ethics and international affairs should deal with the environment. I would actually start with the environment because it scrabbles a lot of assumptions pertaining to both philosophy and international politics. It is a direct challenge to normal ideas of ethics and is a direct challenge to traditional ways of international politics.

CC: Why?

TL: Well, traditional ethics is about thinking about the human person whereas the environment forces you to think more broadly in terms of living things. And even if you accept the view that the way we interact with the environment should be human-centric, at least you have to articulate why you focus on humans. It also challenges international politics because these transnational movements create all these different issues such as agency that we have been talking about. So there are challenges on many different fronts. I also think environmental ethics deserves its own course. In terms of what you could use, our reader turned out to be pretty comprehensive. In addition, we have about 10 syllabi that different participants contributed which we have put online. There are also some readings that came out of the seminar. As a result, we are going to send a note to the participants soliciting readings that would be relevant based on our discussions.

CC: What are the basic, classic texts in this field?

TL: There are a couple readers, which I think are great. One of the speakers, Andrew Light, has a new reader called *Environmental Ethics*. It's about 800 pages and takes purely an ethics approach. Kristin Shrader-Frechette's book, called *Environmental Justice*, is one of the best on the environmental justice issue, so I would recommend that one too.

CC: As for teaching techniques, I assume some students come to the classroom and already have an idea of environmentalism from pop culture. Does it help to tie in pop culture by assigning such things as films and novels?

TL: We had a session on pedagogy and a couple things came out of that. One is "Active Learning," which essentially means hands-on learning. For example, we had a chemist from College of the Holy Cross who gets her students to take different measurements from a river that goes through Worchester, MA, to gauge its pollution levels. Another professor gives a tour of the city where his college is located. It's called the Brownsfields tour because they go to different polluted sites and report on how the history of these sites developed (Brownsfields are sites that were polluted but have been turned into industrial uses or sometimes schools, or hospitals). Getting active, therefore, can be a big component. This was a theme throughout the presentations.

Another discussion point was the fact that a lot of students arrive as environmental activists; this is one of the political issues most students seem to agree on. So it's not always a difficult sell to get them to care about the environment when compared to the interest level in other fields. Often times, you are preaching to the choir a little bit, which makes student involvement much easier.

There is also the dilemma in the larger curriculum sense of how you create an interdisciplinary program; if you create an environmental studies program, should students start with an ethics, science, or social science focus? You can do this in so many different ways; there is lots of creative pedagogy out there, but people are still trying to figure out what they should do.

CC: There's no set curriculum?

TL: There's no set curriculum, but there is a lot that is happening in this area. We are also going to have people send us some of their lessons and what they do in these active learning exercises.

On a side note, one of the other debates seems to be pessimism versus optimism in teaching. You have one side that believes the environment is collapsing and there is nothing we can do. This contrasts with the optimistic approach of looking for ways to find positive examples of how we make change. There are people on both sides of this fence.

--Interview conducted by Mary-Lea Cox