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**Doing their share to save the planet: Children and the
environmental crisis**

King, Donna Lee, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1994

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A

**DOING THEIR SHARE TO SAVE THE PLANET:
CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS**

by

Donna Lee King

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York

1994

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Donna Lee King

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

DOING THEIR SHARE TO SAVE THE PLANET:
CHILDREN AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

by

Donna Lee King

Advisor: Professor Barbara Katz Rothman

The environmentalization of children is a social and political discourse with conflicting notions of new world order. At the same time, it is a lived experience for children negotiating its meaning and recognizing themselves as political actors.

This work uses a wide range of qualitative methods to analyze: (1) the ways children are depicted in media about environmental crisis; (2) the ideological underpinnings of liberal environmental messages directed at kids; and, (3) children's experience of "saving the planet." Methods include textual analysis of print and electronic media, interviews with adult producers of a children's environmental cartoon, qualitative content analysis of 350 children's drawings of environmental crisis, and ethnographic interviews with 100 children between the ages of five and thirteen in classrooms and summer camps in upstate New York and South Carolina.

Findings reveal deep contradictions in the ways children are represented in environmental media, and in the environmental messages targeted to them. Typically children are depicted either as symbolic victims of adult

environmental wrongdoing, or when acting as political actors are caricatured as environmental vigilantes or "eco-fascists". Messages to children about environmental crisis reveal ideologies of liberalism and capitalism that fundamentally contradict basic tenets of environmentalism. This liberal environmental paradox includes: a simultaneous call for children (and others) to both conserve and consume; a diffusion of responsibility that supports the notion of environmental crisis as everyone's fault; and simplistic, individualistic solutions to complex, social-structural problems.

Children's awareness of environmental crisis is widespread and their experience of "saving the planet" is surprisingly upbeat. Children's drawings reveal that across categories of race, class, school grade, and gender, many feel personally empowered to help save the planet. However, for those children who do not feel personally empowered, race/class and gender differences were apparent, with more girls and poor Black children drawing environmental problems with no apparent solutions. Interviews with children indicate that while for many environmentalism is a simple matter of picking up litter, turning off water faucets, or recycling plastic, for others environmental concern becomes a springboard for political activism with potentially radical social consequences.

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Stanley Aronowitz, and the former Committee for Cultural Studies, were instrumental in shaping my thinking about what constitutes knowledge, power, and social analysis. Cindi Katz helped show me a bridge from cultural studies to the study of children. Gerald Handel asked tough questions and made me clarify my thoughts about liberal environmentalism. Kathy Dierlein and Marsha Lifshitz read drafts of my initial proposal and provided timely feedback and support. My mother, Joy Wright King, sent me clippings and told me about Captain Planet. My sisters, Denise Dunning, Susan King, and Lynne Mushock, gathered drawings from schoolchildren in South Carolina.

I might never have noticed the connection between kids and the environmental crisis if not for my son, Alexander Bowden. It is to him and to my husband, Alan Bowden, that I dedicate this work in loving gratitude.

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Nature is a topic of public discourse on which much turns, even the earth.

Haraway, 1992.

Introduction

There are crisis themes arising in each generation that society appropriates for socializing the next. For baby-boomers of the Cold War era, many of whom recall crouching at their desks in classrooms during the Bay of Pigs crisis, it was fallout shelters and "the communist threat". Children of the 1960's, watching marches in Selma and riots in Watts, learned of civil rights and racial strife. In the wake of assassinations, near impeachment of political leaders, early drug-induced deaths of rock & roll heroes, and nightly newscasts of atrocities of the Vietnam War, the seventies displayed a collapse of confidence in the "American Way". This ushered in the so-called self-help "me generation." Patriotic boosterism resurged with Star Wars and Reaganomics, mixed with "psychic numbing" and "nuclear nightmares". Anti-drug hysteria, in the form of a "Just Say No" campaign, made a perennial return as a moral crusade in the 1980s. Crisis theme follows crisis theme, recycling and returning in different permutations across generations, serving a variety of functions within American society.

In the 1990s, the environmental crisis is the most pervasive crisis theme targeted at children. On t-shirts and diapers, animal crackers and Burger King bags, in classrooms and on cartoons, a persistent call for children

to "save the planet" has been embraced and promoted within every arena of child life. As Coward (1990) notes, "children and ecology are two terms that seem to go naturally together. Much green rhetoric is about our children's future" (40). And, as Bolotin states, it is easy to be enthusiastic about environmentalizing kids:

Americans... are ready to embrace green (particularly when it comes to an outdoor concert or two), to take it into their hearts and homes, to testify that making a difference - whether by using cloth diapers or by separating cans from bottles - has changed their lives. Who could argue? Feeling powerful (and righteous to boot) is a rare and delicious commodity these days; besides it takes an unseemly streak of perversity to be against the environment (1990:47)

Yet far from embodying a completely benign and altruistic area of mutual or pan-social concern, the environmental crisis represents a site of cultural formation with conflicting narratives of new world order that address vastly different political, social, economic and ideological commitments and concerns (cf. Aronowitz 1988; Bookchin 1990; Brown 1991; Chawla 1988; Diamond and Orenstein 1990; Haraway 1992; Hecht and Cockburn (1990); Paehlke 1989; Ross 1991; Slack and Whitt 1992; Wilson 1992). As such, environmentalism provides a largely unexamined field of social reproduction and entails a specific discursive practice in which power and its resistance circulate (Foucault 1980).

Recently I asked an acquaintance from Germany, a woman in her mid-twenties, whether she recalled the Greens

influencing the culture of German children in the late 1970s and early 1980s. According to my German acquaintance, the Green party was more a political phenomenon than a cultural one, and did not target children. German children, she said, might be involved in environmentalism if their parents were active environmentalists, but she knew of no children's culture of environmentalism.

In the United States in the 1990s quite the opposite is the case. Cultural and commercial aspects of environmentalism are dominant, while political and ideological factors are essentially submerged. Far from being left alone, ignored, or influenced solely by parents, children in the United States are aggressively targeted as a consumer market for "green" products, children are exploited as social icons and political symbols in all manner of environmental media, and, in the popular culture as much if not more than in the schools, children are systematically inculcated with environmental messages telling them to "help save the planet".

This culture of environmentalism for children in the U.S., with its apparent contrast to the more overtly political model of the earlier German Greens, raises several questions of potential sociological significance to be explored in this project: What is the social meaning of children as targets of environmental messages? As environmental icons? As environmental actors? What is

revealed about late twentieth century American society in the intersection of culture, commerce and the environmentalization of children? Which ideological underpinnings support liberal environmentalism, and how do children negotiate this (I will argue) contradictory political/environmental targeting? Is environmentalism simply another form of social reproduction, where children are subtly coerced into consensus and efficiently incorporated into the existing social structure - in this instance, through the appropriation of environmentalist rhetoric? Or do children find spaces in the rhetoric of environmentalism for effective expressions of political empowerment?

These last questions introduce concepts and concerns emerging from the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, and in particular from analyses in Britain on working-class "youth" and popular culture. A second purpose of my project, a subtext, will be to explore the applicability of cultural studies theory to the study of American children, confronted with somewhat different race, class and gender issues. Questions of representation and discourse, of ideology and social reproduction, of the commodification of culture, nature, and politics, and the individual and collective negotiation of these social and cultural forces, will be examined in the specific context of children and the environmental crisis.

Let me state clearly at the outset - there is an environmental crisis. While all crisis themes are real in terms of W.I. Thomas's "definition of the situation", and all serve a variety of social functions, some are rooted largely in fantasy - these include urban legends of razor blades hidden in Halloween candy, and moral panics about the abduction of little children by strangers - while others are based on real, material, conditions of social oppression. Examples of these latter crisis themes include liberation movements of oppressed groups throughout the history of the United States; fascism, genocide, and "ethnic cleansing"; the AIDS pandemic; and, global environmental crisis. In the pages to come I critically examine the social implications of environmental crisis for children - as objects of cultural representation, as targets of contradictory environmental messages, and as social actors experiencing and interpreting crisis messages about "saving the planet." It is because I view both children and saving the planet as serious issues of critical importance that I undertake this work.

CHAPTER ONE

ICONS AND TYRANTS:

IMAGES OF CHILDREN IN ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

The Invention of Childhood

In this chapter I explore how children are represented in popular media about environmental crisis. Let me begin, however, by clarifying what I mean by "children" - as a concept, a category, a status, and as a social and historical construction.

Throughout the history of humankind, children have always existed. But in Western societies "childhood" is a relatively recent phenomenon (Aries 1962). Perceived and treated as darling little pets, children in the Middle Ages were "coddled" and even sexually fondled until the age of five or seven years, at which point they were weaned and then immediately absorbed into the social world of adults (100-110; 329).

The transitional phase of childhood with which we are familiar today emerged only after the gradual introduction of a "need" for moral edification and compulsory schooling of the young (131-133). In the Middle Ages children who passed into the adult world were accorded no special status, and as such, experienced no special restrictions. They participated in every aspect of adult society, including work, play and war. But with the advent of moralism and pedagogy (beginning in the 14th century and culminating in

the 17th & 18th) childhood was ultimately conceived as a unique period of innocence and weakness (both moral and physical) requiring strict adult intervention and institutional supervision, first by the Church and followed by the schools (333).

Initially a project for the upper and then middle classes, eventually even lower class children were "saved" from the adult world of work and the streets (Zelizar 1985). By the early 1900s, virtually all children in the United States were brought (though not without a bitter social struggle) into the fold of a "normal" childhood, one in which children were at once economically unproductive and emotionally precious (Zelizar 1985).

Children and the Politics of Representation

That childhood can be argued over, that its definitions and delineations are often subject to heated debate, reveals what is most significant in this brief historical account - childhood is not a natural fact. The historical specificity of the birth of childhood implies that children and childhood might change, or be used, in any number of social ways.

Children are perceived in our society as social incompetents (Denzin 1979; Cahill 1990), as vulnerable victims (Best 1989), as precious commodities (Zelizer 1985; Katz Rothman 1989), as future replacements of adult members (Ambert 1986), as an endangered species (Postman 1982; Winn

1983), as a marketing "goldmine" (McNeal 1992), as future citizens (Hess and Torney 1967; Sigel 1970), and as little tyrants (W.C.Fields).

The notion of childhood as changeable, as mutable in response to social trends, is viewed by many across the political spectrum as a cause of great concern. Some liberal advocates of childhood worry that an eroding division between adult and child worlds is fostering an aberration, the adult-like child, and creating a new correlate, the child-like adult (Meyrowitz 1985; see also Postman 1982; Winn 1983). Similarly, political conservatives and religious fundamentalists espouse "family-values" which rely heavily on traditional notions of the child as helpless and the adult as protector. This concept is employed for its fullest effect in emotionally-charged narratives of fetuses as "unborn children".

The image of the child is a potent signifier and a highly effective political tool. Male politicians ubiquitously kiss babies, in front of a camera or a crowd, cooing-infants so as to foster impressions of paternalistic care and concern. Children in this context are portrayed as innocent "babes in the woods", vulnerable, dependent, and in need of protection.

Frequently the image of children's innocence and vulnerability glides into that of helpless victim. Moral panics erupt over "missing children", whose pictures are

plastered on milk cartons and supermarket bulletin boards. That most missing children are "abducted" by estranged parents becomes beside the point (Fritz and Altheide 1987; Gentry 1988). Throughout the 1980s, in newspapers, magazines and on television, children were portrayed as at-risk for innumerable social dangers, ranging from transitory urban legends of razor-laden Halloween candy (Best and Horiuchi 1985), to full-fledged moral panics of widespread Satanism and sexual abuse of children in child-care and nursery school settings (Best 1993; Richardson, Best, and Bromley 1991). Often these perceptions of children receive more media attention than the very real risks of poverty and violence that many children experience.

Gorelick (1989) argues that the construction of children as victims of rampant (and extra-familial) sexual abuse arose in response to a "perceived assault on the traditional boundaries of work, family, and childhood" (7). Unsurprisingly, "working mothers" emerged as the implicit folk devils. With the increasing placement of young children in day-care settings outside the home, working mothers "came to be seen as the people responsible for placing their children in such peril" (Gorelick p.7). Here, "vulnerable children" are part of an ideological narrative of the dangers of feminism, the demise of the family, and the perversion of traditional gender roles (cf. Conover 1983; Gerson 1985; Johnston 1992).

One crucial theme lost in this rendition, of course, concerns the economic necessity, born of a stagnant economy, which forced many women out of the home - usually not into glamorous self-fulfilling careers (as implied by the theme, "selfish" working mothers), but rather into low-skilled, low-paid, dead-end, and insecure jobs in the least prestigious sectors of a growing service economy.

Social constructions, such as these of children as innocent, vulnerable victims of both sexual, and feminist, abuse, can be read, I will argue, in Foucaultian terms of discourse and power. In this theoretical context, social life is circumscribed, regulated, and even materially produced, by language, by signs, and by systems of knowledge which are, significantly, not universal or essential but always contingent and historically specific (Foucault 1980).

Structuralist theories of ongoing, fundamental sign-systems (such as Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology, or Lacan's dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language") are rejected in post-structuralist accounts. No longer a seat of essential truths, knowledge becomes a power play of discourses, and the study of social life an act of "deconstruction", a careful tracing of the geneology of what has come to be understood as natural fact.

Examining the ways in which this naturalization of constructed knowledge is used to regulate members of society to particular systems of power (e.g., Foucault 1979),

becomes a kind of "oppositional" act, a means of revealing, and possibly resisting or even transforming hegemonic, or taken-for-granted, world views (Sawicki 1986).

Feminists have long argued, for example, that one way sexism persists in a patriarchal order is through the promotion of degrading, trivializing, or otherwise negative and disempowering representations of women in cultural productions such as television, cinema, and advertising. By deconstructing popular texts, oppressive narratives of traditional femininity are exposed and critiqued. But this is not a simple and straight-forward task. Reality is both reflected and created in the representations and narratives of a society, in its discourses. Familiar and entrenched discourses of women as bimbos, as emotional hysterics, as sexual objects, as mothers and saints, serve to define and create "women".

Resistance to "subversive" representations of women, such as freely sexual beings or powerful political actors, is both entrenched and systemic¹ (Roman and Christian-Smith

¹ Recall, for example, the media uproar a few years back when, during a nationally-televised baseball game, Roseanne Barr (now Arnold) publicly scratched her crotch and spit on the ground, after performing a coarse and screeching rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner". Acting out familiar and acceptable codes of (male) baseball, Barr/Arnold directly and violently transgressed requisite codes of feminine behavior. As McRobbie (1991:27) points out, even within iconoclastic punk subculture, where many codes of traditional feminine decorum were routinely breached, spitting and vomiting (an idiosyncratic yet trademark public activity of punks) was consigned exclusively to males.

1988). The politics of representation becomes an even more critical and complex issue for women who are Black or Asian or Hispanic, and/or who are poor or working class (cf. Anzaldua 1981; Collins 1990; hooks 1990, 1992; Moraga 1986; Spivak 1988; Trinh 1989).

In the same way, representations of children are never innocent or natural, but are inextricably entwined in the politics of social discourse.

In her deconstructive study of cognitive development in children, Walkerdine (1988) argues that scientific notions of child development serve a historically specific function, that of regulating children to the democratic order:

The scientific truth about children's reasoning has become a very powerful tool indeed in pedagogic practices, especially in early education. By producing 'natural reason', it is felt that the government by reason, of reasonable people, is assured... I am questioning the confident assurance of mastery over the physical world, the idea of independent autonomy, of rational government... By focusing on [the development of 'mathematic concepts' in children] I am able to prise apart both the current psychological and pedagogical 'truths' about children's learning and to suggest other possible 'readings'. I will argue that mastery is a fiction shakily and scarcely achieved, and then only at great cost. The easy assertion of the government of reason covers over both its sociality and the unconscious lurking beneath (6).

Bracketing Walkerdine's interest in "the unconscious", I too will attempt to "deconstruct" a contemporary discourse on children - as environmental icons and evangelical eco-tyrants.

Vulnerable Children as Environmental Icons

The portrayal of children as vulnerable victims finds

expression in the popular rhetoric of environmentalism. Prefigured in the strategies of anti-nuclear groups, children are frequently used as social icons and political symbols in environmental messages about saving the planet.

The most common theme is a cautionary one, describing a morbid legacy of environmental degradation and pollution bequeathed by adults to the young. Environmentalists, seeking to raise popular consciousness and instill proper ecological behavior, invoke parental responsibility for protecting the vital interests of the next generation. "I don't want my children to grow up in a world that is covered with styrofoam," states a celebrity model on a 1991 Earth Day VH-1² extravaganza. In a music video about picking up trash, a voice-over declares, "I want my kids to have a clean planet Earth." "We recycle for Pete's sake. And Susie's. And Billy's," a Target Stores promotional handout intones. Children as an abstract class are portrayed as facing rapidly diminishing opportunities. The theme revolves around notions of inheritance, of "responsibility for future generations." Visual images of children are rarely necessary in this context, as the message is presumed to be well-understood.

Another strategy uses images of children as aesthetic objects, to exude a sensual as well as emotional appeal.

²Video-Hits 1, a music video channel on cable television.

This is not unlike popular advertisements for the "United Colors of Benetton", or Kids Gap, where beautiful children of every hue are photographed in luscious, full-color detail. These images are designed to please both eye and heart. They are meant to sell not only clothing, but a subtext that seemingly resolves (and certainly exploits) issues of racism, through the power of aesthetic presentation.

We can see this aesthetic technique applied to environmentalism in a singularly insipid and sentimental music video by Bette Midler (an entertainer who got her start performing topless in gay bathhouses in Hawaii in the 1970's). Filmed in black and white to achieve a dream-like or fantasy effect, the video depicts children dressed in hyper-romantic costume. A white girl in black dress and exaggerated blonde wig sits in a field, quietly painting a picture of the planet Earth. A boy dressed in feathers and beak peeks at her from behind a tree, while children made up as wood sprites and ragamuffins roam countryside and town, aiding the disadvantaged and interceding in mock conflicts. Accompanied by a thematic refrain, "God is Watching Us From a Distance... This Song is for Everyman", the message is unambiguously clear - if only adults could be more like (idealized) children, and attend to the will of an absent yet all-powerful Father, everything would be okay.

This sentimentalized and aestheticized version of

childlike innocence and dependance (and its emotional appeal to needy "adults") is by now a familiar conceit. Of more interest are the ways images of innocence and vulnerable children are exploited in a pointedly political fashion by environmentalist and anti-nuclear activists within the context of popular culture.

On the same VH-1 Earth Day celebration mentioned above, brief (15 second) promotional clips of a documentary about the Savannah River nuclear-weapons facility were shown as commercial announcements for an upcoming broadcast. Over and over in ominous tones, the announcer recited, "Coming up, Building Bombs, a one-hour documentary about the deadly effects of making weapons." Each time the word "deadly" arrived, the visuals quick-cut to a rustic scene of a babbling brook where a young father helps a tow-headed youngster drink from a big plastic jug of water. Innocuous in practically any other context, here the activity of drinking water is visually associated with contamination from radioactive waste.

Sitting helplessly by, watching the unwitting poisoning of innocent babes, by their fathers no less, is meant to cut to the core of deep-seated desires to protect and preserve the young. It is an ideology of innocence in the service of a political agenda quite different than 'traditional family values', yet strikingly similar in its calculated effect.

The use of little children as political icons is an

openly acknowledged practice of anti-nuclear activists. In her polemic on the impact of nuclear threat on children (based largely on interviews with adults and high-school adolescents) La Farge discusses the "inspiration of the child" (1987:122). Children are an inspiration to political activism in parents, "political action... a part of mothering" (127). Intimate contact with little children is seen as a sensitizing experience, available not only to mothers, but to "more and more men" (127). The goal is political sensitization of a larger public to the threat of nuclear proliferation, through a connectedness and identification with children.³

Next logical step, one that La Farge explores, is the strategic use of the image of vulnerable children to promote this political aim. She cites pamphlets entitled "What About the Children" exerting pressure on local school boards to detail their (non-existent) evacuation plans in the event of nuclear war, thus forcing a public recognition of the vulnerability of children to such mass destruction:

Clearly, this strategy, which spoke to officials in their role in loco parentis, had at its core the image of the child (143).

A second, more direct, strategy involved the active

³ This insight, of course, is not unique to La Farge. In different ways Chodorow (1978), Katz Rothman (1989), and Ruddick (1989) have theorized about the political implications of mothering, as have Marxist feminists writing about social reproduction and gender relations in the family (Dalla Costa 1972; Laslett and Brenner 1989).

recruitment of children into anti-nuclear organizations. A "complex motivation" was at work, according to La Farge, that included: helping children "deal with" the nuclear issue; getting children involved in anti-nuclear activism; and mobilizing public opinion by using the image of the child (144). This mobilization included using real children as a "visible" presence at rallies and marches and other public relations events. The tactic was seen as problematic by many even within the anti-nuclear movement, in part because of the implicit exploitation of children for their symbolic value, but also because adults were perceived as "unloading" the problem of nuclear proliferation on children, by telling kids, in effect, "This is really your issue" (145).

We begin to see images of the child serving two seemingly contradictory functions. Children are portrayed as vulnerable, as innocent victims, as essentially helpless in the face of global disaster. Yet, at the same time, children are recruited and displayed in political actions and told they can do something about the problems with which they are being faced. The earlier debate over the adult-like child emerges here in a new context.

"Let Kids be Kids," writes Stephen Hicks (1991) in a Wall Street Journal article (later reprinted and widely-circulated in a condensed version in the blandly popular and politically conservative Reader's Digest). "Children are

not able to deal with global environmental concerns when they are still grappling with personal hygiene." Succinctly but effectively, children are depicted as vulnerable to a new, insidious, danger - manipulation through the political machinations of over-zealous teachers and environmental activists.

This notion of children as overburdened by adult concerns is addressed from a completely different political perspective in an editorial cartoon (for adults) drawn by Wright (1991) around the time children's entertainer Paul Reubens (Pee-Wee Herman) was arrested for masturbating in public in an X-rated adult movie theatre.

"Son, about Pee Wee Herman," says the father in the first frame of the cartoon. "Yes! We want to help you through this crisis," adds the mother. In the following three frames, the child, drawn very small in relation to his extremely tall parents, responds:

Pee-Wee Herman? I'm facing a future plagued with AIDS, a dying, dirty planet, decaying cities, crime, drugs, stifling debt, guns, substandard education, dumb courts and a shredded constitution!

Did Pee-Wee Herman do that? No! It happened while you grown-ups sat on your backsides reading sex trivia! Frankly, you disgust me!

Now go to your room!

Here a reversal of generational roles is used to depict a child more adult-like than many American adults, particularly in his sophisticated political outlook. Unlike the previous example, where children are reduced to social

incompetents incapable of meaningful political/environmental awareness, still dealing with personal hygiene, here the child exceeds the parent in his analysis of crisis and political priorities. His disgust over his parents prurient interest in Pee-Wee Herman's behavior, and his impassioned inventory of contemporary social crises, implies not only a mature and knowledgeable insight into political affairs but an enlightened and even radical tolerance for the uncensored expression of sexual desire. This is a different kind of child than has been represented, one seemingly savvy and committed, vocally expressive and politically active, emotionally and intellectually mature. As I shall demonstrate, it is an image that strikes fear into the hearts of many adults.

Portraying the Child as Eco-Tyrant

A palpable adult anxiety is discernable in the move from images of the child as beautifully or vulnerably innocent, through portrayals of children as unfairly burdened by adult concerns, to representations of the adult-like child, wise beyond his or her years. Among these, it is only the politically savvy and passionately informed child who is perceived as a potential threat to adults, and who is therefore the most ambivalently portrayed. As we shall see, this ambivalence is exemplified in popular representations of children as "eco-tyrants".

Children, of course, have always been demonized at the

same time they have been sentimentalized and trivialized as symbolic innocents. The notion of children as little tyrants can be traced throughout popular culture. It was made famous, for example, by W.C. Fields, in films debunking sentimentalized images of children, for adult comedic relief. More recently, in a widely-circulated newspaper article about "the tyranny of toddlers" (Zelizar 1985:), yuppie parents are portrayed as ambivalent about their young - appalled at their toddlers' messy habits, bad table manners, and demanding style.

Youth subcultures are another classic target of adult fear and loathing, particularly those emerging from within already disenfranchised social groups - Blacks, Latinos, gays and lesbians, poor and/or working class kids. They embody what McRobbie calls subcultural "discourses of disrespect" (1991:22). The term 'folk devil' - that "gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided" (cited in Hebdige 1979, fn.7:157) - was first coined by Cohen (1972) to describe the demonization of young British rockers and mods in the mid-1960s. Punks, skinheads, neighborhood gangs, even the more pedestrian "mall rats" of suburban America, all represent youthful folk devils in popular media and myth.

Another common mode of child demonization contrasts ideal children of the past with those in the present, portrayed as incapable of ever measuring up. J.G. Ballard

accomplishes this in an unflinching invective entitled, "The Last Real Innocents" (1991). Describing children depicted in a collection of old photographs from post-World War II, he states:

... they are clearly children, in the sense that most are small and under 10 years old, but they have the look of crushed adults, with eyes far sharper than anyone can see today in a suburban playground or shopping mall (1991:10).

This insidious reference to the dullness of contemporary children is soon expanded to deny their very authenticity:

... with [the] slow parade of quiet but passionate images, one is virtually looking at the last generation of real children, standing silently like witnesses to the last real world. Today's children, across a large part of the planet, are dressed in jeans, T-shirts and Day-Glo track suits, and they have voices and a body language to match or mimic their television culture heroes. A bored and indulgent adult world has foisted onto its offspring the image of a kind of dandified super-infant, adept at computerspeak by the age of 4, tuned in to the latest consumer fads and canny in its reading of its parents' psychology.

By contrast, Capa's children, photographed [around the time of World War II], seem to show no understanding at all of the world around them... (10).

This is an obvious and vituperative rearticulation of the adult-like child. It probably is no accident that Ballard was himself a child during the very era he so romantically eulogizes. While children are real by virtue of their uncomprehending innocence of adult wars, ways and concerns, children are fake when they can make "canny reading[s] of their parents' psychology". The more comprehending of adults children become, it seems, the greater the perceived threat and the sharper the invective caricature.

Antagonistic images of alienated youth, and the vilifying of contemporary children as obnoxiously precocious, are both popular social constructions. And, as we have seen, adult-like children are the object of concern, of fear, and of outright loathing by many adults. When children's perceived 'adulthood' is blended with commitment to a political cause, such as environmentalism, a new, ambivalent, representation emerges - the image of the child as eco-terrorist.

One cannot yet find "Children as Eco-terrorists" catalogued in the National Newspaper Index.⁴ But a clear pattern of representation is discernable in clippings I have collected since the early 1990s. Wrapped within the cloak of the "eco-tyrant" are children who "bully" their parents into recycling, who "shame" their parents into not drinking beer, not smoking pot, not eating animals, who, made to feel terrified that their parents will die, beg them to stop smoking cigarettes.

The litany of adjectives used in the popular press to describe environmentally-concerned children is extensive and

⁴ In fact, you cannot find "Children and the Environment" in the National Newspaper Index. The topic is listed under "Environment and Children" and includes articles on environmental influences as diverse as "low birth weight" and the effects of lead paint. All told, there are six articles included that concern children and environmental crisis. It is a very incomplete list. None of my clippings from the Wall Street Journal or The New York Times is indexed. This "lack" is a graphic demonstration of the paucity of systematic cultural analyses of issues of children and environmental crisis.

homologous. That is, together they describe "the symbolic fit between the values and life-styles of a group" (Hebdige 1979:113). "Nagging", "harassing", "tormenting", "vociferous", "proselytizers", "crusaders", "chanting", "green police"... It is a compendium of negatively-tinged descriptors, conjuring up visions of cult-worship and political fanaticism.

This nightmarish portrayal is represented in stunning visual detail on the cover of a USA Weekend magazine (Garelick 1991), where "34.2 million readers" found themselves face-to-face with an archetypal trio of eco-"Enforcers". Identically clad in black T-shirts and jeans (shades of Ballard's diatribe), a blonde girl, Black girl and a presumably Hispanic boy stare grimly from behind dark-tinted glasses which obscure their eyes from view and contribute to the menacing effect. Two of the children stand with their arms crossed in a posture of simultaneous self-defense and stubborn confrontation, while the Black girl in the middle subtly proffers a single yellow daisy to the viewer. Presumably hand-picked for their Benneton-like racial coordination, the image of these cover-children is contrived to inspire not pleasure but fear.

Responding to the perceived threat of children as eco-fascists, a woman from California wrote a concerned letter to the nationally-syndicated weekly magazine:

If you think your cover photo was supposed to amuse me, it failed. It frightened me. There are those of us

who can remember Hitler and Stalin and how they used kids to spy on and coerce parents to carry out their political schemes. The environmental movement goes far beyond protecting Mother Earth from human beings. Its political overtones (or undertones) are manifested on your cover (Letters 1991).

This is a naked expression of blatant fear in the face of children as political actors, seemingly in direct response to the cover illustration alone. More commonly, popular representations of eco-active children convey an ambivalent and complex message when read within the text.

For example, often a tone of parental indulgence can be detected, as toward a much-loved precocious and difficult child:

For Michael Clement, the memory of a recent encounter with his 6-year-old is still vivid. "One morning I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth. Carolyn walked in and quietly shut off the water. Then, calmly, she said, 'Daddy, don't you care about the earth?'"

The Arizona father and doctor, equal parts amused and amazed by his daughter's eco-awareness, had no good answer. Now he has taken to wondering each day what orders await him from the girl he and his wife have begun calling "Miss Ecology 1991."

The bottom line: He's stopped running water unnecessarily. "It's hard to argue with a charming little girl, especially when you know she's right" (Garelick 1991:4).

Integral to the discourse of eco-activist children is the reversal of standard social role expectations of parent and child. Invariably mixed in with these parents' somewhat rueful respect is a fair bit of annoyance with their "eco-smart" child. Children become earnest and stern eco-taskmasters, while parents are often portrayed as self-

indulgent, silly, and "beleaguered" by their children:

It's a reversal of the age-old generational war: now children are bullying their parents into changing their behavior (Better 1992).

"She's harassing me, that child," said an exasperated Kloss. "If I leave the water on when I'm brushing my teeth, she yells at me. She says, 'Off, off, off. You're wasting that water'" (Boccella 1991).

"It's bad enough when your mother did it to you. Now the kids are on to us" (Slesin 1991).

"The kids are right, but I'd like to make my own decisions in life" (Garelik 1991).

"60s generation" parents in particular are frequently caricatured as having lost (or never really held) their "social commitment" especially in regards to concerns for the planet:

The parents who were peaceniks, or otherwise politically active and socially conscious in the 60's seem to be on the shortest fuses. Paula Rubinstein, a New York antiques dealer and self-avowed "sympathizer to the antiwar movement" hates that she cannot take a bath in peace... "[M]y daughter... tells me I'm wasting water. It drives me crazy" (Slesin 1991).

Parents... are taken aback by their younger children's concerns. It's as though the soundtrack of their own '60s youths (Save this! Stop that!) has been programmed into their offspring, with perhaps more emphasis on actually doing something, not just protesting (Garelik 1991).

The recalcitrance of ecologically-wayward parents is frequently "explained" by children in these popular reports as the result of their parents' never having learned about the environment in school:

Rubin blames the blunder, in part, on the generation gap. "If my parents had seen the program on TV, they would have said, 'That's too bad about the dolphins, but that's life,' he says. "They weren't taught how to

save the environment when they were growing up" (Better 1992).

Despite the obvious reference to schools, children's environmental awareness is often portrayed as "natural", as emerging from some essential and timeless quality of childhood:

"Kids are... more instinctively tied in, more connected [to environmental issues]" (Slesin 1991).

..."They see things in black or white. You either save the elephants or you don't, you either save the whales or you don't." Teachers, parents and environmentalists say this eco-enthusiasm is the product of children's natural interest in plants and animals... (Boccella 1991).

"Kids have such a natural empathy for the world... they find it very easy to embrace the idea that we should protect it..." (Boccella 1991).

At the same time, children's ecological concerns are consistently ridiculed and trivialized - reduced to "pet peeves", "soapboxes", and a caricature of "political correctness" and religious fundamentalism:

Like many her age, Rachel has become a junior eco-evangelist (Boccella 1991).

Solomon is a member of YES - Youth for Environmental Sanity, a troupe of eco-crusaders that travels around the country preaching an evangelical mission... (Better 1992).

Like an army of diminutive missionaries, many children are bringing home to their parents all kinds of messages about the way things are in the world - and the way things ought to be (Garelik 1991).

Laced throughout the discourse on children's "eco-vigilantism" is a subtext of irritation bordering on fear - children are presented as rigid and intolerant environmental

police:

If teenagers have been remarkably successful at forcing [environmental] concessions, it's probably because they have intransigence on their side (Better 1992).

Absolutely no plastic is an unwritten law in the household. "If something is in plastic, I have to hide if I want to use it," Ms. Gilchrist-Pierce said (Slesin 1991).

[Kids] learn that these things are objectively wrong, at a time when they're too young to have learned a measure of empathy and understanding to shade the primary colors of censure. We try to tell them it's not polite to make a citizen's arrest at the bus stop because someone is puffing away... (Quindlan 1990).

"Kids tend to be very dictatorial and insistent anyway. They feel that there's a right way to do something. It's like when kids used to tell their parents to stop smoking. Now they are insistent that they do everything that's environmentally correct (Boccella 1991).

Rhetoric describing children's environmental political action as "confrontational" or "guerrilla tactics" reverses former constructions of children as "overburdened" by adult concerns, in language that is at once condescending and critical:

Kids are leaning on their elders to kick bad habits, be kinds to animals and help save the planet. Talk about parent guilt! (Garelik 1991).

The environmental actions children are supposedly demanding are couched almost exclusively in terms of personal, private decisions about "changing behaviors" - turning off the tap water, recycling instead of throwing away plastic bottles, reusing brown paper bags. When broader social action is referenced it is usually in terms of consumer behavior - boycotting products that are known to

be harmful to the atmosphere, for example, or buying only products that are wrapped in less packaging.

Why, in this context, do we see ambivalence bordering on hostility in the portrayal of children who are assertive about their environmental concern? Is it simply because "eco-smart" children are perceived as getting on their parents nerves? Are children the eco-fascists they are portrayed to be? And what about the notion of children as inheritors of the earth? How do we reconcile conflicting images of children in environmentalist rhetoric?

To better understand the dichotomizing discourse on children as simultaneously environmentally vulnerable and environmental tyrants, it is necessary to return to cultural studies theories about subcultures, and in particular, to Dick Hebdige's classic study of British punks, The Meaning of Style (1979). In this book, Hebdige demonstrates how subcultures "...'breach our expectancies', how they represent symbolic challenges to a symbolic order" (92). But he goes on to describe how even flamboyantly perverse subcultures (what he calls "spectacular" subcultures) can be coopted, "incorporated" into a dominant culture simultaneously horrified and fascinated by transgressive and defiantly self-identified outcast groups.

One way outgroups are incorporated into mainstream discourse is through what Hebdige calls "the ideological form". Groups that are considered a threat to the status

quo, youth subcultures in this case, are redefined by the culture in contradictory ways. This is Barthes' concept of 'identification' in which the bourgeois is seen as 'unable to imagine the Other... the Other is a scandal that threatens his existence (quoted in Hebdige p. 97). In order to defuse this threat, "the Other" must be "naturalized, trivialized, and domesticated", and at the same time reduced to "a pure object" (Hebdige 97).

We can see this process of incorporation at work in representations of environmentally-concerned children. Children are demonized as eco-fascists or Enforcers in response to the potential threat they pose to bourgeois social norms, through, for example, their demands for radical changes in patterns of consumption. As Paehlke notes, even such a seemingly innocuous issue as mandatory five cent deposit on returnable bottles is fiercely resisted by the status quo, as going "too far" (Paehlke 1989:6). In order to defuse the threat of the "eco-smart" child, children who show environmental concern are reduced to "Little Miss Ecology", their concerns trivialized as "eco-crusades" and "pet peeves".

This is one way the discourse of change is contained and coopted - through a politics of representation that at once demonizes and ridicules. Children, it seems, are aware of this process, at some level. Responding to a typically ambivalent article in The New York Times magazine about

"Green Teens", a 16 year old girl writes:

I would hope that in the future my own parents and older people in general would see that what we young people are fighting for is not a joke. As a "green teen" I have learned that recycling is not enough... without the "green teen" of today, the earth will be a shambles tomorrow (Letters to the Editor 1992)

We need now to look more closely at a crucial source of children's environmental concern - pervasive social messages throughout the popular culture telling kids they have to "help save the planet." For a second form of incorporation of alternative or resistant discourses takes place in the realm of "the commodity". As I will argue, this becomes apparent in the context of children and the environmental crisis in the "selling" of environmentalism to kids.

CHAPTER TWO

CAPTAIN PLANET AND THE PLANETEERS:

KIDS, CRISIS, AND COMPETING NARRATIVES OF A NEW WORLD ORDER

The Environmentalization of Children

Messages to children about environmental crisis are evident in every realm of child life. Department stores display all manner of childrens' clothing - down to their diapers - sporting brightly colored planets, rainforests, wildlife and slogans, with colorful hanging tags that read "Kids Talk - Save Our Earth", "Enviro Team", and "Keep Our World Clean". The environmental targeting of children includes cereal boxes decorated with endangered animal species, fishsticks with "Clean Ocean Kids" activity books inside, and animal crackers admonishing children to "Help Save the Animals". Burger King bags depict a burger in the shape of the planet, and brag about their "New Earth Happy Packaging" in the handwriting of a child:

You will probably notice that our sandwiches now come in paper wrapping instead of a box. That's because we figured the world could probably use 15,000 less tons of trash a year. And less trash means less trucks to carry it. Which means less gas, and a lot less air pollution. Not to mention the reduction in packaging the packaging has to be shipped in! All in all, its just one of the ways we are trying to make the world a nicer place to eat.

Not only are children targets of "green" advertising campaigns; there are a plethora of books, magazines, television shows, and school curricula specifically designed to educate children about environmental concern. Barney and

Sesame Street, Mister Rogers and Nickelodeon, MTV and VH-1 all devote a significant portion of their children's programming to environmental issues. There is an "Earth-based" environmental magazine for kids, an environmental cartoon called Captain Planet and the Planeteers, and a seemingly limitless supply of books telling children "how to save the earth". From breakfast in the morning until they climb into their "save the rainforest" pajamas at night, children eat, sleep, read and watch tv about environmental crisis.

Often it is difficult to decipher what adults want from children regarding environmental crisis. Are children supposed to curtail their consumption and conserve? Or buy the latest Toxic Crusader or Captain Planet doll? Are they innocent victims of imminent global disaster? Or tyrannical "eco-terrorists" cowing their parents into recycling the trash? And when they are taught about the ecological hazards of strip mining, forest clear-cutting, driftnet fishing, toxic waste dumping, oil spills, nuclear waste storage, overcrowded landfills, ozone depletion, greenhouse effect, the effects of pesticides, ad infinitum - what exactly are kids supposed to do?

This chapter examines pervasive social messages directed at children about "saving the planet." Specifically, I analyze a popular cartoon, Captain Planet and the Planeteers, to decipher liberal environmental

messages being transmitted to children in the name of "saving the planet". I critique Captain Planet (cartoon and superhero) as epitomizing a problematic and paradoxical environmental ethic - one that seeks to improve the natural environment and yet preserve existing social relations.

Theoretical Frameworks

Socialization

The notion that children are targets for social messages is, of course, nothing new. As we know from Phillipe Aries's work (1962), the modern concept of childhood as a distinct social status did not arise until after the invention of systematic moral edification and compulsory schooling (329).

Socialization implies a concerted effort on the part of society to shape, if not mold, new members to prevailing social norms and values. Consensual structural-functional approaches emphasize children's internalization of society, citing institutional arrangements of family, school, and popular media as primarily responsible for transmitting the culture to young initiates.

Marxists structuralists, critical of existing social arrangements, point to these same institutions as functioning (wittingly or unwittingly) to reproduce unequal and oppressive social relations based on class. This is accomplished, not by force, but through a practice of symbolic violence, "wherein the consent of children is

gained, or at least sought" (Katz 1990, p. 6; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Marxist feminists advance the theory of social reproduction by examining the ways in which unequal gender arrangements are essential to the maintenance of capitalist social relations (Dalla Costa 1972; Laslett and Brenner 1989).

Structural approaches tend to view children as passive objects, empty vessels to be filled for the smooth maintenance of social structure (cf. Dennis 1965). From this perspective, social messages to children are useful indicators of norms, values, and social relations of power and privilege in a society. Their importance lies more in the information they provide about adult society than in their relationship to the social experiences of children.

Interactionists see socialization as a process whereby a child becomes an emergent member of a particular social order. This view implies a dialectical relationship, between social constraint and the reflexive construction of self (Elkin and Handel 1989; Power 1986:260). Children receive social messages and proceed to interpret them; fashioning meaning from the objects, circumstances, and gestures of their everyday lives. They actively construct their social worlds, although always within the confines of existing social, cultural, historical and biological boundaries (261).

Children are also a largely untapped source of insight

into various aspects of their society and their own conditions (Ambert 1986:7). Insights into the social experiential world of children can provide unique reflections of adult society. "A child, then, is a complex social object. The meanings brought to the child will be reflected in his [or her] actions" (Denzin 1979:112).

Liberalism

Before I define what I mean by liberal environmentalism it is necessary to define liberalism in more general terms. Notions about liberalism vary, and the meaning of the concept is currently in a state of flux (MacLean and Mills 1983). Liberalism refers to a philosophy and school of political thought that arose "with capitalism and raised demands for democracy and political liberties that often expressed deeply held convictions about the inherent equality of men" (Jaggar 1983:31). Abstract individualism is one of liberalism's most fundamental principles. Human beings are conceived of as "autonomous, atomistic, isolated beings" with "rational minds" and "machine-like bodies" (Katz Rothman 1989:58-59). Liberal individualism emphasizes human rationality, individual autonomy, and the importance of self-fulfillment. Thus, from a liberal perspective one can stress either moral aspects (individual autonomy), or "prudential" aspects (self-fulfillment) (Jaggar 1983:33). However, from both the moral and the prudential perspective liberalism grants primacy to individual rights over the

general "good" (Sandel 1983). Also from either perspective liberalism seeks to limit the degree to which states can intervene into the "private" sphere of family or domestic society (Pateman 1979). When it comes to the public sphere, however, a tension arises in liberal thought, between concern for individual rights and concern for the common good, creating a fundamental division. Classic liberals argue against any state intervention into the public sphere, especially in the "free market", whereas welfare liberals call for "positive government intervention in the economy" to address the huge inequities that arise in capitalist society (Tong 1989). However classic and welfare liberals alike take for granted the present social order, believing "that a market society, privately-owned property, and the present day bureaucratic nation state cannot be changed in any basic sense" (Bookchin 1990:15). Thus is liberal environmentalism structured around the social status quo.

Liberal Environmentalism

I am defining liberal environmentalists as those adherents of liberalism (in either sense of the term) who are also concerned about and involved in issues of global ecology and environmental crisis. Liberal environmentalism is not a self-defined political and ecological perspective. Most mainstream (as opposed to radical) environmentalists take liberal principles for granted and are unreflective about their political grounding. As I will demonstrate in

this chapter, this is particularly the case for "corporate" liberal environmentalists, and I will use the Turner Broadcasting System as an example.

Contradictions inherent in the political philosophy of liberalism are clearly evident when applied to issues of global ecology and environmental ideology. Paehlke (1989) outlines several basic premises of the ideology of environmentalism that compete in essence with liberal values:

- o Environmental ideology views the earth as a "commons", and "grants both other species and future human generations consideration in economic and resource decisions";
- o In the interest of "the planet", environmental ideology is unwilling to maximize economic advantages for its own adherents;
- o Environmental ideology is predicated on a willingness to intervene in a market economy on behalf of altruistic values (i.e., for the general good, or the "commons" and its inhabitants);
- o An ideology of environmentalism requires state intervention to enforce limits on economic expansion;
- o And finally, environmental ideology is opposed to militarism in every form, and in particular, to nuclear weaponry (Paehlke:6-8).

When we compare the basic tenets of liberalism with those of

environmentalism, we see that liberal environmentalism is by definition an ideology rooted in contradiction and paradox.

Viewing Culture

To argue that cultural productions such as Captain Planet and the Planeteers serve as far more than simply entertaining, educational or "informational" fare for children opens to question the social function of culture and the possible critical and analytic approaches toward culture as an object of study. Bourdieu (1977) views the production of "legitimate" culture as a form of "symbolic violence" functioning to transmit hegemonic values and reproduce social relations (MacDonald 1977:39-40). Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School embrace a distinction between "high" and "low" culture, regarding mass culture as a soporific and manipulative instrument of capitalist domination (Aronowitz 1981).

Much recent work in cultural studies takes a decidedly different point of view toward the value and reception of popular culture. Specifically addressing electronic media in advanced capitalist society, Kellner (1987) argues that television images are "fractured" and "saturated with contradictions" which open spaces for diverse readings. The notion that cultural objects and images may be creatively reinterpreted and thus potentially subverted or resisted by cultural "consumers" is current among many theorists of cultural studies (cf. Fiske 1989; Kinder 1991; Willis 1990).

Morris (1988a; 1988b) warns however that simply embracing popular culture as a site of resistance undermines necessary political struggle in the cultural terrain. She cites a "rhetorical gap between mass culture (what the industry does) and popular culture (what we do with what it does)", and states that "inventing" connections between the two is "a major ethical and imaginative action (and image) problem for radical politics" (268).

Cultural Critiques of Children's Television

The fact that children are being systematically socialized to environmental concern through the medium of popular culture can be easily demonstrated in a typical afternoon of children's television watching. Sesame Street, MTV, Nickelodeon, Barney and the Backyard Gang, all targeted to young viewers, regularly air environmental messages for children. Commercial cartoons have capitalized on environmental issues with characters such as the Toxic Crusaders and Captain Planet.

Cultural criticism of children's television takes many different forms. Following Dewey, Postman (1985) values process over content in learning, and criticizes educational shows such as Sesame Street as primarily teaching children to love television. He argues that television serves best when it is purely entertaining, that all serious public discourse is undermined when transmitted through its glitzy, fast-paced medium. Meyrowitz (1985) emphasizes the extent

to which electronic media have impacted on social interaction. He argues that television usurps traditional socialization roles in the family, blurring generational distinctions and promoting "the adultlike child and the childlike adult" (227). Kinder (1991) sees television, video, and video games as creating a "postmodernist subject", part passive spectator and consumer, part dynamic interactive participant in "intertextual" televisual narratives (36-37).

Methods

I approach Captain Planet and the Planeteers from three distinct yet complementary perspectives: as a (contested) cultural text; as a product of mass culture; and as part of an ethnographic study on children's experience of environmental crisis. While the bulk of this chapter will address the cartoon as a cultural text, I choose as a sociologist to remain actively engaged with audience and producers as well. Therefore I also treat the cartoon as a product of social interaction and interpretation (Brunt 1992; Denzin 1992).

Production - Phone interviews with assistant and executive producers of Captain Planet and the Planeteers and a promotional package provided by Turner Broadcasting System were used to gain information about the cartoon's origin, production, promotion, and premise, and to examine the producers' expectations and motivations for socializing

children to environmental concern.

Text¹ - Close readings were performed, deconstructing the cartoon as a literal and visual text, to elaborate thematic, symbolic, and ideological material. These textual analyses involved reading both with and against the narrative grain to provide space for alternative readings. In applying my method I have borrowed liberally and eclectically from an array of critical cultural analysts (cf. Dorfman and Mattelart 1975; hooks 1990, 1992; McRobbie 1991). I analyze the cartoon as a cultural text embedded with codes and representations that can be read from a number of perspectives, including the margins. This method of reading popular culture is akin to Hall's early model (1980) of encoding and decoding whereby "media codes [are] analyzed, not in terms of complete ideological closure, but according to 'preferred' or 'dominant' meanings which [can] be decoded by viewers from within similar frameworks" (Brunt 1992:70). It is the viewer's socially structured frame of reference which, in the act of decoding or deconstructing, ineluctably shapes the meanings derived from cultural texts. When I read Captain Planet and the Planeteers, situating myself within the cultural framework of postmodernism, feminism, and critical cultural studies, my point of

¹I watched several episodes of Captain Planet informally on Saturday mornings during its regular broadcast time before I began my textual analysis. I then videotaped three different episodes to analyze the cartoon as a popular text.

departure ensures that my reading will be oppositional to a dominant or hegemonic reading. It is my hope that this oppositional reading may speak to others situated within, or receptive to, an alternative perspective on the environmentalization of children.

Ethnography

I am including here excerpts of interview data from later chapters as they pertain to the Captain Planet cartoon. My project is not to conduct audience studies but to explore the variety of ways children are thinking about environmental crisis and responding to media messengers such as Captain Planet. Because it is exploratory, this is not intended as an analysis of what kind of child will think which way. Rather, I am interested in the range and diversity of childrens' thinking about environmental issues.² Following Brunt (1992), the children in my sampling are not meant to be representative but "typical" in the sense of Weber or Lukacs:

[T]his kind of ethnograph[y]... is working not in the realm of "the average" but of "the typical"... "The typical" engages with often heightened circumstances, special conditions, exceptional cases, extreme positions, precisely in order to highlight tendencies that may in "normal circumstances" be merely incipient - and hence the concern in that tradition that carries

² Using a descriptive analogy of marbles in a jar, Katz Rothman (1993b) contrasts exploratory research with representative sampling. While random sampling is designed to tell us, for example, what proportion of black and white marbles are in a jar, exploratory research is concerned more with "the variety and kinds of marbles in there" (18).

on with Lucien Goldmann, not with the immediate, but with "the maximum possible consciousness of the group". And that is because something is perceived, both by the researcher and by the community researched, to be at stake (Brunt 1992:74).

While this chapter is not predominately ethnographic, I believe children's responses to environmental crisis, and to Captain Planet and the Planeteers as a medium of that message, shed distinctive light on the issue, which they perceive, with cultural encouragement, to be very much at stake.

Watching Captain Planet

The theatrical (and pedagogical) premise of Captain Planet and the Planeteers is succinctly provided in its public relations kit:

Gaia, the spirit of the Earth, awakens from a 100-year nap to discover the devastating effects people have had on our planet's environment in the 20th century. Fearing for the future, she calls upon five special young people from around the world - Wheeler (North America), Linka (Soviet Union)³, Gi (Asia), Kwame (Africa) and Ma-Ti (South America) - to lead the battle against further destruction of the Earth. She gives these planeteers magic rings that enable each of them to control one element of nature - Earth, Fire, Water, Wind and a very special power, Heart. When the planeteers join their powers together, Captain Planet, an environmental superhero, is summoned. Together, they battle the eco-villains who are trying to destroy the Earth.

Each episode ends with a :30 [thirty second] epilogue including tips for viewers on how they can be a part of the environmental solution through recycling, carpooling, etc. (TBS 1990).

Ritually reprised before every episode of Captain

³ Linka now hails from "Eastern Europe".

Planet, this basic premise (minus mention of the 30 second tag) is immediately followed by several minutes of aggressively loud and fast-paced commercial advertisements selling junk food, toys, paraphernalia, and other t.v. shows, to kids. Typically the cartoon returns to some dastardly deed being perpetrated against the Earth by one or more, often comic and entertaining, eco-villains.

In an episode aired in the fall of 1992, Zarm, evil spirit of the Earth, descends into a peaceful Third World-like village of generic indigenous people, armed with a "dream-machine" that provides peasants with large automobiles, indoor plumbing, central air conditioning, and other consumable objects of the First World. This could represent the redistribution of technology and goods to peoples historically not only denied such goods, but exploited for their natural resources and human labor to produce them for others. Unsurprisingly, it is not the tack producers of Captain Planet develop in their plot. Rather, there unfolds a cautionary tale where greed, aggression and pollution quite naturally follow any attempts at economic advancement in developing nations. By the end of the show peasants are shown willingly rejecting progress and technology and returning gratefully to primordial poverty.

Meanwhile with unremitting regularity, 2 or 3 minute blocks of commercial advertisements are interspersed throughout every Captain Planet narrative, framing it and

providing its deeper structure. Always depicted as comfortably housed and stylishly dressed, children of the West can be seen driving big convertible cars while eating Apple Jacks, riding rocket-powered tubes of toothpaste through outer space, having their hands "controlled" by uncontrollable urges to eat Chips Ahoy cookies, and so on. When the thirty second tag finally arrives, admonishing kids to turn off the lights and tune-up the car, it is framed by 2 minutes of preceding advertisement and 4 minutes following the closing credits.

A logic that argues it is right for us to own cars but others must remain using carts, where children are encouraged on the one hand to conserve and on the other to purchase Barbie's latest dream-house, is clearly paradoxical. But it is a paradox which serves a practical and pedagogic function.

Selling Environmentalism to Kids

Captain Planet and the Planeteers made its television debut on September 15, 1990 as "the world's first animated environmental action-adventure program" (TBS 1990). Brainchild of Ted Turner, Board Chairman and President of Turner Broadcasting System, and a joint venture of TBS and DIC Enterprises, (a major production company specializing in children's programming), the enviro-tainment cartoon airs on more than 220 network affiliate and independent stations nationwide, can be found on cable on TBS, and is shown in

over 50 countries covering almost every continent, creating a vast global market.

Not only is "the world's first environmental superhero" on Saturday and Sunday mornings as a cartoon show, Captain Planet is also "a whole line of fun-filled and imaginative products" including "apparel (for Planeteers of all ages), video games, school supplies, shoes, Halloween costumes, slumber bags and tents, lunch boxes, sports bottles and stickers" (TBS 1990). Even a recent Tupperware catalog (1992) has Captain Planet appearing as a reusable plastic lunch kit and tumbler set for "earth-smart kids!". Just after making its pitch for kids to buy Tupperware, and then for kids to fight pollution, the Tupperware ad concludes with a pitch for kids to "watch the number-one rated Captain Planet show... see your local listings for times and channels" (18).

The merger being forged here, quite apparent and unabashed, blends entertainment and education, prosocial and procommercial, and describes the current liberal paradox in environmentalizing kids: at the same time that they are admonished to conserve, recycle, reuse and respect the limits of the earth, children are aggressively canvassed and cajoled to buy products and consume goods.

Turner Broadcasting System's own expensive, glossy and conspicuously "printed on recycled paper" public relations packet is quite forthcoming in acknowledging its product

marketing strategy ("Licensing and Merchandising: A Cooperative Effort," TBS 1990). They follow a now firmly entrenched practice of creating licensed character products that precede and then drive their subsequent cartoons with the express purpose of selling merchandise to kids. While historically cartoons and cartoon characters were created as entertainment and then often licensed out to merchandisers and advertisers for commercial use, today (as the TBS package makes explicit), licensing and merchandising cartoon characters is not only an integral aspect of cartoon production but, more often than not, its raison d'être.

Engelhardt (1986) attributes this crass commercialism in children's television production to deregulation of the industry by Ronald Reagan in 1983, when policy guidelines for children's shows and limits on advertising time were rescinded. One consequence, the program length commercial cartoon, has premise, planning and production revolve entirely around the licensing and marketing of character products generated for sale. He-Man, Strawberry Shortcake, The Smurfs, The Transformers, Care Bears, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles all represent calculated 'made-for-tv' market strategies designed for the promotion and sale of "lovable" or "action-adventure" protagonists.

Even the 1990 Children's Television Act - which once again mandates limits on advertising time, requires stations to air educational and informational shows for children, and

specifically bans children's programs that are designed to plug products - has not reversed this trend (Center for Media Education 1992). While broadcasters are required by law to document the value of their programming for children, many are not reporting adequately to the Federal Communications Commission, and many of those broadcasters that do report are touting such diverse shows as GI Joe, Leave it to Beaver, and Santa Claus is Coming to Town as "pro-social", educational, and/or informational for children (Aufderheide 1992).

Into this arena Ted Turner entered with a new idea for a children's cartoon - Captain Planet and the Planeteers - selling not only product licenses and action figurines, but a full-fledged "global environmental ethic" (TBS 1990). This merger of corporate mass marketing practices and environmental pedagogy represents, I will argue, an essentially flawed project, and epitomizes a paradox in liberal environmentalism.

Global Visions and the Liberal Environmental Paradox

"We have to manage our planet, and we have to do it on a global basis. It's the greatest challenge that humanity has ever faced, and it's the most exciting time to be alive." -R.E. Turner (TBS 1990, emphasis in the original).

Turner presents the notion of "managing the planet" as a thrilling and unprecedented challenge. Others have been inclined to cast a more wary eye toward global management as, at best, threatening democratic participation and, at

worst, promoting totalitarian responses (cf. Barber 1992; Bookchin 1990). Critics of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT)⁴ fear a slide toward anti-democracy has already begun, citing provisions under negotiation at the Uruguay Round that would give a secret GATT governing body the power to overrule any national or local environmental legislation deemed "unnecessarily" obstructive to trade (cf. Citizen Trade Watch Campaign 1992; Dawkins 1992; Rosenthal 1992; U.S. Environmental and Consumer Groups 1992; Wiener 1992).

"Global management" is an obvious referent to multinational corporate practices, with the "globe" reduced to a site of flexible capital and flexible labor. Integral, as well, to the liberal environmental notion of "managing the planet", is the presentation of nature as, alternately, mother and resource. She/it must be protected so that "we" (postindustrial, late capitalist, consumerist nations) can

⁴The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) is a 108-member international organization that has been in existence since World War II. The Uruguay Round is the latest of a series of GATT multilateral trade negotiations. In GATT negotiations, nations seek to agree on multilateral rules that govern the commercial importing and exporting of goods. Recent controversy has arisen over proposals to revise rules and give the GATT new binding powers that would pre-empt the right of national and local governments to legislate strong environmental protection and other health and safety regulations. If approved these changes would also extend mandatory deregulation to cover not only goods but services, negatively impacting both workers and the environment.

sustain our preferred standard of living⁵. Just as laboring women are "managed" by physicians, who, operating under patriarchal notions of "protection" and control, reduce a birthing woman's activity and experience to the status of a manipulable object - "labor" (Katz Rothman 1993a), so is nature, as mother and resource, objectified and dominated in the name of "care".

Ethical concerns, such as responsibility for future generations or for the quality of the biosphere, are frequently espoused in liberal environmentalism. These concerns, however, are always conflated with the unarticulated, hegemonic assumption that (responsible) capitalism, (liberal) patriarchy and (benevolent) racism are inevitable natural facts. Meanwhile, analysis of the inherent drive within capitalism to both devour global environmental resources and reproduce egregious social injustice is invisible in global management schemes and absent in liberal environmentalist ideology⁶. Therein lies

⁵ Meanwhile, as demonstrated in the Captain Planet episode described above, so-called developing countries may be depicted as either backward and ignorant of environmental issues, or short-sighted and greedy for Western progress.

⁶This is argued succinctly and passionately by social ecologist, Murray Bookchin: "Liberal environmentalism suffers from a consistent refusal to see that a capitalist society based upon competition and growth for its own sake must ultimately devour the natural world, just like an untreated cancer must ultimately devour its host. Personal intentions, be they good or bad, have little to do with this unrelenting process. An economy that is structured around the maxim, "Grow or Die," must necessarily pit itself against the natural world and leave

the paradox; for while the desire to "save the planet" may be experienced as sincere by its proponents, liberal environmentalism is fatally undermined at the outset by its contradictory call for simultaneous environmental change and political, economic and social reproduction.

The Making of an Environmental Superhero

"I had a mandate from Ted to create a superhero, to make a cartoon called Captain Planet". This was reported to me by a woman who, as a high-level executive producer of Captain Planet and the Planeteers, is responsible in large measure for its creative direction and environmental content. I will be citing her frequently throughout the remainder of this chapter. All of her quotes are taken from an interview I conducted with her over the telephone in the summer of 1992. The Captain Planet public relations kit describes the conception of the cartoon in a similar way:

In the fall of 1988, TBS Board Chairman and President R.E. Turner had an idea for an environmental superhero. "The champion of environmental causes should be a superhero who sets out to battle environmental problems in order to preserve the Earth's natural resources," he said. "He will be Captain Planet" (TBS 1990).

Turner's mandate for a male superhero named "Captain Planet" to protect "resources" is immediately telling in many of its ideological assumptions. The earth is portrayed as a passive repository (a resource) in need of a (male) superhero to preserve (and subsequently exploit) its

ecological ruin in its wake as it works its way through the biosphere" (Bookchin 1990: 15).

treasures, by force of military authority (**Captain Planet**) if necessary. Almost by definition, however, a liberal environmental agenda will at the same time attempt to be politically correct:

"We wanted to create a superhero who would not be representative of one country," explains Turner. "He had to be someone that every kid could look up to." With that in mind, the team began developing "the look" for its superhero (TBS 1990).

Just as in media-driven contemporary politics, where "the look" is considered crucial for popular success, so it goes in cartoon marketing. Yet, within the politics of representation, where issues of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness and anti-colonialism create a complex and treacherous terrain for liberal image-packaging, **Captain Planet** is clearly not a superhero "every kid" can look up to, despite the careful attempt to create a "universal" appeal:

"**Captain Planet** was the most difficult of the characters to conceptualize. We knew we had to make him universal, so we made him out of crystal, and gave him the colors of life: sky-blue skin, grass-green hair and earthy brown eyes." (TBS 1990).

Take away the "natural" trappings, however, the blue tint and green hair, and what is revealed is a classic white male superhero, universal only within its own tautology (all superheroes are massively muscular and towering white men). Among his classic Nordic features - strong square jaw, small straight nose, thin upper lip and gleaming white smile - only **Captain Planet's** "earthy brown eyes" (conventionally

for superheros a steely cold blue) stand in stark contrast to what is otherwise an archetypal made-in-the-U.S.A. male god.

Responses to Captain Planet by Children

For Engelhardt (1986), children's television of the mid-eighties reflected a "self-portrait of the Reagan era", with "the Universe of the Action-Figure Superhero" representing the thrill of Star Wars military technology (87). Captain Planet was conceived during this era. Even his ritual departing cry, "The power is yours!," closely mimics Prince Adam's invocation, "I have the power," uttered when transforming into He-Man. Institutionalized and commercialized for well over a decade, male superhero "masters of the universe" are common stock on children's television, and many children are savvy critics and consumers of such narrative (and plastic) figures.

Several of the children I interviewed relate positively to the superhero, Captain Planet, and they favorably view his job as "cleaning up the planet" and "taking care of the bad guys" who pollute. Doubts about the ethics of depicting a superhero taking care of the environmental crisis did arise for some children. Jessica, eleven years old and recently upwardly mobile in a newly blended family, put it this way:

I didn't think it [Captain Planet] was good stuff to watch... It was bizarre and it wasn't down to earth. I mean they were making stuff so, they were making it seem like only a superhero could do it. And you know,

I don't think that's true because, if they're saying that, then they're saying that real people can't recycle. They're just saying that super people can help save the planet and I, that's why I didn't like it, I didn't think that was true.

While agreeing that environmental problems won't be solved by superheros, Mathew, nine years old and from a socialist Jewish activist family, takes a more favorable view of Captain Planet's pedagogic role:

It's mostly just... for your amusement... I mean none of this could really happen in real life... But it tells you about the problems on like the [planet]. I mean they could never be solved in the ways they solve it [in the cartoon]. Like [when] Captain Planet comes out and does all this [superhero stuff].

Mathew goes on to contrast the environmental superhero with his historical prototype, Superman, noting the effectiveness of depicting Captain Planet as dependent on the powers of nature and vulnerable to environmental problems such as pollution and toxic waste:

But it's not as if Captain Planet was Superman. 'Cause Captain Planet goes out and he gets hurt, and he gets his power drained, and they have to lift him up... He just has the powers of the environment. He really can't like fire a laser at your head or anything. And he wouldn't.... He actually sounds like he's doing hard work... And they make his hero character sort of vulnerable...I wouldn't say that's his weakness, I'd say that was his strength... That's why people sorta like him...

Captain Planet appears then to be an ambivalent narrative figure, a floating signifier. Standard superhero for some, positive role model for others, meaningless or even hazardous in other childrens' views. But what of the Planeteers? For as we all know every superhero needs his

cast of supporting characters:

Turner wanted the series to appeal to children of all ages and races. To that end, five Planeteers were created - each from a different region of the globe and each with a different power. Turner's idea grew into a series, Captain Planet and the Planeteers sm (TBS 1990).

Thus are children brought into this configuration of cartoon, crisis, and environmental superhero. "The idea originated by Ted Turner was basically to instill an ethic of international environmental cooperation in kids, and [to] show them that by combining their powers they could create something that's much greater than the parts, create a whole which is kind of embodied in Captain Planet."⁷

Five Kids from Five Countries with Five Magic Powers

The Planeteers, carefully gender-, nation-, and color-coordinated, are "special people," chosen to help save the planet and each provided with a discrete elemental power. As such they comprise a veritable United Nations/Nature.

Wheeler, the U.S. planeteer, is white - not Jew, not Italian, certainly not black, Korean, Latino, Caribbean - and from Brooklyn. (This in itself approaches contradiction, given the demographic characteristics of the culturally diverse New York City borough.) But for his red hair, pinkish skin and slightly shorter stature, he is the spitting image of Captain Planet himself. This brash and

⁷ Personal communication from an assistant producer of Captain Planet and the Planeteers, 6/12/91.

impulsive All-American planeteer - the only one of the group to wear long pants - holds the power of fire. Kwame, the only Black planeteer, comes from Africa and holds the power of earth, grounding the so-called Third World in both a literal and figurative sense. He is portrayed as a calm and sensible leader, and is provided with a strong and muscular body. By contrast, Ma-ti, the Latino planeteer, is quite short and child-like. He holds the "very special" power of heart. Heart might recall a stereotypical "Latin lover" or the excess emotionality commonly attributed to the South. Here it appears to represent indigenous peoples not fully developed, a sweet, non-threatening geo-neighbor to balance the impulsive and fiery neighbor of the North.

The young women Planeteers are of sturdy body and paramilitary style. Gi - whose features, body size and hair style are remarkably similar to Ma-ti's from the South - stands for a generalized "Asia". Her elemental power is water, and she communes with dolphins and other such sea creatures. Except for a demonstrated love of fish, little about Gi can be explicitly identified as Japanese, neither is Japan's global economic clout evident in the character's depiction or development. Linka, the former Soviet turned ambiguously "Eastern European", speaks with a bad Russian accent and holds the power of wind. She has a fondness for music, an analytical mind, and frequently plays the mature, if somewhat stiff, foil to Wheeler's brash adolescence.

Following the cartoon series, one senses a potential 'melting of the cold war' romantic subtext brewing between the two characters.

These then are Turner's multicultural planetees, his vision of international environmental cooperation. Standing in stark contrast to this liberal environmental image-packaging are typical responses made by children about the Planetees. Most children I interviewed recall the Planetees as nameless holders of magic rings that "spurt out" magic powers and can conjure up Captain Planet. Robert, six and from a white, financially-struggling, single-parent family, provides a typical description of the Planetees:

I don't know what they look like but they have rings to make Captain Planet combine: fire, water, wind...

Alexander, eleven and from a white upper-middle class divorced family, gives a similar account of the Planetees:

It's about... these four kids from different countries or something, or five... and they just like try to prevent stuff, and I think when the rings come together or something Captain Planet comes... against... bad guys that are ruining the environment.

Clearly, Captain Planet is more salient for these children than are the Planetees, who emerge almost uniformly as two-dimensional figures amplified and made interesting to children only through the power of their magic rings. Liberal environmentalism appears to falter in its quest to foster a multinational eco-activist identity among children through the promotion of Planetees. Here it

seems to succeed best in instilling a powerful interest in magic rings.

Gaia: Negotiating the Terrain of Nature

Implicit in the liberal defense of capital is a deep ambivalence about the status of Nature, as mother to be protected and as resource to be exploited:

The basic message [in Captain Planet] is to learn that we are part of the earth, and that we have the responsibility to protect the earth... as the thinking species we have a responsibility to protect nature... Nature's not just a bunch of natural resources that have been put here for us to use up as fast as possible... We have to change our perception of the way we view ourselves and the ways of the planet, in relationship to the planet... We're part of it, it's not ours. And we have to protect it because we depend on it for survival.⁸

The crux of any environmental ethic is respect for nature. But beyond this basic premise lie many different interpretations of how, why, and what constitutes "nature" and "respect". Conflicting notions of human and nature relations are demonstrated in the cartoon producer's preceding statement; on the one hand we humans are urged to "change our perceptions" so as to see ourselves as part of nature, and nature as inherently worthwhile, "not just a bunch of natural resources." But inextricably intertwined with this potentially subversive and egalitarian view of nature is the simultaneous notion of hierarchy and

⁸Unless otherwise stated, quotes used here and below are taken from the interview I conducted with a female executive producer of Captain Planet and the Planeteers.

exploitation; we as "the thinking species" are urged to "protect nature because we depend on it for [our] survival."

Whereas Captain Planet the superhero was brainchild of Ted Turner, Gaia, spirit of the earth, was created by the cartoon's high-level female producer to balance a perceived skew towards boys and "male energy":

I put Gaia in to balance Captain Planet...to balance the energy, the male and female energy.

As a cartoon character, Gaia reflects the notion of nature as nurturant and feminine; taken at face value this is a traditional device. Historically, women have been associated with nature (as opposed to culture) and, according to some feminists, as such have been denigrated and oppressed (cf. de Beauvoir 1952; Firestone 1970). But within the conventional trope of woman/nature lies a potentially subversive message, one promulgated by feminists of various theoretical and political persuasions: so-called "maternal" qualities such as compassion, nurturance and empathy are invaluable capacities that preclude exploitation and oppression, and are thus crucial for the survival of the planet (cf. Agarwal 1991; Diamond and Orenstein 1990; King 1990; Katz Rothman 1989; Ruddick 1989).

Though visually rendering Gaia much like a Barbie doll, albeit with brown hair and a tan, her creator demonstrates a budding awareness of this character's subversive potential:

Gaia is a very special character... She is the

embodiment of the planet itself. She is compassionate towards all living things and feels the pain of the Earth's destruction (TBS 1990).

However, this subversive potential is never fully developed in the cartoon narratives. The "spirit of the earth" remains a secondary character and the children I interviewed show a remarkable lack of interest in the Gaia figure. Only one child spontaneously mentions the character by name and role. When Gaia is recalled, it is vaguely as "the lady who gives out the rings". One child, a six year old girl, remembers her as:

the girl-lady that can fly off in the air... she didn't have to have a ring on... cause she's one, well I think she's Captain Planet's mother or something, or a friend.

More often, even when probed, the children had no recall of "a lady" on the cartoon, aside from perhaps a "girl" Planeteer or an occasional female guest character. While one might expect children to anthropomorphize nature and thus, perhaps, view "it" as "her" fairly readily, most children I interviewed paid scant attention to the Gaia character, rarely recalling her or mentioning her by name.

"It's Everybody's Fault": Reproducing Liberal Environmentalism

When I talked to Eddie, ten years old and from a white middle class, two parent family, he reflected on Captain Planet and universal responsibility for the environment:

It's everyone. Everyone does something not good for the environment. It's nobody's real fault. Like, when I was little, I watched that Captain Planet, and... there's like this bad guy and the good guy. And I guess, we're the bad guys and there's not going to be like a miracle or anything.

It's up to us though to prevent it [environmental destruction]... There's no Captain Planet going to clean up the earth and make it beautiful again. It's up to us. We can't... You know, we're the bad guys and we have to turn into good guys, I guess.

Eddie's thoughtful critique of Captain Planet demonstrates the degree to which liberal environmentalism demands that all of us accept personal responsibility for global environmental problems. Children in my study were particularly prone to this individualist ideology, at least on a rhetorical level.

While the plot of Captain Planet always points to evil polluters with names like Hoggish Greedly or Doctor Blight, the message about environmental problems is a conflicting one, with superheros and bad guys at the one end, and 30 second pro-environmental tags urging kids to turn off the lights at the other. The producers of Captain Planet and the Planeteers sees this formula as both entertaining and educating children about environmental problems:

If we'd had a program like Captain Planet thirty years ago we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now... children are going to be, are the leaders of tomorrow. And, because the issues are very complex...they don't understand the issues. I mean you can't find one adult in a hundred thousand that can tell you what creates the ozone hole, or what causes global warming... [After watching Captain Planet] they'll know what the ozone hole is, they'll know what rainforest is, they'll know what acid rain is, they'll know what strip mining is, they'll know what driftnet fishing is...

And what are children supposed to do about these huge, corporate, problems?

Well the kids that I've met feel really empowered... [Be]cause at the end [of the cartoon] they are told what they can do, you know. We give them a thirty-second tag.

Once again we confront the liberal environmental paradox:

children are taught about huge, complex, institutional problems and are provided with simple and relatively painless individualistic solutions:

I can tell you what I've seen... children not letting their dads take bags out of the grocery store... children starting little clean up campaigns in their neighborhoods, starting recycling programs in their schools. A very funny example about a year and a half ago was when one of the grandchildren of one of our executives in the company, a little three year old, wasn't letting his daddy cut down a tree to build a carpark... And I think his daddy says, "Why not?" And the little boy says, "Because Captain Planet says trees are our friends."

Thus is the liberal environmental ethic complete. Trees are to be preserved in suburban backyards, and personal consumption is to be carefully monitored:

So basically it becomes a new environmental ethic, it becomes part of normal behavior, not, not consuming... I mean it was consume, consume, consume...

Meanwhile, multinational corporations are essentially let off the hook. Business - far from being labelled a villain, or in need of careful regulation - is heralded as "doing its share", of its "own free will", in the great universal push for a cleaner environment:

We've gotten criticism from the ultra-right wing that we're anti-business, and we refute that by saying we are pro-responsible business... Business is changing of their own free will...they're reducing packaging...they're doing life cycle analysis on their products to make them less environmentally damaging, from top to tail, from the pollution it creates when it's manufactured, to the amount of landfill space it takes up when it gets thrown away... Proctor Gamble's been doing great strides... We're not twisting anybody's arms here. I mean it's terrific some of the things that are going on, very encouraging!

But the mess the planet is dealing with now, who is responsible for the degradation and waste? According to the

liberal environmental ethic, it is ignorance, not greed, that generated the crisis:

You know, the people who have made the greatest mistakes on this planet, they have not been done out of... you know some of them have been done out of, out of greed, but most of them have been done out of ignorance... People forty or fifty years ago really considered the ocean as a great big dumping ground. They didn't realize that we were killing off all the sea life, they truly didn't realize.

This producer reveals more than simple grammatical awkwardness when she shifts her emphasis, from those most responsible for environmental disaster, to the more abstract "mistakes". "The people who made the greatest mistakes" remain faceless and nameless. Responsibility is conveniently diffused. Corporate interests shielded yet again.

Competing Narratives of Nature and a New World Order

Key themes evident in Captain Planet and reflective of the liberal environmental paradox include: a simultaneous call for children (and others) to both conserve and consume; a diffusion of responsibility that supports the notion of environmental crisis as everybody's fault; and simplistic, individualistic solutions to complex, systemic problems that demand serious social, political and economic consideration and concern.

Liberal environmentalism fails, I argue, when it neglects to critique thoroughly and vigorously the ideological assumptions inherent in our current social relations. A radically new set of social relations between humans and nature, and between humans and humans, is essential to rectify the environmental crisis we face today. This will require a highly politicized and

socialized environmentalism, one that looks well beyond the hegemony of capitalism, patriarchy, science, racism, and the unexamined assumptions of liberal humanist philosophy.

Environmentally sustainable economic systems must replace the free-market capitalism and vestigial 'already existing' state-sponsored socialism responsible for global environmental degradation. At the same time, new epistemologies must be embraced, discourses of nature and humanity that radically reconfigure our social/ecological relations.

In the liberal environmental paradox nature is ambivalently theorized as both mother and resource. But neither mothers nor natural resources have fared well under a capitalist hegemony rooted in an epistemology of nature as 'other', to be feared, dominated and exploited. Alternative notions of nature as Gaia can be politically reactionary, as in the Malthusian doctrine of radical biocentrism, where a transcendent Nature dominates culture/"man" (Bandy 1992). Other epistemologies of 'nature as Gaia' have subversive potential, as in the anti-hierarchical, anti-patriarchal, relational foundation of the various ecofeminisms, where nature and humanity are posited as inextricably linked (cf. Diamond and Orenstein 1990).

Most promising in my view, from within the framework of cultural studies, postmodernism, ecofeminism and emancipatory political activism, is an emerging view of nature as a **social actor**. Aronowitz (1988) proposes a view of nature as both a structural resistance and constraint and an agent of the social

and historical process. Here nature is theorized as a social entity to be respected and related to, at the same time that it is encountered by humans as a boundary condition for action. More than a metaphor, this notion of nature as a social actor posits actual subject positions for "natural objects" such as the ecosystem and human biology in a radical reformulation of what constitutes social relations (315).

Haraway (1992) too approaches nature as a vital actor/actant in a new configuration of social life:

If the world exists for us as "nature," this designates a kind of relationship, an achievement among many actors, not all of them human, not all of them organic, not all of them technological. In its scientific embodiments as well as in other forms, nature is made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans... The commonplace nature I seek, a public culture, has many houses with many inhabitants which/who can refigure the earth. Perhaps those other actors/actants, the ones who are not human, are our topick gods, organic and inorganic (297).

Both Aronowitz and Haraway address crucial social and political ramifications inherent in discursive formations of the environment. Aronowitz, in deconstructing science as discourse and power, exposes its logic of domination. For him emancipatory theory requires that nature, long under the dominion of science, be (re)cognized as a "historical and moral agent" (1988:315). New scientific and technical norms must be discovered if the goal of human emancipation is to inform social and natural scientific theory:

Our temporary certainties will present themselves as science, when, in fact, they will be hegemonic ideologies for a particular era... The world of things... is constituted by the practices and discourses of social life... Once this becomes a new common sense, we can turn

our attention toward the new critical science... a science devoted to constructing a world out of utopian discourses (1986:539).

Haraway also explodes the myth of science as truth, paving the way for radically new discourses on the nature of "nature". Transforming science and nature through rhetorical strategy and socialist-feminist political method, she creates hybrids and monsters, bastard creatures of social and fictional reality that completely and irrevocably disidentify with their patriarchal, capitalist and liberal essentialist forebears:

Perhaps we can... "articulate" with humans and unhumans in a social relationship, which for us is always language-mediated (among other semiotic, i.e., "meaningful," mediations)... Where we need to move is not "back" to nature, but elsewhere, through and within an artifactual social nature (1992:313).

Conclusion

Social critics like Haraway and Aronowitz emphasize the interrelation of social and "nature" relations. Environmental messages to children such as Captain Planet and the Planeteers graphically demonstrate the liberal misdirection of children's very real willingness to help save the planet. In particular, through its contradictory promotion of conservation and consumption, and by exposing children to huge complex environmental problems but providing them only with simplistic, individualistic solutions, Captain Planet and the liberal environmental ethic provide salve but little substance for effectively directing children's environmental concern. It is to actual children and their concerns that I turn next.

CHAPTER THREE

DOING SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

IntroductionWhy Study Children in Sociology?

It is not a new idea in sociology to study children. Children have been an object of sociological study at least since the time Durkheim was writing essays on morals and education (Durkheim 1956, 1961; see also Jenks 1982:146). Child socialization has long been established as an area of expertise within the discipline of sociology, encompassing a wide range of theoretical approaches including structural-functional, Marxist and symbolic interactionist perspectives.

Yet, in his introduction to an edited collection on the sociology of childhood, Jenks (1982) offers a provocative view of socialization theory as serving mainly to justify particular (adult) models of the social world. He argues that the dominant metaphor of "growth" central to most socialization theories obscures the location of children and childhood - as course of action and a social practice - and presupposes a universal, rational adult world into which children are expected eventually to enter and conform (13).

Children, Jenks argues, are viewed much like "savages", and like savages are routinely defined as a "'natural' meaningful order of being" (10). Social constructions of children as natural, emergent, and Other, reinforce

conventional notions of a child-adult developmental continuum that remain untheorized and reproduce hierarchical social relations:

These [unexamined] assumptions embody the values and interests of the theorist, which in turn generate normative models of the social world. In this way children and savages alike are excluded from the analysis or reimported as an afterthought (10).

Although we may take umbrage at Jenks' narrow definition of socialization theory (as an exclusively structural-functional project) I believe he raises several points about the sociological study of children that merit further consideration: What does it mean to include children in the analysis of society? What do we gain by studying children as a discrete social category? And once we move outside the traditional framework of child socialization, what unique methodological issues do sociologists encounter when doing sociological research with children?

Why Sociologists Haven't Studied Children

Waksler (1986) contends that "taking children seriously as sociological subjects encourages the application of a wide range of sociological concepts and theories to children's activities and experiences... and the application of concepts developed in studying children to adult activities" (71). However, she quickly adds, approaching children seriously as subjects and objects of sociological study "is to risk being taken for a fool" (71). This is so, Waksler argues, because in order to discover how children

explain themselves and their social world, sociologists must identify with children and suspend their adult beliefs. Because this is rarely done, children's perspectives are frequently distorted by adult researchers. Waksler cites two "fundamental adult biases that particularly distort children's worlds": the notion of children as "unfinished, in process, not anywhere yet", and the idea that children are "routinely wrong, in error, and don't understand" (73-76).

Like Jenks, Waksler argues that socialization is a "political activity" that needs to be problematized rather than taken for granted, and she calls for more documentation on the child's perspective of the process (76). Not until sociologists suspend their "adult role" is it possible to begin to study children sociologically. Research benefits resulting from this suspension of adult beliefs include: insights into areas where children's expertise exceeds that of adults (this can only happen when notions of adult "superiority" are abandoned); explorations of the "child role" (this contravenes ahistorical notions of children as "natural"); issues and evidence of children as socializers of adults (impossible to acknowledge when children are assumed to be innately incompetent); and phenomenological insight into the lived experience of children (79-80).

In a similar vein, parallels between the place of children and the place of women in sociological research

have been explored by Ambert (1986), Thorne (1987), and Alanen (1990).

According to Ambert, sociologists have not studied children for much the same reason women were invisible prior to the influx of feminist scholarship; because sociology is a discipline with patriarchal theoretical foundations, children (and women) were not considered legitimate topics. In sociology, children have been viewed as peripheral to macro-social issues, or simply as "future replacements for adult members" (13). Ambert notes that even as women became more centrally located in sociological research, due to the impact of the women's movement and through inroads made by feminist scholars, children were left in the margins of sociology, narrowly defined in the specialized areas of socialization, family, and educational institutions.

Ambert attributes this leaving behind of children by feminists to gate-keeping issues within the discipline. She argues that because there is no established, mainstream tradition in sociology for the study of children, it doesn't advance careers, there is little support for sociological research, and there are few outlets to publish (1986:12-13).

A second factor Ambert sees as contributing to the disjuncture between the emergence of women as a legitimate object of sociological investigation, and the relegation of children to only select areas in sociology, is a vestigial feminist ideology that seeks to distance itself from

"traditional feminine roles" (13). Only after major social changes occur do marginal categories enter the mainstream "consciousness" of sociology. Ambert argues that the social upheaval tied to women's massive entry into the workforce, and the consequent propulsion of childcare into the public arena as a social problem, may be the catalyst that legitimates children as a discrete category for sociological study (12).

Alanen, however, argues that it is the unreflective perpetuation of a "triangle of childhood, the family, and socialization" that is chiefly responsible for the absence of children in sociology (Alanen 1990:15). Taking a different tack, she argues that rather than an object of feminist neglect, children are emerging as a sociological category as the direct result of feminist efforts:

Feminist criticism of conventional notions of the family and the project of deconstructing the family form a methodological bridge from a critique of the concept of socialization to a positive notion of childhood as a social construct (15).

Taking up issues about children's place in society, and sociology, raised by Ambert, Jenks, Waksler, and others, Barrie Thorne frames her discussion of women and social change around the question "Where are the children?" (Thorne 1987). Just as the major task of feminism was to re-vision women as central to the social project, Thorne makes an argument for the re-visioning of children as existing within specific historical and social contexts; as coming from

"varied circumstances, experiences, and social relations"; as having unique "worlds of meaning and capacities for action and survival"; and as being competent and canny political actors (98-99).

Addressing methodological issues in doing empirical research with children, Thorne argues that the most suggestive work in sociology is based on qualitative and interpretive approaches (101). Such approaches allow for a reflexivity that is particularly crucial for doing work with children who, Thorne argues, "will never be in central positions of knowledge-creation" (102). She acknowledges that no matter how willing adult researchers may be to give children a "voice", that voice will necessarily be mediated through the representations of adults.

This responsibility of adult researchers on the part of children is in itself mediated by yet another, immutable, social fact: we were all children once (102). Much as DeVault argues for empathic interviewing as a crucial methodological tool in feminist research (1990), the unique relationship of former children to present children can promote, in principle, empathic research techniques that will allow children's experiences to emerge relatively less distorted into adult view.

The recurrent message of sociologists writing about the absence of children in sociology centers on the dual need for undistorted representations of children as active

"participants and constructors in the social processes that make up their, and our, worlds", and the recognition that "childhood remains a political issue enmeshed in ongoing everyday struggles" (Alanen 1990:26).

Part One: Children's Drawings in Social Science Research

How do we suspend our adult beliefs and identify with children in order to understand, for example, children's experience of environmental crisis? What methodological tools do we need to explore the meaning of "saving the planet" for children? Qualitative and interpretive techniques emphasizing reflexivity are particularly useful in this context. I adapted several already existing methods for doing sociological research with children, including ethnographic in-depth interviewing with individual children, and small focus groups. I have also developed a relatively untapped method for doing sociological research with children, using children's drawings of "saving the planet" to study their environmental concern. Below I provide a complete description of my procedures for data collection and analysis of children's drawings of environmental concern. Findings from the drawings research are detailed below in Chapter Four.

The idea of using children's drawings as a research method in sociology came to me in the fall of 1990, while watching children recite essays and present pictures about

environmental crisis on our local public television station (WMHT 1990). I was breastfeeding my infant son at that time, often seated in the overstuffed rocker situated in front of our tv, and I found myself interested for the first time in watching children's television. Perhaps in part because I was experiencing, as a new mother, a heightened state of receptivity and vulnerability, the environmental essay contest, repeatedly broadcast during those autumn months, exerted a powerful impact on me. Visual images of disaster emanating from the hands and mouths of babes struck me with particular force. I formulated both my initial research question (how are children responding to the bombardment of cultural messages directed at them about saving the planet), and my interest in children's drawings, in the course of watching these public service announcements by kids. The use of children's drawings has turned out to be a rather novel method in sociological research.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Children's Art

Psychologists and art educators dominate in the research and theory of children's art. Art educators focus primarily on the pedagogical implications of children's art, concerning themselves with the promotion of aesthetic appreciation, creative expression and competent artistic production in children (Lowenfeld 1970; Eisner 1972; Riston and Smith 1975). Psychologists generally study developmental aspects reflected in children's art,

particularly as they apply to theories of perception, personality and cognition. While a few anthropologists and sociologists have studied some facet of the visual arts (see for example, Alland 1977, 1983; Hatcher 1985; Kavolis 1968), and much has been written on the intersection of society and the arts across the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies, little research exists outside the disciplines of psychology and art education that uses the artistic production of children.

Cognitive and Perceptual Theories of Children's Art

Most theories of children's art focus on the development of the very young child. Reams have been written about the significance of children's earliest scribbles and the ubiquitous tadpole-like creatures children first draw to represent people, the so-called "global-man." (cf. Eng 1959; Alshchuler 1947; Lowenfeld 1970; Golomb 1974; DiLeo 1970).

Gestalt psychologists focus on the perceptual development of the child and view these early drawings as products of children's creative inventiveness. The Gestalt view of children's art, first expounded by Rudolph Arnheim (1954), arose in opposition to the prevailing theory that "children draw what they know, not what they see." This "intellectualistic" account of children's perception, put forward by Piaget and others, viewed children's drawings as an index of their conceptual immaturity. Children were

thought to hold an inferior mental image of reality in their mind's eye which they then attempted to copy or imitate onto paper or clay. The resulting "distorted" representations of people drawn by children were thought to be evidence of their "synthetic incapacity" or early cognitive inability to relate parts and wholes.

Arnheim reversed this theory of incipient cognitive incapacity, arguing that children draw what they see, not what they know. Instead of viewing children's drawings as crude or poorly executed attempts to imitate what they know of the "real" world, Gestalt psychologists emphasize children's inventive creativity in the forms they choose to draw. According to this theory, the child sees the shapes actually given in real life and proceeds to invent graphic forms to represent what is seen, an achievement arrived at through experimentation by creating "structural equivalents" for given forms (Arnheim 1954; Golomb 1974; Eisner 1972). In this view the very young drawing child is an active creator, interpreting and inventing pictographic images to represent the visual world.

Psychoanalytic Interpretations of Children's Art

Psychoanalytic approaches to children's art are rooted in Freud's theory of the unconscious as the determining factor in the development and manifestation of the individual personality. The psychoanalytic perspective views the production of artwork by children as a useful

means of eliciting otherwise hidden or repressed unconscious material, represented on paper in symbolic form, which is then made available for diagnostic and clinical interpretation.

Some Jungian theorists, seeking to establish the existence of universal unconscious symbols, believe that the earliest preferred shapes children draw, such as circles, stars and mandalas, are actual traces of the collective unconscious ingeniously manifested in archetypal signs in the artwork of the young child (Read 1956; Kellogg 1959).

More typically, psychoanalysts, including art therapists, view the art of young children, particularly their abstract painting, as spontaneous expressions of the child's personality and affect (cf. Alschuler and Hattwick 1947; Machover 1950; Kris 1952; Case and Dalley 1990). Color, form, the quality of the drawn line, the use of space, the repetition of patterns, are all regarded as visual expressions of children's deepest and frequently repressed feelings. The representation of emotional expression through art is considered a direct, albeit symbolic, reflection of the unconscious, requiring professional psychoanalytic interpretation (along with sufficient knowledge of the child's case history) to decipher its content.

Alschuler and Hattwick (1947), drawing on their own case studies, offer several observations on the

psychoanalytic implications of color usage in young children's paintings. Children who consistently used black, they argue, "repressed their feelings and anxieties" (37). The color orange was characteristic of "children who stood out for a relatively good adaptation to their environment" (41), whereas excessive use of brown in children's art was an indication of overly-fastidious "cleanliness education in the form of too early bowel and bladder control and also restrictions in play with dirt or other smeary materials" (41).

Strong preferences for drawing curving or straight lines represented two clearly different personality types:

The children observed to work primarily in single straight-line strokes tended to stand out as a group for their relatively assertive, outgoing behavior... By contrast, the children who worked with curved, continuous strokes tended to stand out as a group for their more dependent, more compliant, more emotionally toned reactions (55).

Persistent linear stylistic patterns were found to be significant indicators of personality dysfunctions:

Our analyses suggest that in seeking and clinging to abstract, linear techniques... children [were] symbolically expressing their desire to escape their emotions... When children remained focused on one specific abstract pattern so persistently that their work took on a strongly repetitive or even stereotyped character, they were found to be emotionally disturbed, and their painting pattern tended to be a symbolic expression of their specific conflicts (54).

Crucial for the psychoanalytic interpretation of children's personality through art is work produced spontaneously and as free of cognitive ideational content as

possible:

Abstract or pre-representative paintings and drawings can be, and often are, more expressive of inner feelings than are representative products because the very process of representation involves a conscious awareness of outside stimuli and a reaction to those stimuli rather than a direct expression of self... It is as the child uses creative media freely without intent to represent that he is most likely to express pure feelings quite free from external factors. It is, accordingly, children's abstract products which most truly reflect their free flow of feelings unbounded by ideas (13).

Analysts and art therapists use expressive material in children's artwork not only for clinical diagnostic purposes, but also as an active form of therapy for deviant or otherwise dysfunctional psychic disturbances (Kris 1952, Machover 1950; Case and Dalley 1990). Needless to say, sociologists studying children's art will have very different interests, outlooks, and research goals.

Maturational Plateaus in Children's Artistic Ability

Most theories and empirical studies of children's art focus almost exclusively on very young or preschool children's artistic production and development. Developmental theories of children's art generally extend only from the first year to around age five or six, occasionally stretching into age seven or eight, but rarely past nine years of age.

Once a child successfully completes the transition from pictographic to representational art, around age 5 or 6 (when children begin to show more interest in reproducing visually accurate representations in two-dimensional form)

the differences between children's drawing's increasingly becomes a matter of degree of mechanical skill and less a matter of cognitive and perceptual development. (Eisner 1972; Thomas and Silk 1990).

Drawing ability varies widely in early childhood but often by the time a child enters elementary school, she has achieved a basic mechanical proficiency and perceptual maturity to render accurate representational drawings. By the time they reach early adolescence, around age fourteen or so, most children will have achieved the highest level of artistic skill they will maintain throughout their adult lives (Goodenough 1924; Harris 1963; Lowenfeld 1970; Eisner 1972).

The early establishment of a baseline competency in artistic production is useful knowledge for the sociologist seeking to use children's drawings as data for sociological analysis. From early childhood (five to seven years), through middle childhood (eight to 10 years), through late childhood or early adolescence (11 to 13 years), picture detail and skillful use of artistic materials improves until a competency threshold is reached at about 14 or 15 years of age. Early in the relatively short duration of this developing continuum a basic ability to effectively communicate ideas in works of arts will have been established, usually by the time a child enters elementary school.

Children's Drawings as Social Communication

Most children are reasonably competent artists by the time they reach kindergarten or first grade. It therefore follows that most school-age children are able to adequately represent the content of their social interests and concerns in a drawing so as to be understandable to an outside viewer. As one elementary school art teacher told me, most children communicate ideas in their drawings in an easy and straight-forward manner (Hague 1991). Children are able to depict, with varying degrees of skill and technical mastery, their views about the world in artistic media at the elementary school level. And, according to Thomas and Silk (1990), not only are children capable of expressing their ideas in art, they may actually have a need to communicate their ideas to others through art:

Many children's drawings, in particular those made by older children, can be readily and immediately understood by others. Consequently, it is reasonable to consider at least some of children's drawings as attempts to communicate and, therefore, that communicating with others is sometimes part of children's motivation to make drawings (70).

Given the easy access art production provides for children's expression not only of their feelings and creativity but also for their notions about the social and natural world, I have concluded that the content of children's drawings can provide a useful, reliable and virtually untapped resource of sociological data about children's ideas, values and social concerns.

Using Children's Drawings as Social Data

Robert Coles is a well-known, if rare, example of a social scientist using drawings in order to understand children's experiences and concerns in a social context. Trained as a child psychiatrist, and a self-acknowledged protege of Anna Freud, Coles is best known as a prolific writer on the personal and social experiences of children. Beginning in the 1960's with a six-volume series on the impact of racial desegregation on the lives of some of the children involved (1967), exploring the moral and political values children hold (1986a, 1986b), and continuing with a recent work on the spiritual life of children (1990), Coles always situates his many studies of children's lived experience within a particular social and historical context.

The inclusion of a social perspective distinguishes Coles's work from most psychoanalytic work on children's art and provides support for a sociological adaptation of his method and object of study. His early desire "to know what those people truly feel deep down" (1967:18) and "to find out how individual minds (with all their past history) engage with contemporary change as it makes future history" led Coles to use not only traditional research methods such as participant-observation and in-depth interviews with children, but also the collection and analysis of children's drawings (30).

It is Coles's treatment of children's drawings as data that is most salient for my project. The relevance of children's drawings as social or generalizable data is addressed by Coles tentatively in his early work:

...I am offering the analysis of many hundred drawings as evidence only of what they suggest to a child psychiatrist who has come to know those who drew them. I value these pictures for what they have told me about individual children, rather than children in general or children of one race or another. The fact that many other children, under certain social and historical circumstances, share feelings that these children have been willing to indicate with crayons and paint is probably a fair assumption. That is as far as I would care to take the matter of what scientific relevance this study has (1967:41).

Coles's suggestion that the content of children's drawings is best understood as subjective and individually variable reflects his professional location in psychiatry, a discipline in which the unit of analysis is the (deviant) individual, and where legitimation through affiliation with the natural sciences is vigorously sought. Yet Coles's interest in the social remain strong, and ultimately his work affirms the social relevance of children's drawings when, in volume after volume on various facets of children's lives, he uses their drawings as descriptive data reflective of general social issues and concerns. Reflecting his somewhat ambivalent position on the "scientific relevance" of children's drawings as data, Coles rhetorically asks:

What have these children had to say in the drawings they have done these past years? Is there any reasonable way to categorize and classify their pictures so that the individual child's feelings are preserved, and yet more general conclusions made

possible? I think the answer to the second question is yes, and I will try to show why by describing the interests and concerns these children reveal when they take up crayons or a brush (1967:44).

Coles provides general and rather ambiguous statements about his methods of categorizing and interpreting children's art:

Drawings and paintings can be compared in a number of ways: the use of color; the subject matter chosen; the child's command of form; his [sic] desire to approximate the real or his ease with whatever fantasies come to mind; his willingness to talk about what he draws and explain it, to expand upon its relevance or significance - for his own life or the lives of others around him (1967:44-45).

He emphasizes the intersection of individual and social influences on what children choose to draw but provides no clear procedures for analyzing the content (either social or psychoanalytic) of children's art. His method can be deduced from careful reading of his treatment of children's drawings, which he persistently requests, collects and describes. He uses rich description of individual children's artwork to suggest rather than expound the significance of their social content. Despite his careful disclaimers, the reader never doubts the importance and relevance children's drawings hold for him.

Coles gives several reasons for the use of children's drawings in research: the pleasure children find in creating art work; the relief they often feel at not having to talk to an adult about what they feel; the "ice-breaking" function drawing activities can provide in the interview setting; and not least, his own long-abiding interest in,

and enjoyment of, the creations children produce with crayon and paper. In keeping with his goal to discover how "individual minds engage with contemporary change as it makes future history", Coles finds it consistently relevant to explore and analyze children's drawings:

Each child tries to see, tries to say through the use of crayons and paints what has been seen, tries to give visual expression to a world glimpsed, a world scrutinized and searched for meaning... (Coles 1992:16).

In discussing his work with children over the years, Coles offers an important caveat:

... the drawings and paintings of children, like so much else that makes up our human discourse, have to be regarded within a larger context that goes under the name of historical change... [There is] a great danger in work such as mine: one accumulates a body of "data", publishes it in scientific journals, in books, then proceeds to the next project. Readers examine the work as it is written up and call upon it as fact, as research, to be cited. All the while the world changes, and children respond to what are now new ways of thinking and getting along with others. Yet, all too often, no one is there to record what has taken place: a new everyday order of things translates into new ways of thinking about oneself and others (1992:33, emphasis in original).

A lack of careful attention to issues of history, context, and social change is, I argue, a crucial problem in the only other book by a social scientist (to date) on the social implications of children's drawings.

Reflection of Group Values in Children's Drawings

In his book, Group Values Through Children's Drawings (1966), Wayne Dennis aims to show how children's drawings are accurate indicators of the values of their particular

social group. To prove his thesis, Dennis gathered over one thousand drawings from 11, 12 and 13-year-old schoolboys from a widely diverse set of cultures, races and nationalities. Supplying only white paper and a pencil his instructions to the children were simply to draw a picture of a man:

On these sheets of paper, I want each of you to draw a picture of a man. You may draw any kind of man you wish, but draw a whole man, not just the head and shoulders. You may have as much time as you need. Do you have any questions? (1966:10).

Dennis argues that how a (boy) child draws a man will reveal the social values of the group to which he belongs: "children generally draw the men whom they admire and who are thought of favorably by their societies." (1966:2). Central to his thesis is the notion that when asked to draw something children will most often draw that which they admire or prefer. This notion is supported by Eisner (1972:120) who reports empirical evidence that children will exaggerate those aspects in a drawing that are most meaningful to them. It therefore follows, says Dennis, that dominant social values are exhibited in children's drawings because children will draw those forms which they prefer, and those preferences will be socially determined.

Dennis constructs categories for the boys' drawings of a man that include: widespread preferences; modern dress versus traditional dress; masculinity; smiling or non-smiling faces; actively working or not working; and so on.

Item frequency counts were used to determine category placement. For example, in the masculinity category, ratings were applied relative to the frequency of "masculine" items such as facial hair, weapons, smoking a pipe or cigar, wide shoulders, etc. In the widespread preferences category, ten "unpopular" characteristics, such as eye glasses or crutches, were itemized and their frequency tallied. In this way, for each category, Dennis was able to assess those attributes preferred by boys when drawing a man.

His results show that few groups prefer old men, fat men, disfigured men or poor men. In a finding that Dennis cites as an index of modernization as a goal, most groups were found to prefer modern dress to traditional dress. This was so even among a majority of the Brooklyn Hasidim boys Dennis studied, of whom he expected admiration and preference for the traditional dress of elders. Based on these data, Dennis predicted that these Hasidic boys could be expected to "defect" from their orthodox upbringing in the future (39).

In a controversial, though not unique, finding, Dennis discovered that black boys overwhelmingly "preferred" to draw white men rather than "Negroes." From these data Dennis concluded that black boys aspire to be white:

Nearly all the Negro drawings clearly represent white men, as do other American drawings; few represent Negroes. This finding strongly supports the theory that drawings represent goal figures and that in

appearance, and perhaps in other things, the American Negro wishes to be Caucasian (177).

This conclusion points to a fundamental problem evident throughout Dennis's book; his obliviousness to social values other than those of the dominant group situated within white patriarchal capitalism. Unreflective paternalism is apparent in Dennis's notion of children as passive reflectors of adult values. Unsurprisingly, given this context, girls and women are virtually ignored.

While acknowledging that children's drawings can reflect children's values, Dennis neglects to explore the distinction between children's values and those of adults. He is interested only in discovering dominant, or hegemonic, values in children's drawings. His is a reductive, hierarchical notion of socialization, emphasizing a top-down (rather than interactional, dialogical, or dialectical) direction of influence, wherein the child passively internalizes and reflects group values imparted by adults:

We have indicated that we believe that the drawings of children show not only the values of children but also the values of their societies. This is because most of the values which children hold are communicated to them. Most communication is downward from the older to the younger. (1966:6-7).

Dennis argues successfully for the relevance of children's drawings as empirical social data, but erases the child, presenting children as passive conduits of adult values.

How I Look at Children's Drawings

Looking at how some social scientists have used

children's drawings as social data, we see that Coles uses drawings and paintings extensively in his prolific work on children (cf. Coles 1992), but despite an abiding interest in children's experiences of social issues, frequently looks at pictures as the product of a particular person, of what a particular mind is like (Erikson 1992)¹. On the other hand, Dennis (1966), a social psychologist, utilizes children's drawings to trace group values. He sees children's drawings as a kind of social mirror, passively reflecting those values most esteemed in a given society. Elsewhere, drawings by children have been employed in market research (McNeal 1992); as a curricular tool in the elementary schools (Warren 1991); and for a study on gender differences (Reeves and Boyette 1983). Only the last was conducted by sociologists.

I decided to use children's drawings as a qualitative survey tool, a reasonably efficient means of casting a rather wide net to see what variety and kinds of concerns children might have about environmental crisis. Drawings, I have found, are a relatively quick and easy way to gather social information from and about children. I got

¹Kai Erikson has informally used children's drawings in his work with environmental groups in the Midwest. He reports that children are appropriating cultural images to describe their fears of toxic waste. He argues that children think visually, that even their speech is in terms of visual imagery, and that while they can learn, like adults, to lie with words, their pictures will not lie (personal communication 1992).

cooperative and interested responses from teachers and camp directors, and from all of the children who participated in the study. On the whole, children were not only willing but were eager to participate in the drawing sessions.

Research Methods: Drawings

A convenience sample of 325 children between the ages of five and 15 was drawn from 3 elementary schools, 3 summer camps and 1 neighborhood center in upstate New York, and from 4 elementary schools in South Carolina, throughout the summer and fall of 1991. The majority of children in the study are white, lower-middle to upper-middle class, and under 12 years old. Black children within the same age and class range are also represented. Because specific class status was not always available, a subsample of poor (low-income) Black children from a small blue-collar city in upstate New York was selected. Also included in the sample are: children attending special education classes (these account for many of the children over 11 years); two Chinese-speaking children; two wheel-chair using children; and a child with Down's Syndrome.

Children were asked to, "Draw a picture about what it means to you when someone says, You have to help save the planet." No preliminary discussion occurred prior to the drawing session, other than to introduce the activity as part of a project on children and the environmental crisis. All drawing sessions were conducted by the author or by

classroom teachers following the research protocol. Drawing sessions were of approximately twenty to thirty minutes duration. At the conclusion of each session children were given an opportunity to discuss their drawings (in a group setting) in response to the question, "Can you tell us what is going on in your picture?" These brief (approximately five minute) discussions were tape recorded or copied onto the back of each child's drawing, and were later used for assistance in content analysis. Because some children drew more than one picture, a total of 354 drawings was collected. All were used in constructing thematic categories, but only a child's first drawing was tabulated for comparison across grade, gender, race, race/class, and geographical region.

Using a qualitative method of content analysis, I analyzed each picture so as to discover thematic categories of children's environmental concern. My method was exploratory, interpretive, and systematic (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967). Drawings were initially sorted according to their manifest content, including (but not limited to): subject choice; inclusion or exclusion of human figures; inclusion or exclusion of signs of environmental degradation; the use of slogans; and/or positive or negative sanctions. Gradually piles of drawings began to take on distinctive characteristics - a particular emotional tenor, and/or ideational theme. These data then functioned in a

dialectical fashion to inform the categorization of subsequent drawings. A pattern emerged in the content and classification of these children's drawings, leading to the construction of six thematic categories of children's environmental concern: 1) Everything's Okay; 2) Taking Personal Action; 3) Calling for Action; 4) Depicting the Problem; 5) Indicting the Problem-Makers; and 6) Recasting the Problem.

Some Advantages to Using Drawings in Sociological Research

The most obvious advantage to using drawings as a research tool is that drawings are non-verbal, and thus provide an alternative means of communication for children (and adults). In lieu of direct observation of children's environmentally-concerned behavior, drawings can also provide ethnographic clues about children's social strategies, meaning-construction, symbol-making, role-taking, differing levels of reflexivity, differing orientations to the environment, and differing orientations to adult messages. Like language and behavior, drawings can reveal "attempts by the child to act on his [or her] environment, to make that environment sensible and orderly" (Denzin 1979:141).

Children's drawings can also reveal "salient interaction objects" which can be studied by "recording the repeatability ratio of all the [symbols] in the [drawings]" (Denzin 1979:123) Those symbols with the highest

repeatability ratios are indicators of salient or problematic objects. Rather than understanding children's drawings as simply reflecting adult values, "such a mode of analysis permits the observer to focus centrally on the question, How do children take account of one another?" (Denzin 1979:123-24). I have expanded Denzin's question to ask, How do children take account of themselves and problematic social issues in their drawings of environmental crisis? In Chapter Four I provide a detailed look at this process and children's concern, as revealed in children's drawings about "saving the planet".

Part Two: Interviewing Children in Sociological Research

In my discussion above I have intimated a particular theoretical stance on the issue of doing sociological research with children. Let me begin now to state my position more directly. As a sociologist I have some problems with the discussion of children as a "special" category for social science research. The basis of this special status for children is usually argued on the grounds that children have unique developmental characteristics that irrevocably separate them from adults. This developmental difference is argued as being in effect on all fronts: cognitively, emotionally, physically, in every way, children are seen as inferior to adults.

As it was for women, children are usually placed on a sentimental pedestal that defines them as at once precious

and useless (Zelizer 1985). Psychological theories of stage developmental ability are concretized into natural fact, and it becomes an almost rote requirement to refer to children's inability - to articulate verbally, to express emotions, to think abstractly, to hold political attitudes - all on a rigid time schedule based on arbitrary notions of chronological age as the crucial determining factor.

As much as sociologists argue for the mutability of human nature depending on the social and historical context in which humans interact, we have yet to fully acknowledge and accept the idea that child development is in large measure a social construction. I do not intend to elaborate the argument here (see Walkerdine 1988 for a detailed discussion of the "production of rationality" in children), but simply raise it as an issue in need of much more careful sociological study, particularly as it applies to our attempts, as sociologists, to do research with children.

While children are becoming more accepted as a legitimate area of sociological study (as witnessed by the recent official establishment of sections on children in the American Sociological Association and the International Sociological Association), some unreflective assumptions remain within the discipline regarding children. Recently a colleague trying to organize a conference on sociological research with children was denied funding by the American Sociological Association. When she wrote to inquire why

funding was denied, she was informed that:

"Because the field of child study has been an interdisciplinary one and one in which scholars have been working for a number of years, the goals of the workshop [to explore the unique methodological issues that arise in doing sociological research with children], although commendable, did not seem to break new ground. For this reason, the proposal failed to meet the "cutting edge criterion" which is one of the most important in the judging of proposals" (Beshers 1993).

Are we to understand that sociologists have nothing to contribute to the study of childhood as a social status, children as a social category, and children as social actors? I am arguing here that one major contribution sociologists can make to the study of children and childhood is to place them once again within the context of social construction; to de-naturalize children as it were. Issues that arise in doing sociological research with children are not that very different than issues in doing sociological research with any social category or group. Problems arise, I believe, when we stereotype all children, all women, all Blacks, all the poor, all colonized peoples, all gays and lesbians, all anybody, as being completely identical in kind. While I value the insights, for example, that DeVault (1990) provides in her analysis of methodological issues in doing feminist research with women, I feel somewhat discomfited by the universalizing assessment she makes of women's speech as halting and hesitant. Inversely, are we to understand surefooted communication as a peculiarly male trait? This is just not my experience as a woman who

listens and a woman who speaks.

The same issue can be raised in respect to children. Some children are capable of extensive, thoughtful, and articulate responses in the interview context, at varying ages and "stages". I have mustered monosyllabic responses from 5 year olds, 9 year olds, 11 year olds, and 13 year olds. Equally, I have garnered elaborated and interesting responses from children as young as three. What are we to make of this? I am arguing that children's unique categorical status exists because socially they have been defined as such. Just as women, Blacks, poor, disabled, drug addicts, retarded, and other "marginal" categories display certain (often physical) features in common, but are individually diverse within their categorization, so are children members of a social category defined by physical difference, but infinitely variable within that overarching construction.

Having said that, I now want to make a somewhat different methodological argument - against the notion that it is somehow impossible for the adult sociologist to adumbrate children's experience in any reliable way. That adults necessarily will distort children's experience, by sheer virtue of the act of interpretation, is closely related to current concern in academic circles about ethnographic research in general. Alice Echols, in a book review on the Stonewall riots (1993:215-217), cites

historian Michael Frisch as observing that, with the increasing use of oral historical accounts as evidence, there is an inclination to "grant 'experience' sole interpretive authority" (216). To accede this, I believe, would be a serious mistake. I am arguing that it is inherently the role of the sociological researcher to analyze and interpret social experience. Ethnographers, particularly in the field of anthropology, have been struggling to reconcile the contradictions of "real" versus "constructed" accounts of social life (Clifford and Marcus 1986; see also Katz 1991b). But many sociologists, particularly those influenced by the insights of postmodernism and deconstruction, take no issue with the notion of social life as constructed, as mediated, as a moveable text. The issue of "authenticity" become moot in the context of mediated social relations. Having said all that, I agree with Waksler (1986) in her assessment that sociologists need to phenomenologically alter their perspective when researching children (or anyone else, for that matter), so as to enter into their social worlds as reflexively as possible. But, like Thorne (1987), I recognize (and provisionally accept) the unique power differential I wield as an adult who actively produces "knowledge"; I understand that children's experience of the social world which I seek to understand and express will necessarily be mediated through my activity as a researcher

and writer. There is no pure conduit through which authentic and true experience can be conveyed; not through art, not through literature, certainly not through popular culture, and not through scholarly attempts at ethnographic realism. This is a site of social responsibility that I believe needs to be acknowledged and respected if one is to do sociological research with children.

Research Methods: Interviews

I interviewed nearly 100 children in three summer day camps and two elementary schools in upstate New York over a period of two years using three different formats: post-drawing sessions; small focus groups; and in-depth individual interviews. This number (100) includes all children who participated in focus group interviews of 15 to 30 minutes duration, and children interviewed in-depth by me individually for anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour. The drawing sessions I have discussed above. After children completed their drawings they were briefly interviewed in a group setting about the content of their drawing (Can you tell us what is going on in your picture?). For the most part these interview data were used to aid my content analysis of children's drawings, but occasionally post-drawing session interviews were extended into a focus group format.

Focus Groups

Although it has fallen somewhat into neglect, focus

group research has been part of the sociological repertoire since the mid-1940s, when Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall used it to study the effects of wartime propaganda on adult radio listeners (cf. Merton and Kendall 1946; Merton et al. 1956; as cited in Morgan 1988). More recently, market researchers have seized upon focus groups as an important qualitative tool for understanding and exploiting children's consumer behavior (Advertising Age 1992; McNeal 1992; Morgan 1988).

I used focus groups to interview children about their environmental concerns in several different contexts: immediately before drawing sessions; immediately after drawing sessions; and without an accompanying drawing session. I conducted focus groups outdoors on picnic tables or seated in a rough circle on the grass in three summer day camps in upstate New York, and indoors in small rooms away from the larger classroom in two elementary schools in upstate New York.

In focus groups conducted after a drawing session, several children, usually two, three, or four at a time, would describe their drawings and then discuss as a group issues and concerns they had about environmental crisis. Often, when one group of children was involved in a drawing session, I was able to take another, smaller group, for a focus group interview of approximately twenty to thirty minutes (the duration of a drawing session). When used

before a drawing session, or in lieu of a drawing session, I would begin discussion by asking group members "What does it mean to you when someone says, You have to help save the planet?. I directed the focus group interviews in a semi-structured fashion, asking specific questions to open up and guide discussion, but allowing children in the group freedom to respond and move the discussion into spontaneous directions, so long as it was in some way relevant to the topic of environmental concern.

One advantage of using the focus group format is that it displaces the typically hierarchical relationship of adult to child, particularly when conducted in an informal manner by the adult researcher. Other advantages and disadvantages of focus group interviews are probably quite similar in doing research with adults as well as with children. Reticent members are often inspired by the comments of others in the group, and may be more willing to speak in a group forum (this, of course, can also work in the reverse). The only disadvantages I encountered in doing focus groups were a mundane and pragmatic kind; later when transcribing from tapes, I often had difficulty identifying which child was speaking when in a group; and sometimes, when focus groups were conducted before a drawing session, or in rapid succession because of time constraints in the elementary schools, a group would be interrupted right in the middle of a great discussion so that the children could

go draw their pictures, or in order to usher in the next focus group. For some groups fifteen to twenty minutes was plenty of time, but for others, another thirty minutes would have been extremely productive.

Only once did a focus group veer off into irrelevant (for my purposes) areas of discussion or banter, and become impossible to retrieve. Given commonsense notions about children as having short attention spans and disruptive behavior patterns, this is a remarkably small number. Very occasionally a focus group never got off the ground, there being no member interested or aware enough about the topic to act as a catalyst for discussion. These were also quite rare, and sessions were usually cut short in either event.

Ethnographic Interviews with Kids at a Summer Camp

In the summer of 1992 I returned to one of the day camps where I had conducted drawing sessions the summer before, in order to interview children individually and in-depth about their environmental concerns. The camp's director, a young man in his mid-twenties, was very helpful, and gave me free rein to roam the camp and interview any child willing to participate, so long as it didn't interfere with the child's scheduled activities. Some of the camp counselors were aware of my presence as a researcher studying kids and the environmental crisis, and most assumed I was some kind of environmentalist. I had very little dealings with the adult staff, and spent practically all of

my time at the camp talking to individual children outdoors: under trees, while walking through the camp, at picnic tables during lunch, and while fishing in the large, greenish pond. Children at the camp seemed to be quite comfortable with my presence, and probably considered me as just one of the staff.

While children were involved in scheduled activities throughout their day at camp, most had at least some time in which they were free to choose an activity. I often stopped to talk to a child seated at a picnic table, watching a sport activity, or tending a fishing line, using a small cassette tape recorder to record our conversations. Sometimes other children came by to inquire as to what we were doing, and then those children would often ask to be interviewed. In this way, over the course of a summer, I talked in-depth to more than twenty-five children about their experience of environmental crisis. The results of those discussions, and of the focus groups as well, are found below in Chapter Five.

Conclusion

Children are not simply "future replacements for adult members" of society. Nor are they a universal category determined by solely by age. Children are already-existing social actors with race, class and gender identities who interact and interpret their social lives and experiences - in families, in classrooms, with friends, and in larger

social arenas such as politics, media, and environmental crisis.

Concerns of language and cognitive development as obstacles to doing sociological research with children are exaggerated. Researchers willing to suspend their adult beliefs and identify with children quickly discover that children are reasonable and coherent respondents in the interview setting (cf. Yarrow 1960; Amato and Ochiltree 1987; Gunther 1992).

Many social scientists, even within our own profession, argue that sociology has nothing "cutting-edge" to contribute to methodological issues in studying children. I am arguing here that sociology does have a major contribution to make in advancing social science research with children. Our contribution is rooted in the simple, fundamental, yet often forgotten premise that children are people. Not becoming, not Other, not savages, not incompetents, sociologists in particular should recognize that children are historically and culturally situated social actors who are integral, yet frequently neglected, contributors to the creation and understanding of our social life.

CHAPTER FOUR

"IF WE DON'T DO ANYTHING NOW, THERE WON'T BE ANYTHING LEFT":

CATEGORIES OF CONCERN IN CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS OF
ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

First save the planet, then you can watch cartoons.
Slogan found on an infant t-shirt.

Adult Notions of Children's Environmental Concerns

How are children responding to the bombardment of cultural messages directed at them about saving the planet? As I noted in Chapter One, many adults imagine that messages about environmental crisis go right over the heads of little children. Environmental issues are seen as too abstract for children to comprehend (Hicks 1991).

Others worry that children are unfairly burdened by "grown-up" concerns such as global warming and nuclear disaster. Research on children's responses to the threat of nuclear war often refers to "nuclear nightmares" and the "psychic numbing" of the nuclear-concerned (Mesnikoff 1989). Children are seen as viewing problems such as global environmental degradation or cataclysmic nuclear disaster as overwhelming and far beyond their measure of social influence or control.

Some adults argue that this attitude in children leads to cynicism, apathy, or even nihilism in children in relation to the larger society. In her study of the impact of nuclear threat on young people, La Farge (1987) worries that children are becoming "survival artists" in an effort

to cope with intense vulnerability and "learned helplessness" (89). In the face of nuclear proliferation, she states, many children are "restricting their emotions", retreating into private or even religiously fundamental worlds, and withdrawing from the political process (74-75).

But, as I have also shown in Chapter One, a concomitant body of writing about nuclear and other crisis socialization portrays children in a quite different light; as overzealous, intolerant, and self-righteous proselytizers (see especially Coles 1986:243-279; Quindlen 1990). Multiple representations of children as "eco-tyrants" are evident in the popular press, where pejorative images of environmentally-concerned children are promoted with headlines such as, "The Enforcers: Teach Your Parents Well" (Garelik 1991), and "Newest Parental Nightmare: The Eco-Smart Child" (Slesin 1990).

Still other adults are troubled by the consumerist content of environmental crisis messages for children. They ask, Will concern for the well-being of the planet motivate children to participate as fully actualized, self-managing citizens in cooperative, ecological democracies?¹ Or are children learning instead to be simply "caring" consumers in a vast, global, "green" marketplace? (Coward 1990; Bolotin

¹ But see Walkerdine (1988) for a critique of the notion of "self-managing" citizens and rational democracy in the production of cognitive development in children.

1990; Bookchin 1990).

Why Study Children's Concerns?

The relationship between how children are perceived and how they perceive themselves is a dialectical one. Children simultaneously shape and are shaped by the prevailing culture (Alanen 1990; Power 1986). Children reflect society; children interpret society; children co-create society. When studying children's interpretations of social issues, we learn not only what children's concerns are, but what adults' concerns are, and importantly, how the two intertwine and perhaps compete.

This last point is noted by Ambert (1986) in her critique of the virtual absence of children in sociological research:

We know very little about how children manage or negotiate the points of divergence and of convergence between the realities presented to them by their parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and mass media (7).

Convergences and divergences in young people's experience of social life have been explored in different ways by Fiske (1989), Hebdige (1988), Katz (1990), McRobbie (1990), Willis (1977; 1990) and others in cultural studies. In their work on youth, these cultural analysts draw on three interlocking concepts: hegemony - whereby dominant values in a society become so taken-for-granted as to be invisible to members, despite their often pervasive oppressiveness; consumerism - as simultaneously a means of social control and a medium of self-creation or "symbolic work" (Willis 1990); and resistance - the subversive

response by youths (in subcultures and other social settings) to push back against the structural constraints of late capitalist society, often through popular cultural expressions of personal style (Hebdige 1979; McRobbie 1988).

There is then a dual argument for studying children's interpretations of social issues: children are intimately bound up with the creation of society, thus their lived experiences are inherently valuable as social facts; and, children's perspectives and concerns reflect aspects of adult society that might otherwise remain occluded or merely implicit except as revealed "through the eyes of a child." Always there lurks a danger of sentimentalizing children - as pure and innocent surveyors of emperors (or empires) without clothes - but the fact remains that children provide unique, and grossly unexamined, perspectives on the social world (Ambert 1986, Waksler 1986).

Therefore, we might expect children's responses to social crisis issues to reveal: 1) implicit adult agendas and concerns; 2) hegemonic or dominant social values that might otherwise remain obscured; and 3) vital strategies or tactics used by children to negotiate meaning within existing social structural constraints.

Research Methods

A convenience sample of 325 children between the ages of five and 15 was drawn from three elementary schools, three summer camps and one neighborhood center in upstate

New York, and from four elementary schools in South Carolina, throughout the summer and fall of 1991. The majority of children in the study are white, lower-middle to upper-middle class, and under 12 years old. Black children within the same age and class range are also represented. Because specific class status was not always available, a subsample of poor (low-income) Black children from a small blue-collar city in upstate New York was selected. Also included in the sample are: children attending special education classes (these account for many of the children over 11 years); two Chinese-speaking children; two wheelchair-using children; and a child with Down's Syndrome.

Children were asked to, "Draw a picture about what it means to you when someone says, You have to help save the planet." No preliminary discussion occurred prior to the drawing session, other than to introduce the activity as part of a project on children and the environmental crisis. All drawing sessions were conducted by me or by classroom teachers following the research protocol. Drawing sessions were of approximately twenty to thirty minutes duration. At the conclusion of each session children were given an opportunity to discuss their drawings in a group setting, in response to the question, "Can you tell us what is going on in your picture?" These brief (approximately five minute) discussions were tape-recorded or copied onto the back of each child's drawing, and were later used for assistance in

content analysis. Because some children drew more than one picture, a total of 354 drawings was collected. All were used in constructing thematic categories, but only a child's first drawing was tabulated for comparison across grade, gender, race, and race/class, and geographical region.

Using a qualitative method of content analysis, I analyzed each picture so as to discover thematic categories of children's environmental concern. My method was exploratory, interpretive, and systematic (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967). Drawings were initially sorted according to their manifest content, including (but not limited to): subject choice; inclusion or exclusion of human figures; inclusion or exclusion of signs of environmental degradation; the use of slogans; and/or positive or negative sanctions. Gradually piles of drawings began to take on distinctive characteristics - a particular emotional tenor, and/or ideational theme. These data then functioned in a dialectical fashion to inform the categorization of subsequent drawings. A pattern emerged in the content and classification of these children's drawings, leading to the construction of six thematic categories of children's environmental concern: 1) Everything's Okay; 2) Taking Personal Action; 3) Calling for Action; 4) Depicting the Problem; 5) Indicting the Problem-Makers; 6) Recasting the Problem.

Findings from the Present Study

An overwhelming majority of children's drawings demonstrate an awareness of environmental crisis (87 percent). Nearly half of all the children (47 percent) - including 67 percent of kindergarten and first graders, and almost half of all the girls (47 percent) and boys (47 percent) - depict themselves or others taking personal action for positive social/environmental change (see Tables 1 and 2). Descriptive data show that while some children express (in their drawings and in subsequent interviews) a daunting awareness of the power and effort required to "save the planet", many children feel empowered, not unduly burdened by the call for global stewardship. A detailed description of each thematic category is provided below, to illustrate different aspects of children's environmental awareness and concern, and to raise issues and questions of potential theoretical significance about the environmentalization of children.

Categories of Children's Environmental Concern

Everything's Okay (n=33, 10% of total)

These drawings are imbued with an aura of deep tranquility. Each picture reveals an apparent absence of stress and evokes a quiet sense of repose. Reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, one young girl's picture is replete with butterflies, a deer, two smiling girls, a fancy bird. Even an intricately drawn green and red-eyed snake is shown amicably curled around a sturdy tree. Nature is presented

to us as serene, home as secure. Flowers, rainbows, trees, even one child's dark cloud and rainy scene conjure up the pastoral image of nature at peace and in balance. People-populated landscapes are curiously absent here - comprising only 15 percent of the category - while animals, including among others a horse, dog, birds, turtles, snakes and frogs, are more frequently represented (25 percent). Homes when they appear are happy-looking places, nestled in a landscape devoid of any indication of problems, pollution, damaged ozone layers or recyclable trash.

While we might assume that young children drawing such pictures are simply arrested at a pictographic stage of arcadian landscape production (i.e. little children always draw sunny scenes and pretty flowers) - and are thus quite likely unaware of "save the planet" messages - let us first look carefully at the data. Almost half of all the drawings in this category (45 percent) include some rendition of a healthy, happy planet earth. In one engaging variant a nine-year-old Girl Scout draws the earth as a smiling global figure wearing top hat and flowers, a continent for a nose, and arms and legs that protrude from its benign rotundness. Some children portray the earth in space amidst other planets in the solar system, while others place it high or low in the sky of their cheerful landscapes, often right between simultaneous depictions of the sun and the moon. At the very least, these children can be seen to have

recognized and acknowledged a significant element of the "save the planet" message.

If these children are unaware of environmental crisis, we might expect a correlation of chronological age/grade, with the youngest children representing the least environmentally aware. However, this is not borne out in the present study. In fact, six times as many 2nd and 3rd graders (23 percent) drew unpolluted nature scenes as compared to 9 percent of the youngest participants in kindergarten and 1st grade (see Table 1).

Given the undeniable ubiquity of environmental crisis messages to children, it is significant that those in the (relatively) higher grades are overrepresented in a category that seems to imply total innocence or blissful obliviousness about "saving the planet". Perhaps the appellation, "Everything's Okay," is too simplistic, too unidirectional to adequately describe this kind of environmental concern. Pictures of planets and incongruities of age differences in this category seem to mitigate against sheer obliviousness as its defining factor.

Could it be these children are too aware of environmental crisis, and are expressing psychological avoidance, fanciful escape from overwhelming, stressful "planetary" demands? Perhaps. But there are reasons to doubt such a premise. The content of these pictures evinces much pleasure in natural scenes. And there are virtually no

indicators of the bizarre or the strange - content that might reasonably be expected in representations of children's repressed fear. Another reading - going beyond the apparent, yet consistent with the overt content of the drawings - suggests that these idyllic scenes might depict the world put right again, after the work of saving the planet has been done. Or perhaps these children are painting a portrait of a world worth saving, a motivational goal for would-be "planetees". This is supported by the comments of one 3rd grade boy, describing his pastoral scene, "It's a forest with a waterfall and a river really clean, and it's nice and clean and there's no garbage on the ground." Another child, whose first drawing depicts smiling figures picking up garbage (and therefore is not included in this category), drew a second picture of a house, a bird, and a flower. She reports, "This is the earth, and this is Pluto. And here is me, I'm cleaning up all the garbage and putting it into the wastebasket. And there's one more piece [of garbage to pick up]". Referring to her second picture, she says, "This is it all cleaned up. And I'm inside, playing with my friends."

While such examples suggest that some of these children are responding to environmental concern, if in a subtle mode, it remains possible that many are simply unaware of environmental crisis. For, when asked about their drawings, most failed to directly mention any specific environmental

problem or issue. Thus, despite some ambiguity between the content and descriptions of their drawings, children in this category appear to be unaware of any crisis in "save the planet" messages.

Taking Personal Action (n=152, 48% of total)

Almost half (48 percent) of all the children in this study drew pictures of themselves and/or others actively participating in some kind of environmental activity; or the artist provided clear, spontaneous verbal comments indicating such activity is implied in the picture. One child's picture of a landscape, with objects circled and slashed with a line, illustrates this latter type. The eight-year-old girl describes, "There's a whole bunch of junk on the ground and I pick it up... I made a [no] sign." Several of the younger children express their personal action in this way, verbally but not figuratively locating themselves in their pictures.

More than two-thirds (67 percent) of the K-1st grade youngsters drew and/or described themselves in environmental activity (see Table 1). Examples include releasing dolphins from underwater cages, stopping people from capturing animals in the rainforest, "help[ing] elephants live forever so they don't do what the dinosaurs did (they all died)," and picking up garbage, including on the moon: "I went to the moon when I was 2 years old. They have garbage there too. I helped pick it up." These youngest children (5-6

years old) exhibit a remarkable, if idiosyncratic, awareness of environmental issues, along with a marked sense of personal agency in the face of global problems.

Teaching or enlisting others to help save the planet is a common theme throughout these drawings. Describing his picture - a bright and smiling figure bending cheerfully to pick up an object - one 5-year-old boy states, "...I went outside and found some poison that bad boys left on the ground. It was sickness poison. I put it in the garbage. Kids should learn from their parents that poison is bad." This is a rare example of a child directly citing parents as socializing agents about environmental issues. More typically these children depict themselves as socializers "environmentalizing" others, as, for example, in a drawing of two smiling girls and a scowling male figure by a 5th grade South Carolina girl, who writes, "The girls are showing the man to not pulite [sic]. Throw trash in the trashcan." Throwing away trash and picking up garbage are dominant themes, with 60 percent of all the drawings including some rendition of people personally "cleaning up" the environment.

All the children depict themselves and/or others performing some kind of constructive action to improve environmental conditions. There are, however, qualitative differences in the ways children render the degree of effort required to "save" a planet. While an overwhelming majority

draw smiling, cheerful figures busily picking up garbage or recycling trash, a few children (7 percent) add representational details or dialogue that underscore the hard work they perceive as necessary for getting the monumental job done. Preparing to clean up a messy park, one little girl in a drawing tells her friends, "We better put our shoes on." "Whew!", a girl in another drawing declares, "all of this work I did will pay off." "It means it's a difficult...", a boy writes at the top of his page. "Yuck," protests another child's figure, working at sorting and picking up trash. Several children draw figures wiping sweat from their brow, and one picture in particular seems to sum up the theme that saving the planet is hard work. Smiling bravely, a little girl holds the entire earth on her back. "The fate of the world is on our shoulders," the fifth-grader's heading declares.

A perfectly equal gender division occurs in this category, with almost half of all the girls (47 percent) and boys (47 percent) drawing someone taking personal action to help the environment. Some gender differences in theme preference can be detected however, with more girls drawing "protecting, preventing and nurturing" themes - such as planting trees or saving animals - while only boys (although in only two cases) depict "avenging" as taking personal action. Instances of avenging polluters include a figure with a gun "kill[ing] Captain Dirt Man", and a huge

hand holding a pistol, shooting "the Litter Man."

Both boys and girls draw themselves using technology to repair environmental problems. Technical solutions range from the pleasantly mundane (vacuum-cleaners suctioning up garbage from the surface of the earth, children sweeping the planet with brooms), to the celestial. In one third grade girl's drawing, two girls in spacesuits, attached by thick tubes to their rocketship, approach the planet crying, "I will save the Earth!" In another the power of the sun is used to propel a young boy's solar car. One child, a six year old boy, uses a brightly-striped hot air balloon to depict himself picking up beer bottles floating in the sky, against a backdrop of a multi-ringed planet.

Throughout every thematic variation, which includes one instance of a child (a Black boy from South Carolina) drawing himself walking up the steps of the White House to inform the President about "bad polluters who should go to jail", the dominant response to environmental concern is a sense of personal agency. These children unambiguously convey, in visual and/or verbal terms, that they feel they can do something about the "problems with the planet." The meanings and implications of this kind of environmental empowerment for children will be examined further in the discussion section.

Calling for Action (n=71, 22% of total)

Looking at these drawings, one is immediately struck by

the incessant prevalence of the imperative, as over and over the viewer is exhorted to "HELP SAVE THE PLANET!" and "MAKE OUR EARTH A HAPPIER PLACE!". Words take on a special significance in this (second largest) category of children's environmental concern (22 percent), where drawings are distinguished by an absence of human figures, a surfeit of positive sanctions, and a heavy reliance on slogans and signs demanding environmental action. The dominant message is a rallying cry to others to eradicate environmental problems.

For some children the effort to persuade others to environmental activism results in a pure symbolic gesture. Many children simply draw recycling cans, or even more succinctly, the circular arrows of the "reduce, reuse, recycle" symbol. Several incorporate the circular symbol of the peace sign along with the recycle sign or with a picture of the earth.

Most children combine images of environmentalism - planets, recycling cans, and natural landscapes are the most common - with words, slogans and text. In some pictures the text threatens to overwhelm, as in one 12 year old girl's drawing, where almost half the page is written commentary:

Q: What do you think of when someone says you have to help save the planet[?]. A. Recycle. pick up trash. Try to help people be aware of problems such as the holy [sic] ozone. If you see a piece of litter pick it up.

Other children quite literally plant signs in their

pictures' front yards, reminiscent of local election campaigns, with pointed messages about the environment. The slogans below are from individual signs in a drawing by an 8 year old girl:

"Recicle! [sic]". "help save our earth!". "You can save our animal friends by saving their homes." "don't ploute [sic]". "Save rainforests". "You can help us save the earth." "have composts!".

Drawing posters or signs rather than human figures in action can be interpreted as a kind of political activism. Children's poster art, much like that of such diverse artists as Goya, Kollwitz, Picasso, Hopper and Remington, is seen in this way as providing "social comment and rhetorical assertion" (Coles 1992:49).

There are several ways children approach this aesthetic and political stance in their drawings about environmental crisis. Some try to educate their viewers, using their drawings as a way to show others proper environmental actions. One fourth-grade South Carolina boy demonstrates a remarkably informed knowledge of environmental issues in his drawing, including suggestions for positive actions such as using solar energy and joining Greenpeace.

Other children use "before and after" techniques, dividing the page into two frames, with the earth (or a landscape scene) depicted first as polluted or damaged, and then as repaired or cleaned up. "See what happens when you don't take care of the Earth," one fourth grade girl writes. "See what you can do when you clean up." This can also work

in reverse, as in another 4th grade girl's drawing, "Make your world a better place" (smiling, green and blue planet)... "not worse" (orange and brown planet "all steamed-up" emitting red rays and an angry grimace).

Many of these children demonstrate political commitment and concern in their pictures of "saving the planet". But another, more complex, quality emerges when the drawings are taken as a whole. Revealed in the repetitiveness of content and tone - the incessant imperative, the sameness of the slogans, the planets, the message, almost by rote - a sense arises that, for some, politics is reduced to a treacly slogan on a Hallmark card: "Saving my planet means a lot to me. Tell me what saving your planet means to you _____." Perched atop a pretty rainbow and a shiny sun, this second grader's sentiment can easily be reduced to "cute".

Similarly, the sheer redundancy of virtually interchangeable depictions of the earth with "Recycle", "Save the Earth", or "Save the Planet" at the head, suggest the possibility of some subtle contradictions here - commitment and trivialization, impassioned pleas and pat phrases, social comment and social reproduction - in the expression of some children's environmental concern. Paired and contrasted with "taking personal action" drawings, they raise complex questions about issues of children's empowerment, political engagement, and the social uses of

environmentalization.

Depicting the Problem (n=29, 9% of total)

A distinct qualitative shift occurs in the content and mood of these children's drawings. Looking at them, one is left with a tangible sense of warning, anxiety and foreboding. Here environmental problems are depicted without any sign of personal action, solutions or perpetrators. "If we do nothing the planet could look like this!," one seventh-grade boy exclaims, beneath a ragged-edged, orange, black and purple earth. "No polluting or the animals will die," a South Carolina third-grader warns. Pictures with planets with bites taken out or with garish colors are a recurrent theme, as are garbage-strewn rivers and fields. Several children, boys and girls alike, depict bombs exploding, some as pulsating abstract energy, others as mushroom clouds complete with BOOM! and BOSH! sound-effects and children crying AH! or "SUE! SUE!" (The artist, an eight-year-old girl, explains "Sue" is a person not a legal action). One kindergartner, a boy from Brooklyn, describes the bird in his drawing as wearing "one of those soda-rings around his neck." The happy-looking home from the "Everything's Okay" category is mutated here into an anthropomorphic figure wearing band-aids and a fiery roof crying "HELP!" - "SAVE OUR HOME", a frowny-face in the o of the "our", standing firmly printed by its side.

Confronted with personal responsibility to save the

planet, these children (9 percent) respond with graphic images of decay and destruction, things gone wrong, the ecosystem awry. Significantly, none locate any agent of decay, any specific causal factor in the problems they depict. Nor do they find refuge in arcadia, satisfaction in slogans, or power in personal action. Of course, it is important to remember that each descriptive category represents only one kind of response children may have to environmental crisis messages. Individual children may draw second or third pictures from completely different perspectives, reaffirming the commonplace that we all are capable of holding simultaneously contradictory notions. Still, the data here clearly reveal that at least some children, at some times, respond to messages about global environmental crisis with serious worry, without easy or immediate recourse or relief, and without any apparent awareness or understanding of the root causes of the problems with which they are being faced.

Given its somewhat "negative" cast (emphasizing problems without indicating solutions, or providing only negative sanctions), it is interesting to note grade, regional, race/class, and to a lesser extent, gender differences arising in this category of environmental concern (see tables 1 - 5). Drawings from the youngest children (K-1st grade) are virtually absent here (the kindergartner's drawing described above - of a bird with a soda ring around its neck - represents that child's second

drawing), whereas there are twice as many 6th-8th graders as might be expected by chance (see table 1). Similarly regional differences arise, with fewer southern children and slightly more northern children drawing environmental problems (see table 3). Race alone does not appear to be a significant factor in these children's depiction of environmental problems (see table 4). But when combined with class (race/class), twice as many low-income Black children draw problems than would be expected by chance (see table 5). There also appears to be a trend in gender differences, with more girls and fewer boys emphasizing problems in their drawings of the environment (see table 2).

Why do more girls and low-income Black children draw problems without solutions than do white children or boys? These findings are suggestive and point to a relationship between social marginality and perceptions of empowerment. For those children whose drawings suggest a sense of personal power (categories 2 and 3), there are virtually no differences according to gender or race/class. However, for those children who express a sense of powerlessness in their drawings of saving the planet, race/class and gender differences begin to come into play. These children's drawings indicate that while membership in a marginal social category (girls, poor Blacks) does not necessarily create or cause a felt sense of powerlessness in children, it increases the likelihood that children will feel (or at

least, draw themselves) powerless to do anything about "saving the planet". Intuitively this makes sense, particularly if we take into account the inverse - the more powerful gender in a society thinks powerfully; the more powerful race and class in a society thinks powerfully.

Of course generalizations from these data need to be carefully qualified, given the small number and non-random sample of the study. Even so, theoretical implications of an intersection of race, class and gender issues in the environmentalization are raised that merit further consideration.

Indicting the Problem-Makers (n=32, 10% of total)

As in the previous category of concern "Depicting the Problems", drawings here focus on environmental problems - not solutions, personal actions, or calls for change. However, these drawings are distinguished by their emphasis on pointing out the problem-makers, and on indicting those considered responsible for creating environmental problems.

Are children who draw "eco-villains" demonstrating a keen awareness of the institutional origins of environmental crisis? A close look at the data reveals who and what these children see as responsible for planetary problems. Air polluters rank as the most frequently mentioned environmental culprits (59 percent). Included are billowing smokestacks of nameless factories; car, truck and jet plane exhaust; people burning garbage or trash; and even

radioactive emissions from a nuclear power plant. Some children point to users of aerosol cans as direct destroyers of the earth's protective ozone layer. None draw the store where the aerosol cans are sold, or specifically identify a chemical plant where the offending ingredients are developed and produced. Other commonly cited problem-makers include people who cut down, destroy or otherwise damage trees (38 percent), water polluters (28 percent), and garbage dumpers and litters (22 percent). 31 percent of the drawings include some other kind of environmental offender.

One picture features a frightened (and frightening) looking character at a computer terminal. The artist, a 14-year-old boy from a special ed class, explains:

It's a scientist working on a computer. We need to send messages to all the scientists in the world telling this, "Don't mess up the environment or we won't have one." Scientists ought to think of more ways to save the planet than rockets and bombs.

This child's drawing is an astute mixture of indictment and recruitment. Scientists are cited as creators of "rockets and bombs" and other (implied) technology that "mess[es] up the environment." At the same time, scientists are depicted as having an express responsibility to "think of ways to save the planet."

Few children so specifically cite personal representatives of big capital and/or nation states as responsible for environmental damage, although one girl draws the Exxon Valdez spilling oil into the sea, as others

draw nameless oil tankers, and many children draw anonymous smoky factories emitting air pollution and dumping toxic waste. In yet another (dramatic) depiction a whaling ship is shown trying to capture and kill a great whale.

For many children individual responsibility for environmental crisis is the dominant focus in their drawings. "A lot of people think only about themselves. They need to think about the Earth," states one kindergarten boy, drawing two menacing figures carrying chainsaws toward a tall tree. "If you don't recycle water you will not have any... Turn the water off," an eleven-year-old Girl Scout admonishes, the girl in her picture brushing her teeth with the water running, oblivious to its rapid depletion.

These children, then, see artifacts of capital and technology - factories, vehicles, aerosol sprays - as primarily responsible for environmental pollution. Loggers or others who cut down trees are a frequently cited culprit, perhaps in response to messages about saving the rainforest and old-growth forests in the Northwest, and the much publicized controversy over the endangered Northern Spotted owl. Few children directly name institutional polluters, although the Alaskan oil spill by the Exxon Valdez has left its trace in many of these children's drawings. It appears that contrary to the "Taking Personal Action" category where in general children view eco-problems as individually created and resolved by "you and me", in the "Problem-Maker"

category children display a budding awareness of the institutional origins of environmental crisis but offer few, if any, structural solutions in their drawings.

While grade levels seem to be significant in children's preference for depicting problems (older children are much more likely to emphasize environmental problems than are kindergarten and 1st graders), they do not appear to be a factor in children's depiction of problem-makers (see table 1). However, a developing pattern of race, class, and gender differences in children's reception of environmental crisis themes continues here, with almost three times as many boys as girls drawing pictures depicting environmental problem-makers (17 percent and 5 percent respectively; see table 2), and far fewer Black children drawing problem-makers than would be expected by chance (see table 4). Keeping in mind that this category of concern represents a small percentage of drawings by children in the study (10 percent), it still appears that race, class and gender play a role in children's reception of environmental crisis themes, particularly for those children who do not draw themselves or others taking some kind of personal action to "save the planet."

Recasting the Problem (n=9, >3% of total)

These last drawings represent a very small percentage (less than 3 percent) that seem to have dramatically changed or recast the original "save the planet" message. Unlike

Category 1 (Everything's Okay), where the planet itself is the element that seems to leave the clearest trace (and thus fuels speculation that the message has been understood on some level by children drawing those pictures), here it is the "saving" part, or the depiction of some other than environmental danger, that is most evident in the children's drawings.

Does recasting environmental messages constitute a category of environmental concern? These drawings are intriguing in the diverse ways they appropriate the notion of saving the earth. One unique, somewhat inscrutable, drawing, by an upper-middle class 5th grade Black girl from coastal South Carolina, fills a page with the gaping mouth of a huge Jaws-like killer whale, brilliantly colored in green and blue, with an impressively rendered double-set of razor-sharp white teeth. Two other drawings, both by younger girls from different summer camps, depict a figure drowning. In one picture a child sits in a small wooden boat with a long ladder falling into the water. Another, smaller child, is apparently struggling in deep water nearby a black life-ring floating on the surface of the lake. "Save the eerth [sic]" the smiling girl in the boat cries out.

Aliens or creatures from outer space are a common theme, particularly among boys. One 3rd grader, a 9 year old Black boy from South Carolina, draws a picture that

features two ringed planets in the sky, with several alien creatures involved in a set piece. "I am diaing [sic]" calls a prostrate antennaed alien. "We need to help him," an impassive-looking alien replies. A woman dressed in orange calls out, "We have to save our planet [sic]." "Yes we do," the small extra-terrestrial next to her responds.

Several of the boys' drawings depict planetary dangers and rescues in overtly aggressive and militaristic terms. Two 3rd grade boys draw pictures of ships under attack by airborne enemies descending by parachute or super-cape. In another the earth is shown under assault by extra-terrestrials who are fiercely resisted by flying creatures with blazing rockets, "Tring (sic) to save the earth." Here saving the planet is recast to convey a complementary theme - "defenders of the earth."

Perhaps these drawings are completely missing the intended message environmentally-minded adults are seeking to convey. On the other hand, they may be demonstrating an implicit continuum of cultural messages that children, and especially boys, are getting from commercial cartoons and environmentalist rhetoric. Some children are primed to see saving the planet as not only the environment, but the entire universe at stake. As Engelhardt (1986) notes, cartoons such as He-Man and Masters of the Universe engage young children with the thrill (and chill) of Star Wars military technology. This along with ads for innumerable

action-figure toys that are even more blatant in their visual (and commercial) aggressiveness (89-94). As I discussed in Chapter Two, the popular environmental cartoon Captain Planet and the Planeteers cleverly exploits this lucrative cultural phenomenon, blending "the Universe of the Action-Figure Superhero," and plots about preventing environmental destruction, with a vast merchandising and licensing enterprise.

That so few children recast saving the planet messages suggests the environmentalization of children is an extremely effective project. Even when the message is recast by children in a number of ways, their alternate themes are linked to concerns for "saving the planet." For the most part, children are getting the message to save the planet in much the way socializing agents are intending it to be conveyed. Implications of this pervasive and persuasive environmentalization of children remain to be critically explored.

Discussion and Conclusion

Children are not social incompetents when it comes to understanding and interpreting environmental messages. Even very young children are getting "save the planet" messages quite clearly, and are responding to environmentalist socialization in often thoughtful and creative ways. Similarly, most children are not experiencing themselves as vulnerable victims, hopeless and helpless in the face of

overwhelming global responsibility. They are neither cynical nor apathetic - although older children are more likely to draw environmental problems than are younger ones, supporting evidence that children's political attitudes become increasingly negative with age (Palonsky 1987). And, contrary to popular myths portraying eco-activist children as environmentally-correct bullies, children in this study do not portray themselves terrorizing others with stringent, self-righteous or unreasonable demands, nor do they express themselves in rigid or tyrannical terms.

Most children respond to social messages about environmental crisis with a clear and confident sense that they can do something about the problem, either through some kind of personal ecological activity, or by urging others to do their share to save the planet. But, what is the meaning of this empowerment for children who experience it? What does it signify for the society that promotes it? And, should we adults rest assured knowing that children are feeling empowered in this way?

In the late 1960s, similar questions were raised as to the effectiveness of political socialization in the schools. Hess (1968) maintains that children in the United States were being presented with a "picture of unity, equality, and freedom that... is distorted, over-simplified, and, to a degree, false" (529). Schools, he argues, created "an attitude of complacency" and a willingness in children to

embrace "inaccurate representations" of the nation as "powerful, wise, and of good intent" (531). He points out that the young child, socialized to believe, for example, in the effectivity of the vote, learns nothing of the "realities of political influence... [and, consequently] overestimates his [sic] own power until he attempts to have an effect upon politics or institutions in government" (531). And, Hess asserts, teaching democratic political values in the form of slogans, rather than as concepts to be applied to social issues, leads to superficial acceptance of egalitarian principles - principles that often disappear when lived social and political contexts require tolerance for the expression of opposing, controversial, or non-conforming views. Summing up his critique, Hess states:

In short, much of the political socialization that takes place at elementary and high-school levels is lacking in candor, is superficial with respect to basic issues, is cognitively fragmented, and produces little grasp of the implications of principles and their application to new situations (532).

More than quarter of a century later, much the same issues arise in the environmental socialization of children. Children are cheerfully targeted for environmental concern. They are told to pick up the trash, recycle plastic, bottles, and cans, conserve trees and water, and buy "environmentally-friendly" products. In this way, saving the planet is a comfortable arena for feeling socially and politically committed, even better suited to white middle-class concerns than, for example, "brotherhood," with its

inevitable, uncomfortable, acknowledgment of long-standing racist oppression, or "nuclear winter", with its attendant gloomy focus on the international proliferation of military weapons of mass destruction.

Saving the planet messages accommodate capitalist social relations in an effective, if paradoxical, fashion. Pictures of the earth are plastered on commodities as diverse as t-shirts and toilet paper. Children as young as three and four are being cultivated as a major consumer market (McNeal 1987; 1992), with environmentalism being sold to kids in any number of ways.

The discourse of environmental disaster encompasses a broad range of social, political, economic, biological and cultural concerns. But the rhetoric of liberal environmentalism, expressed in the pat phrases of many children's drawings, promotes the notion that global environmental degradation - the end result of multinational corporate, military/industrial, and nation state practices of consumption and production - is really "everybody's fault." The reduction of complex global problems to simplistic, individualist solutions serves corporate interests more effectively than it does children, willingly accepting responsibility for stewardship of a planet that is, in most ways, not under their control. Borrowing from Bourdieu, one could argue that liberal environmentalism is a form of "symbolic violence", where the consent of children

is sought to maintain the hegemony of global capitalism.

But, inextricably intertwined in the liberal environmental paradox is the message to little children that they can do something about the problems facing the world today. Children are not "cultural dopes" (Hall 1981). They do not passively consume the ideas and rhetoric supplied them by their elders and the culture at large. Children actively interpret, appropriate, and occasionally subvert or resist, messages aimed at them by society - whether from school, home, tv, or the mall. A sense of empowerment, that actions have effects, and words the power to persuade, is one many children seem to easily embrace. Hess's caveat - that children supplied with a superficial sense of empowerment are being set up for a fall - needs to be heeded in the context of liberal environmentalism. Tentative findings in this study suggest that race, class and gender differences affect the quality of children's environmental concern, particularly when children do not directly express the sense that they personally can help "save the planet". In the next chapter I will explore children's experience of environmental crisis, and the myriad ways they construct, and are constructed, in its discourse.

CHAPTER FIVE

DOING THEIR SHARE TO SAVE THE PLANET:

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

As I have shown in Chapter Four, children are very much aware of environmental crisis. This comes as no surprise when we look at the proliferation of messages targeted to children about saving the planet (Chapter Two), and at the many media representations of children as ecological activists and mini-environmental police (Chapter One).

Not only are children aware of environmental crisis, but they feel personally responsible to do something about such problems as they perceive them. Children's drawings indicate that they are cheerfully willing to do their share to save the planet. But what does saving the planet mean to children? What feelings, attitudes, beliefs and values constitute that sense of empowerment so many children express in their drawings of saving the planet? What do children understand environmental problems to be? Whom do they see as most responsible for causing environmental crisis? And what exactly do kids think they can do to help save the planet? I turn now to the experience of environmental crisis for children.

Children's Experience of Saving the Planet

Individually and in small focus groups I asked children what it meant to them when someone said that they had to help save the planet. Across a range of ages, from the

youngest children (5, 6, and 7 year olds), through the middle children (8, 9, and 10 year olds), and into preadolescence (11, 12, and 13 year olds), the responses I heard were remarkably similar:

DK: What does it mean to you when someone says you have to help save the planet?

Rubin: It means that you can't leave garbage all over the place.
(5 year old white boy, just finished kindergarten).

DK: Has anybody ever told you, you have to save the planet?

Sean: Yeah, I um did it a lot. Sometimes I'm picking up garbage when nobody even sees me, And um... I do walk around and stuff picking up the earth.
(7 year old white boy going into 2nd grade).

DK: Has anybody here ever heard anybody say we have to help save the planet?

[collective yes's]

Shane: Sometimes I pick up garbage at my grandma's house, or my grandma's she babysits, they always, if they have like a cookie box they throw it on the ground and I have to go picking it up.

DK: So you have to go around and pick up other people's garbage, that they throw on the ground?

Shane: I mean I want to.
(9 year old white boy, entering 3rd grade).

DK: What does it mean to you when someone says that you have to help save the planet?

Billy: Well, that means that, um, that you should keep the planet clean so the planet don't get dirty or like waste stuff or anything. We should keep our planet clean, like we clean our, like [we] keep our house clean. It's like the same outside from our house. We should keep our stuff clean, and our whole planet, so the planet won't be dirty and full of garbage and

everything.

(11 year old Black boy, going into 5th grade).

Shannon: Well, it's like the earth is our home, and if it gets trashed, you know, we have nowhere to go.

DK: Um hm.

Shannon: So it's up to us to take care of it.

(13 year old white girl, going into 8th grade).

"If You See a Piece of Litter, Pick it Up"

Over and over again, as I talked to children about saving the planet, a dominant theme recurred: Kids feel a personal responsibility to keep the earth clean. But what is the meaning of garbage for kids?

Jana, a 6 year old white girl, and one of three siblings and a mother who are surviving on welfare, sees cleaning up the earth as directly related to a looming problem of overcrowded landfills:

Well I think everybody should help each other clean up the planet a little, because all this garbage is getting the planet all filled up and by the time everybody throws their garbage out it's going to be fullled up with garbage and they'll be nothing to really do for it.

Claudia, a white 9 year old from an intact upper-middle class family, associates garbage with other "natural disasters":

I have a book that, um, it's called Great Disasters, and it [says] that most of the great disasters that have happened include lots of garbage and stuff.

Shane, the child quoted above who "wants to" pick up trash, vividly portrays garbage as hazardous and even potentially deadly:

... so like an animal, like a duck or something, when there's like a soda can wrapper and it comes around and it gets it's neck caught in it, it grows bigger and bigger and then it chokes him and pretty soon he won't be able to eat or breathe and he'll die.

DK: Shane, where did you hear about stuff like that, the soda can wrappers?

Shane: When my classroom, I went on a trip and I went to this place and it told us all about how garbage can do dangerous things to like animals or fish.

While many children associate garbage on the ground with dire consequences for the planet and its inhabitants, other children see litter as more a matter of personal tidiness. Michael, a 7 year old black Hispanic boy entering 2nd grade, from an intact, lower middle-class family, reports:

DK: Did anybody ever say, "Michael, you have to help save the planet?"

Michael: (nods head)... my mom, my dad, my brother, usually almost everyone.

DK: Almost everyone? Why do your mom and dad say that?

Michael: Because we usually get the house dirty, they want us to clean up, and sometimes there's litter outside, so we pick it up.

DK: Oh, so if your mom or dad see litter on the ground, they say that you have to help save the planet by picking up that litter?

Michael: Um hm. Or usually they don't have to say it, we just do it.

Some version of this sentiment is echoed by many children:

DK:... so what would you do if someone said you have to save the planet?

Robert: Clean. I would clean the garbage off my lawn. (white 6 year old boy going into 2nd grade)

Jessica, an eleven year old white girl, who recently moved with her mother into her soon-to-be stepfather's upper-middle class neighborhood, directly links saving the planet with the upkeep of private property:

DK: Tell me what that means to you, that you have to help save the planet.

Jessica: Um, by taking care of your garbage, and respecting other people's property, and not throwing garbage on it, and respect how much you're putting in the garbage. And if you're just putting in like maybe like just stuff that could be recycled then that would be like not helping the planet at all.

The theme of recycling garbage is a common refrain in children's responses to saving the planet:

Kirin: [Saving the planet] means like you don't throw away like coffee cans. You make things different [i.e., you make them into different things], and stuff like that.
(7 year old white girl going into 2nd grade).

Meg: Lots of people throw like tires and garbage and beer cans, stuff like that. I think we, people, should pick them up and throw them away.

Miranda: They shouldn't throw them away, they should recycle!

Meg: They even threw a dog away. Yeah, it was on the side of the road, and we kept him.
(two white 8 year old girls, going into 3rd grade).

Megan: [Saving the planet means] recycling because, um, our planet is dying from all the smoke and gas from the garbage on it, and that's bringing us [?]. And some of the plants and animals are dying from the garbage.

DK: Where have you heard about saving the planet?

Megan: From my mom... we always clean up the yard because people just throw things in our yard and think that the animals won't get it. Because we have a

garden and the raccoons and chipmunks... We have a chipmunk, and he eats everything. And I'm afraid the chipmunk's going to eat the garbage and then one day we'll find him dead.

(10 year old white girl going into 5th grade).

Occasionally children conflate the generic term "garbage" with a wide variety of environmental problems. Clarence (9) and George (10) are both working-class white boys going into 4th grade:

Clarence: Like you have to pick up garbage. You have to make sure you don't like throw your stuff on the ground because there already is a big giant hole in the um..., um... What's it called again? [Several minutes later]... The ozone layer! That's the one, that's the one. That's the word that I was thinking of.

DK: So the ozone layer has a hole in it.

Clarence: Yeah, a giant hole... and we have to fix that up by not throwing garbage and stuff.

George: Not by that, not just by that. The hole is the size of the earth, they [say] it was bigger than the earth.

DK: Wow. But what can kids do about something like that, George?

George: Stop dropping the garbage all year long.

DK: What's good about picking up garbage?

Shane: It makes the air clean again.

Confronting Problems with the Planet

While picking up litter is a dominant theme in children's perception of environmental crisis, it is by no means the only problem of which children are keenly aware. Just a few of the environmental concerns cited by kids include: "don't waste water, it's a lot big waste"; "the

ozone layer, it's just like dissolving"; "needles and glass in the water"; "dirty air"; "smokey skies and stuff"; "chopping down trees and stuff"; "the loss of animals"; "that big oil spill that took place in Alaska"; "the rainforest that's burning"; "like the toxic wastes being dumped in the ocean"; "like in the war, Sadaam Hussein put all the oil in the ocean"; "paint on the ground soaking into the dirt"; "global warming, it's getting warmer"; "they cut down all the plants and trees and the ground is dying"; "people who live down wind from the test site keep getting this radioactive fallout"; "dead fish floating up because of the oil spill". In two instances children mentioned "too many people" as an environmental problem:

DK: Is there anything else I didn't ask you about saving the planet that you'd...

Max: Um, how many people, um, children you have... Because there's too many kid[s], people on the planet. The earth takes up more stuff and more trees would have to be cut and stuff like that would happen. And more houses would have to be built... and the oceans would expand...

DK: Hmm, so where do you think you've heard about there being too many people?

Max: Discovery Channel. A lot of, in China there's a lot of, lot of, lot of people.

DK: Hmm, they talked about that?

Max: They tried, their goal is to have one, one child.

DK: Do you think when you grow up you're going to want to have children in your family?

Max: Um, I might. I... don't know.
(8 year old white boy going into 3rd grade. His mother recently remarried, both parents are M.D.s.

Implied in any discussion of population control is the issue of abortion. While seemingly difficult for a child to comprehend, this theme is introduced by Ann, a 9 year old white girl in 3rd grade:

DK: Are people part of the environment?

Ann: [immediately] People are part of the environment.

Gretchen: Yes. [distorted on tape].

Ann: ...And we have to watch our step when we have... Because like if we have so many people on this earth, we're not all gonna fit on it... That's the main idea about this earth. If we don't watch our step, we're not gonna be able to fit on this earth.

DK: What can people do to watch our step?

Ann: Well, I mean, you can, I don't mean like bornishing people or things like that...

DK: Like what people?

Ann: Um...

Gretchen: Abortion.

DK: Oh abortion?

Ann: Yeah.

[giggles from a few in group]

DK: You don't mean like getting rid of people before they are born, or anything like that.

Ann: No, cause that's an indivisional person... and... [pauses].

DK: So how are people gonna watch their step then?

Ann: Well, maybe, I don't really know but, I mean... [pauses].

DK: So you know that there's a problem, maybe too many people, but you don't know exactly what people can do about it.

Ann: Do about it, yeah, because it's, um, I mean you can't destroy them because that's, that's, I don't know, I just...

Ryan: [The earth will] be too full, or like there's going to be cities and no countries, cities all over the world, apartments, everything.

DK: Do you think there is enough room on this planet for everybody?

Ryan: I, yeah...

Ann: Nope.

Ryan: No, no, not if we... For now, for now it's okay, but as soon as they get, as we multiply... the earth doesn't get bigger.

Where have you heard about too many people on the earth?

Ann: Well we heard it from our class when we talked about Earth Day yesterday, that there's, there's a lot of people...

Gretchen: I've heard some problems on the news... like in the lakes, and they're polluting, and they're like using motor boats.

Malthusian dilemmas of life and death easily meld into problems of recreational vehicles discharging gas and oil into lakes. The abrupt juxtaposition of diverse and complex environmental issues is not unique to children. Rather, it mirrors the very essence of television news as a modern medium of information. Sometimes there is spillover of other crisis themes in children's concerns about saving the planet:

Yolanda: [Y]ou help the planet to be a better place [by] like stop polluting and try to prevent people from polluting. And you have to try to stop people from doing drugs and killing people.
(11 year old Black girl, in foster care in a poor section of town, going into 5th grade).

DK: Charles, what do you see as some of the worst problems with the environment?

Charles: Littering, smoking and stuff, and drugs. (11 year old working class white boy going into 5th grade).

I found examples such as these in children's drawings as well, suggesting there may be a relationship between age, race, and class, and the inclusion of concerns about homicide, smoking cigarettes, alcohol, and drug use, within a broadened theme of saving the planet.

We have seen that children are aware of environmental crisis, and we have also seen that children feel personally responsible to do something it. But how does it make children feel when they have to help save the planet? And what do children think they can do about the pervasive and pernicious problems with which they are being faced?

"It Makes Me Feel Sad; It Makes Me Feel Mad!"

In an early handbook of research methods in child development, Yarrow (1960), writing about interviewing children notes:

There is a tendency for children in middle childhood to exclude adults actively from their private world. Unlike the preschoolers who often think out loud, in the middle childhood period children are more likely to keep their feelings and thoughts to themselves... [L]anguage is used very little at this age as a means of expressing feeling. It tends to be used almost exclusively in the service of communication of ideas (566).

One of my earliest questions about children's experience of environmental crisis had to do with their

emotional responses: How does it make children feel when someone says they have to help save the planet?. Initially I thought children might feel overwhelmed or burdened by calls to save the planet; that saving the planet might be perceived as too great a task, environmental crisis too massive a problem, for children to feel able to deal with without some emotional stress.

When I looked at children's drawings of environmental crisis, however, I discovered a surprising fact; many, if not most, children feel empowered to do something about saving the planet. Only 29 of 325 children (9 percent) drew pictures that depicted environmental problems without any obvious solution or perpetrator.

It seems environmental messages about saving the planet have affected children in a "positive" way, fostering both a sense of personal responsibility and personal empowerment. In Chapters Two and Four I take a critical look at issues of empowerment and responsibility in environmentalizing kids, and below I examine those issues again, in the context of what kids say they can do about saving the planet, and whom they see as primarily responsible for creating environmental problems.

But I want to look again at the question of children's emotional responses to saving the planet. Is Yarrow correct in his assessment of "middle" children (8, 9, and 10 year olds) as "naturally" unwilling, or unable, to talk about

their feelings? If Yarrow is wrong, and children can and do express their emotions about environmental crisis, what are they feeling?

Some children are reticent, or perhaps simply uninspired, to express their feelings about having to save the planet:

DK: How does it make you feel when someone says you have to help save the planet?

Tara: Pretty good.

DK: Pretty good.

Tara: Yeah.

DK: Anything special about it?

Tara: Um. Nah.
(6 year old white girl, going into 1st grade)

DK: How did it make you feel when your teacher started talking about the hole in the ozone layer?

Justin: [whining a bit] Um, I don't know.
(9 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

When children responded in monosyllabic phrases to questions about their feelings, I did not press further. I tried not to fill in for children, for example, by asking questions such as, "Does it make you feel happy or sad?", assuming that to ask direct questions about particular emotional states would lead them too much in their responses.

As it turned out, however, most children I talked to were relatively forthcoming about their feelings, both in the focus groups and in the individual interviews. Across a range of ages children expressed a variety of emotions about

having to save the planet.

For some children saving the planet makes them feel good, productive and competent to the task:

Jessica: I mean, I think Camp Summer is a beautiful, beautiful camp because they, we always take care of the planet. Because we have like five minutes where everyone picks up garbage, everyday, the whole camp, we pick up garbage, each people. And um, I think that's really good. We pick up straw wrappers... And... at the end of the day, [the camp director will] say what is the cleanest area, and that sort of like makes you wanna do it, because you get the cleanest award... They don't give an award, but they say, the person who had the cleanest area was [so and so], and that feels really good because you know that what you are doing, people see. So that's good.
(11 year old white girl, going into 5th grade).

However, many of the children I talked to had rather mixed feelings about saving the planet:

DK: Evan, how does it make you feel when you see all this stuff on tv about [saving] the planet?

Evan: Well, um, pretty good but sometimes, like, um, sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad. Because somethings should be recycled but they say they're not going to be recycled... And then the next time you see them they might say they are going to be recycled. And then they keep saying this, and you're going to get mixed up, and like not remember one thing and then another.
(8 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

How many of us have struggled similarly, trying to follow the variable, and oftentimes arbitrary, requirements in our community for separating garbage? Some places - upscale neighborhoods in Manhattan, for example, and certain towns in Connecticut - go so far as to employ "garbage police", whose sole job it is to search home-owners' curbside trash bags for illicit "recyclables".

Both Gutin (1992) and Rathje (1989) expose ironies inherent in current recycling myths and measures. For example, despite an elaborate coding system, and much industry-generated publicity and hype, plastic remains essentially unrecyclable:

Amassing a pile of plastics big enough to be worth something costs more than making it in the first place. It's almost impossible to escape the conclusion that recycling plastic is difficult and nearly pointless (Gutin 1992:58).

Inconsistencies, if not downright deceptions, of environmental public relations campaigns are not lost on some children:

Claudia: But on tv they don't always tell the truth, on tv. They might just say something and they don't really mean that they're going to do it, I mean tv. It's not like they tell you the truth all the time.

Sidney: Yeah, lots of commercials, they just lie to get you to buy their project, product.

DK: ...So even when you hear stuff about the environment on tv...

Claudia: It's not always true.
(8 and 9 year old white girls, going into 3rd and 4th grade).

Wariness about environmental hype is expanded by some children into a full-scale condemnation of corporate producers:

Clara: You feel like, if you don't do all this recycling stuff, you feel guilty.

Mandy: Why are we are paying for it?

Emily: Yeah, I know, it's just, sometimes you think, why should we? You know, as the kids we get all the hype and all this stuff about the recycling and... But why should we be doing most of it, because we didn't

have anything to do with it. I'm sure that most of the kids, if we ever had a chance to go back, we wouldn't create... all the plastic and stuff that they like throw away. But I think like grownups should do, especially like, you know, the people who like own the factories and stuff, they should do more.
(13 year old white girl, going into 8th grade).

Some children express pointed anger toward those they see as responsible for causing environmental damage:

DK: How do you as a kid feel about hearing about things like bomb tests in Nevada?

Mathew: ...I feel like a) the government doesn't, isn't doing anything. Well, b) I mean, they keep setting off tests and tests of the same bomb over and over again. And, guess what? You only have to do it once and you know they work. Do it once, you know?! I mean, one test for every bomb. That would be about three tests. Right now they have over 900. And it's something like, I don't know, in the hundred millions of dollars to do one nuclear test, in tax money. It's terrible! And people, down-winders, there's a song about that, people who live down wind from the test site keep getting this radioactive fallout. I mean, it's light ash, but it's like really harmful. It's annoying.
(9 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

Mandy: It makes me really mad when people say, or when you hear these big business men [say] "Everyone out there should try to help save the environment." They reach in and do... recycling laws, they say all this stuff, and those guys are the ones going home drinkin' outta styrofoam cups [and] throwing 'em, you know, not recycling. It makes me mad when people realize that, they finally just woke up, they just realized that we're killing the ozone layer, we're killing all sorts of plant life. They're going and dumping oil in the Persian Gulf, I mean you've gotta be a little looney to do that already. But you're killing everything, and people just woke up and realized it.
(12 year old white girl, going into 7th grade).

For other children anger is mixed with a sense of sorrow or loss at having a diminished planet:

Michelle: It makes me feel bad, sad. Sad that people are so stupid to do this to our planet.

Jamie: It's sad that the planet's being wasted.

DK: What do you think it will be like when you grow up? Do you ever think about that?

Jamie: No.

Michelle: Sometimes I think if people keep on doing this, it will be like we won't even have a planet.

Amy: [It will] be like with gas masks to breathe when you grow up and like lots of trash.

Michelle: And really smoggy and...

Julie: Sometimes it's getting so crowded everywhere, everybody'll have to live like the Jetsons.
(11 year old white girls, going into 6th grade).

DK: What does it mean to save the earth, to you?

Brian: Well if you don't save the earth, you won't have an earth.

DK: So how does that make you feel, to think about that?

Brian: I don't, it doesn't make me feel very good. Because I'm just nine years old and pretty soon [when] I... hit 42, if this keeps up I won't be here for 43.

DK: What are you thinking it's going to be like when you're 42?

Brian: It's probably going to be very smoggy and stuff like that.
(9 year old white boy in 3rd grade).

Many children express fear when they think about environmental crisis:

DK: How does it make you feel when you hear that the earth is in trouble? [to a focus group of three 10 year old white children in 5th grade special ed class].

Warren: It makes you feel bad that the earth, all the fish and the dolphins and that are dying.

Megan: Sometimes it scares me once and a while when you hear it in school - the planet and the ozone layer

and everything's burning up, and the rainforest. It really gets your heart beating fast because you don't know what's going to be happening to the earth.

Billie Jean: Because if we have no earth, we can't move.

Ann: To me it means that um I want to live in a clean environment. I want the sky not to be smoggy, and I want the land to be clean, and I don't want oil spills in the ocean. It gives me a scary feel; if we don't clean this earth up we're gonna live in a junky place. And it's not gonna, it's just, it feels really scared to me, 'cause I don't want to live in a junky place. I want to live in a clean and beautiful environment. (9 year old white girl in 3rd grade).

Occasionally, in expressing concern about the planet, children refer to the uncertain fate of future generations:

Joshua: It makes me feel scared. I'm thinking like maybe when my children grow up, and my children's children, maybe they'll go through the earth and they'll see orange all over, you know, the sky's all black or something, and maybe like the ground's all brown, you know. It makes me wonder. You try to, like whenever something's wrong, pick it up. You know, basic things like that. (12 year old white boy in 6th grade special ed class)

Mandy: ...This is going to sound conceited but I really am concerned. Cause I don't want my great-grandchildren to have to worry about this. I want, I don't think that they should have had to because they're millions, that's too far, but they're a few generations ahead and they didn't do it. The people back there did it, the people now are doing it. Not, not them that's going to come ahead. Maybe they'll add to it. But it costs, they say, it costs too much money to do stuff like that. Well, then maybe they shouldn't have done it in the first place. (12 year old white girl going into 7th grade).

Thomas: If we don't [do something about the environmental crisis] it could look like my picture. Pitiful. Ugly.

Teacher: How does it make you feel?

Thomas: In a way I don't really care because it won't be [?] by the time my life time is over.

Teacher: What about your children?

Thomas: They'll have to deal with it. You take it one day at a time. Probably by then they'll be living in space stations or something. Then when everybody leaves, the earth's gonna clean itself up over billions of years. Then they'll [be] coming back.

(13 year old white boy in 7th grade special ed class).

Other children view the environmental crisis as somehow a direct result of their own neglect or wrongdoing. George and Clarence, two working-class white boys cited above, provide a perfect example of this paradoxical liberal response to environmental problems:

DK: How does it make you feel when you hear about the ozone layer?

George: It makes me feel, like, it makes me feel uh kind of mad and stuff.

DK: ...Who do you think you're mad at?

George: Me really.

Clarence: Like everybody.

DK: [to George] What'd you say?

George: Like me.

Clarence: Like everybody.

DK: [surprised] Like you?

George: Yeah.

DK: Mad at yourself?

Clarence: Yeah, for making the big hole.

George: Everybody, it's like mad at everybody, at like everybody...

These working class boys epitomize a common liberal

dilemma; a vague sense of personal guilt for massive, systemic problems whose cause and solution lie largely outside the boundary of any individual's immediate control. And they are not alone. Many children see themselves as responsible for the problems on the planet.

"It's Everybody's Fault, It's Nobody's Real Fault"

In Chapter Two I discussed contradictions inherent in liberal environmentalism, including the notion that we are all personally and equally responsible for generic "pollution":

DK: Who do you think is most responsible for the problems on the planet?

Michael: Um, people. That's all.

DK: People? And do you think there are some people who are more responsible than others?

Michael: No.
(6 year old black/Hispanic boy, going into 2nd grade).

AB: Well everybody, really. Like everybody is responsible for what they do. And if they like throw garbage on the ground, they're responsible for that.
(8 year old white boy, going into third grade).

Eddy: It's everyone. Everyone does something not good for the environment. It's nobody's real fault...
(10 year old white boy going into 4th grade).

Katie: [T]here's holes in the ozone layer, and the trees are being planted and you know they're dying and everything.

DK: And who do you think's responsible for all that?

Katie: I think the people are, because...

DK: Which people?

Katie: I think everyone is... [because] we were not aware of it, we weren't aware of it before.
(11 year old white/Hispanic girl, going into 7th grade)

DK: Who do you think is responsible for most of the problems on the planet?

Shannon: Everybody.

DK: Everybody equally, do you think?

Shannon: Probably.
(13 year old white girl, going into 8th grade).

The paradoxical individualism of American culture is transparent here. The collective "we", easily invoked when fixing blame for environmental problems, diffuses any penetrating analysis of exactly who or what might be the root causes of ecological destruction. When adults respond in this way it often serves as a convenient form of obfuscation, especially when espoused by those with a vested interest in maintaining existing social relations. At the very least, it represents an unreflective acquiescence to an essentially unperceived hegemonic worldview.

But what does it mean for children to shoulder the blame for ecological disaster?

For some it is a complex problem for which they may not necessarily feel blame, but yet experience the burden:

DK: Who do you think is responsible for most of the problems with the environment?

Billy: [pause] Everybody.

DK: Everybody?

Billy: I think everybody because the people, whoever the person that made up the mess, is responsible for,

to... they should pick it up. Because we, like the people that didn't make up the mess shouldn't pick it up, or we have to because we have to keep our planet clean.

(11 year old Black boy, going into 5th grade)

Of course, when a problem is "nobody's real fault" it becomes rather tricky determining who exactly is responsible for repairs. Children know they are being called upon to fix the planet, and for some this is experienced as an unfair burden.

I asked children who they see as most responsible for problems on the planet, pressing a bit further than on other questions, to see how far children would continue to shoulder the blame, and if they saw adults as somehow differently implicated in this seemingly universal ("everybody on the earth") guilt.

DK: Who do you see as most responsible for the problems on the planet?

Alexander: People.

DK: Do you think all people are equally responsible?

Alexander: No, people that don't care about the environment. Like people that throw away, um, I don't know really... um, well, mostly, well, some people... I don't know.

DK: ...Who causes more problems, kids or adults?

Alexander: [long pause] Adults, I guess... Adults get to do a lot more stuff, and they drive the cars so they're causing the pollution because they're having the cars. And like, just...

DK: And where do they get the cars from?

Alexander: Factories! Ah hah, they make a lot of pollution. They're made by grownups... Because kids litter... [but] plastic factories [are worse].

(11 year old white boy, going into 5th grade).

While many children see environmental problems as ambiguously everyone's (and thus, no one's) fault, other children are quite clear about their own guiltlessness and the relative responsibility of others:

Mandy: What I get a kick out of is they say um, they aim Earth Day at little kids... It's like, when people like will say to you, well, you have to, you know, you have to like clean up all the trash and you have to recycle or else the world will be bad or something. But you know if people, if people back, you know, like ten, fifteen years ago had done what we're doing now, it wouldn't be like this. They're sort of making it like it's our fault if we don't, you know, do it now.
(12 year old white girl, going into 7th grade).

DK: Do you think everybody hurts the earth the same?

Sean: No, well, I don't know. But um, I never throw out stuff. And I never did.

DK: So do you think some people hurt it more than others?

Sean: Well... I don't think too much people hurt the earth, but I think a lot of people didn't know, and a little bit of people did.
(7 year old white boy, going into 2nd grade).

Some children spontaneously cite specific individuals as culpable for ecological problems on the planet:

Burt: I drew a picture of a factory, and a man was running up these stairs, telling the other man to stop the factory... because there was too much smoke going into the atmosphere... I don't think he listened.
(9 year old white boy in 3rd grade).

Mark: ...do you remember when that big oil spill took place in Alaska? [My teacher] was really disappointed... We said that that driver, whatever he did, since he spilled it he should, well he didn't help in any way, so he should have been in prison, because he hurted the environment.

(11 year old white boy, going into 5th grade).

Most children are only vaguely aware of the complex roles multinational corporations, the military, and nation-states play in wreaking environmental havoc. But at least some children recognize the corporate nature of pollution:

Billie Jean: The sky pollution comes from big factories that... like my uncle works in a factory and he burns, um, I forget what he burns, but he burns something that goes off into the air.

DK: How do you know about that?

Billie Jean: Because once he was watching me and I had to go to work with him... I saw it and it didn't smell too good either.
(10 year old white girl in 5th grade special ed class).

Matt: ...but still, recycling factories still let off smoke and pollute the air. They have to go melt all the plastic to make a new thing and what it does is when they melt it the smoke is still going out in the air and still polluting.
(10 year old white boy in 5th grade special ed class).

Other children demonstrate a budding awareness that part of the problem has to do with reduction at the "source":

Melanie: Well, I watch tv and stuff and I see all the commercials for all the Worldwatch or whatever it is, and it just makes me think that we don't need that stuff. All it's doing is ruining the world, and if we don't have a world to use it, then I mean, we really shouldn't...

Francesca: It's really useless if you don't have a place to use it.
(11 year old white girls, going into 6th grade).

This, of course, is Gutin's point about the silliness of recycling programs for plastics:

[I]t begins to look as though the least environmentally costly strategy, despite the appeal of plastics RecyKling as a concept, is source reduction. In other

words, boring old abstinence (1992:59).

Children are aware of environmental crisis, and in large measure they feel it is up to them to save the planet. For some kids there is anger, regret, even bitterness at having to deal with problems for which they are in no way responsible. Others recognize the role "factories" and corporations play in creating environmental hazards and waste, and even useless products.

But for most children the environmental crisis is seen as everybody's fault. Children are quick to lay blame for environmental problems on a highly generalized (and thus, effectively neutralized) "we". Kids seem to be shouldering responsibility on a par with adults. But what exactly do children think they can do to save the planet?

Doing Their Share to Save the Planet: The Meaning of Empowerment for Kids

Many, if not most, children feel empowered to do something about saving the planet. Litter and garbage are featured prominently in their drawings and interviews, and children frequently depict themselves or others picking up trash. Thus it comes as no surprise that for many kids "cleaning up", at least in theory, is seen as a meaningful act:

DK: Well what are kids supposed to do to help save the planet?

JB: Clean up and don't be a litterbug.
(8 year old white boy, going into 3rd grade).

DK: So what do you think a kid can do?

Michelle: Pick up garbage. Like last year here [at camp] we had a contest to see who could pick up the most garbage.

(11 year old white girl, going into 6th grade).

Picking up garbage, and inversely, not throwing down trash, are, as we have seen, dominant themes in kids' experience of saving the planet. But for some children going beyond individual actions and exhorting others to change their environmental habits is a necessary, if somewhat risky, ecological act:

DK: Have you ever heard anybody say you have to help save the planet?

Mathew: Oh yeah, I heard it recent, just as much as they do. I say it to other people, actually.

DK: Who do you say it to?

Mathew: I don't know, basically people who I see that are being careless. Probably they don't listen to me, they just say "Oh, be quiet" or "Shut up" or whatever they say... They just brush you off. I just say it like if somebody litters... then I go, "Hey, can you pick that up?" And then they just say, "Ah, be quiet," or just walk away, pretend they don't notice me. I don't know. Sometimes it's just not even that. Sometimes I'm just saying that you can help, that you can, and I try to.

(9 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

DK: So what are kids supposed to do about [water pollution]?

Amy: Stop littering... and if you see something, if you see someone throwing it in, you should tell them they shouldn't.

DK: Would you do that?

Melissa: Yeah.

Amy: [not sure].

Jamie: It depends on how the person is. If it looks kinda big or if it looks like it's going to go after you, I wouldn't.

DK: Are kids supposed to tell grownups...

[all four girls in unison]: Yeah, yes, yeah.

DK: Would you do that?

Jamie: I don't know, it depends, because if we were by the water and this person... I don't, you know, I don't want them to throw me in, especially if it was green.

DK: So you might be scared to tell a grown-up?

Jamie: Yeah.

DK: But Melissa, you would say something?

Melissa: And then I would run.
(11 year old white girls, going into 6th grade).

Despite their environmental resolve, children are well aware of the potentially unpleasant consequences they face when telling others, and in particular, adults, to stop polluting and start saving the earth. This awareness is reflected in the frequent use of the word "encourage" in children's accounts of approaching adults about saving the planet:

And what kinds of things can kids do...?

Melanie: Well, we can encourage our parents to recycle, we can recycle ourselves...
(11 year old white girl, going into 6th grade).

DK: What can a kid do to change adults?

Alexander: Try to encourage them to recycle and just try to pick up garbage around their place.
(11 year old white boy, going into 5th)

DK: What can kids do to help save the environment?

Sidney: We can encourage people and we can pick up trash and stuff.

(8 year old white girl, going into 3rd grade).

AB: Well, they can encourage their parents to like ride bikes and things, to stop using their cars. Or encourage them to go on a bus, which does waste a little money but, still it's better for the earth.

(8 year old white boy, going into 3rd grade).

But will adults listen to kids admonish them about saving the planet? Some children report success in changing their parent's environmental ways:

DK: Have you had any impact on your parents?

Melanie: I'm getting them to recycle. My mother refused to recycle at first because it was too hard. But I made a deal with her as long as I went down and brought the bottles back and forth, then we could do it.

(11 year old white girl, going into 6th grade).

DK: What do you think a kid can do about something like the ozone layer?

Leah: They can, they can do stuff on their own like they can stop using poisonous gases and stuff like that, and tell their parents about it and people about it so they can stop doing it.

DK: Do you talk to your parents about any of this stuff at all?

Leah: [very definitely] Yeah, now we recycle because we didn't before and now we recycle like aluminum and plastic and um that's um usually it, that's all.

DK: And is that because of your idea?

Leah: Yeah, well I heard it in other places and I came home and I was just saying that we have to help save the planet because pretty soon when we get older the greenhouse effect is just gonna, it's gonna keep gettin hotter and hotter and we're just, we're not gonna be able to live here very long.

DK: ...And how did [your parents] respond?

Leah: They, they did what they could. We started recycling, like a year ago.
(13 year old white girl, going into 8th grade).

But despite some successes, few children see it as an easy task to raise adults' environmental consciousness:

DK: So would you say that you and your friends ever talk about something like the environment?

Katie: Um, well we don't really talk about it but if we see something, somebody doing something bad you know we tell them, that's not good for the environment.

DK: ...Do you think kids can change the way adults do things?

Katie: Not really.
(11 year old white Hispanic girl, going into 7th grade).

DK: What would you tell a plastics factory owner? Do you think they would listen to you?

Alexander: No... Because you're putting their business down.
(11 year old white boy, going into 5th grade).

DK: ...Do you think kids are teaching their parents anything about it [the environmental crisis]?

Joshua: Umm, they try but they're thick.

DK: The parents or the kids?

Laura: The parents... Like sometimes I talk to my mom about recycling and she just like blows it off and starts talking about something else...
(10 year old white girl, and 12 year old white boy, in 5th and 6th grade special ed class).

DK: Can kids change the way adults treat the environment?

MaxS: (pause) No, I know I can't. But I don't know about other people.

DK: Why not? What do you think gets in the way?

MaxS: My dad. He never, when he, he never lets me talk a lot. I have to kind of, I'll say, "Mom", and then dad comes in and says, "Have you seen my keys!!", and I never get to talk.
(8 year old white boy, going into 3rd grade).

DK: Do you think that parents and other adults will listen to kids?

AB: Well, some won't but some will.

DK: Who do you think wouldn't listen?

AB: Well, um like... someone who likes to be bad and things... and throw things around.

DK: What do you think kids can do about people like that?

AB: Um, like tell them to stop or something. And if they don't stop like tell the police or something.
(8 year old white boy, going into 3rd grade).

DK: What do you think a kid can do to help save the planet?

Charles: Nothing.

DK: ...Can kids make adults do things?

Charles: No, but adults can make kids do things.

DK: Do you think that sometimes kids can influence adults, make adults look at some things in a new way?

Charles: [hesitatingly] Yeah.

DK: Like how?

Charles: They see somebody like their parents doing something that they are not supposed to. Telling them that that's not what you're supposed to do. Like if they threw paper on the ground. Because when they [the parents] were going to school they didn't know about littering and stuff... Now that there's more people then a lot of don't know then know, then they can tell them...
(11 year old white boy, going into 5th grade).

Even when children are optimistic about their potential

impact on adults' behavior, like Charles (above) they recognize the need for strength in numbers:

DK: Do you think that kids can change the way adults are doing things?

MaxG: Yes!

DK: Uh huh. What do you think kids can do?

MaxG: Because they can try to make their parents stop using the car, they can try to make them get a bike. And they should try to make them [make] their job to be closer to the house. If like, if it's far away... it would be hard to get there by bike. And by the time they'd get there... they might be fired. So they should be closer and they should use a bike.

DK: And do you think that adults will listen to kids?

MaxG: If all the kids join together to try to help, um, that's a way.
(8 year old white boy, going into 3rd grade).

Some children go beyond changing their own environmental habits, or even that of their family or peers, and call for changes in public opinion and politically powerful adults as well. This is often reported by children in the form of letter-writing to politicians:

DK: What do you think that kids can do to help save the planet?

Yolanda: Well, I think that they should send like letters to different states. And like they should write to the president. And the president, if he could help us with, um, getting the earth to be a better place.
(11 year old Black girl, going into 5th grade).

DK: So what do you think a kid can do about these big adult problems?

Mathew: Well, basically do the same thing adults do. Write letters...[As a kid] you have a little bit more power and a little bit more strength because, you know,

you can say in your letters, like, the adults can say, "Well, I don't want my kid to..." or "Come on, stop" or whatever. But we can actually say we're going to have to live in it. We have a, we can just say, we can say for ourselves, "We have to live in it, and we don't want to"... [Kids] have just a stronger way to act on it. Saying, well, "George Bush, you're not going to be alive, we will be. We're going to be in this smoggy, coughed-up environment, and we don't want it."
(9 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

Mathew argues that kids more than any other social category have a powerful moral and ethical position from which to demand environmental justice, that is, the inalienable right to inherit at least a livable, if not a clean and beautiful, environment. This righteous sense of indignation spurs many children to continue to write to the President, even when their calls and letters go unanswered:

Eddy: ...Like some kids will just write, keep on writing letters to the President, like giving it to him, and saying like so and so, I want, like, you know um, to help the environment and, you know, do this and that... And if you keep writing then maybe it will help it a little. So they're trying to help... some kids are trying to help a little more.

DK: How did you hear about kids that are doing stuff like writing to the President?

Eddy: Um, I just, on a, on a, on a tv, on a t (short laugh), in our classroom we get this thing called uh [Kind Time?] News, and we get it about the environment, um, once a month in our classroom. And it tells about kids and everything and what they're doing to help the environment. And about animals and things.

DK: That's interesting. Is that something you'd do, write a letter to the President?

Eddy: Well, yeah I did it a couple times before, and I asked them to write back and I never got an answer...

The image of schoolchildren writing letters to politicians as a classroom activity is one that strikes fear and outrage

into the hearts of politically conservative ideologues:

While environmentalism is likely to be a mainstay of education in the years to come, this does not mean that America's children are to be condemned to curricula of half-truths and political advocacy... Rather than impressing upon children the need for political advocacy, children should be encouraged to think of their own solutions... Children should not be told by their teachers that they should sign petitions, endorse political agendas, or write pleading letters to the president... Children need to be taught that there are trade-offs implicit in every environmental issue... Environmental education can be a valuable addition to school curricula, but only if it is conducted in a careful, thoughtful, and non-ideological manner. After all, schools are for education, not political indoctrination (Adler 1992:25-26).

Conservative opponents of liberal environmentalism clearly recognize the potential political power children wield, and it scares the daylights out of them. Education for participatory citizenship in a liberal democracy is reconfigured as a dangerously subversive act, akin to child abuse. And as Eddy's, and other children's experience shows, anti-environmentalists have just cause for their concern:

Eddy: And [in another letter] I was telling our city mayor maybe to put more garbage cans around, so the kids that like to help clean up could pick up the garbage and throw it in the garbage can, so somebody could go along every day and pick up the garbage... Well, they're putting a couple more garbage cans, I did get written back from the mayor of [our city]. And he put a couple more in, around Broadway, that's where a lot of the trash is, that's where we walk by. It's kind of like New York [City], you see cigarette things and garbage laying all on the grass part. And right next to the sidewalk... And so the [garbage] pickup doesn't come every day, it comes every two days, when they pick up the garbage.
(10 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

Individual empowerment takes on a new meaning when kids see

the direct and effective results of their social and political environmental efforts. These can range from the sense of accomplishment and recognition kids feel from being part of the cleanest group area in a summer camp, to the satisfaction that comes from having letters to the mayor calling for a neighborhood clean-up campaign realized.

It is no wonder, then, that Adler and other political conservatives are demanding individual solutions not "political advocacy" in the environmentalization of kids. And, ironically, liberal environmentalism for the most part is providing just that, individual solutions to systemic, structural, social, economic, and political problems.

But despite this mutual bias on the part of both liberals and conservatives, many children clearly recognize that it takes more than one's own individual actions to change environmental (and ultimately, social and political) practices. And for at least some children, activist organizing is seen as a necessary means of changing adult environmental ways.

DK: What do you think that kids can do to help the planet?

Joshua: Like pick up stuff. They could maybe plant a tree, you know maybe kids could even draw signs and hang them all over the place, telephone poles, getting the message out to people.

DK: And who do you think needs to hear the message?

Joshua: Mostly the grown-ups.
[The other two kids in the group nod their heads in agreement].
Yeah, because the grownups think they're smart, but man

it's really weird. In some ways I think that kids are much smarter when it comes to the environment.

[Vigorous head nodding among the group].

I mean some people, they'd rather have a leopard skin than have their children grow up with a real live leopard to look at. Really, a lot stupidity that is. (12 year old white boy in 6th grade special ed class).

Children committed to political and environmental activism also recognize that organizing is not easy, and that it is an ongoing struggle:

Mathew: I keep trying to start stuff, like, I tried to start something but then three people in the group quit, no actually two people in the group quit, there was only five people originally, so we ended up with three people in the group. Not much rules because it would be environmental subjects, working with the war on poverty, stuff like that. You can't really do it with only three people, so that was trying to built up.

Mathew: I try to organize a lot of things; they just end up in pishaposh. Nothing. [Not only in our school] no, no, no, just with my friend, anybody. Most of them [are] from my school because most of my friends are in school, but, still I mean, I take, I take them from another school too but, they just, somehow it falls apart and we never get to do it.

DK: What's your first step for organizing?

Mathew: My first step is to... gather people that want to do it, and find them out, and bring them. And I have my first meeting which is kind of boring. I go over, "Hey this is serious". It's not the fun stuff. And then that's why most people give up. Because they don't like it, they don't like the first meeting. But I mean everybody's got to have the first meeting talking. You can't start a group going out into the field...

DK: How did you get people together for a meeting about the environment?

Mathew: Yeah, well you see... me and my mom and all that, we had one, it was called the environment, I forget the name of it. Oh heck, who cares about the name? And we used to go out and do all sorts of science projects and stuff about the environment.

DK: So your Mom's into saving the planet too?

Mathew: Oh yeah... we come from a family of activists... yeah, peace activists, democracy activists, everything, communists... We go to demonstrations, vigils. The latest vigil that we've been doing is because they keep setting off bomb tests in Nevada. That's been our latest issue, I think.
(9 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

As Mathew vividly demonstrates, actual children don't jive with the pervasive and pejorative media construction of eco-vigilante children self-righteously and fanatically proselytizing about saving the planet to hapless, harassed, and environmentally stupid parents. Contrary to popular representations of parents and children at odds, or even more dramatically, as reversing traditional authoritarian roles when it comes to environmental issues, in Mathew's case parent and child are sympathetic and in sync in their political and social commitments and concerns.

Conservatives such as Adler are inclined to view children's environmental and political engagement as the exploitation of concerned children by "ideologically-motivated" adults. Meanwhile others on the left of the political spectrum, like myself, see the simplistic slogans and crass commercialism of liberal environmentalism as exploiting kids in a completely different way - by (cynically or naively) selling children a false bill of goods, and selling kids short in terms of effective ecological action. But in talking to children like Mathew, who identified themselves as politically active and who

talked articulately and at length about their environmental concern, I never sensed the simple parroting of catch-phrases of "politically-correct" adults.

DK: What do you think will really make [adults and politicians] listen?

Mathew: You know, at this rate I don't know if anything will. You know, as if all we've done isn't enough? And this is just the beginning. And all these, if you feel like a debate we've run, or [the] "End the styrofoam" [campaign] or whatever happened in those places, well, listen to this, that's just the beginning. That's almost just McDonald's and Burger King. That's just a little portion, you know. They still have a lot more. And then, they just don't listen to it. And we know how much it took just to do that much. It took years. So either it has to speed up, or it's getting a little hard for them to listen to anything.

DK: And when you say "them", who...

Mathew: We mean basically the government because basically the government has most of the power to change. Because they have, they make laws, they're in charge of making laws. I mean, you could just make for your state, you could make it for your community. But that's not going really help, as much. It's better to go for the top. But, still... it's usually easier to get your community [involved]...

And one of children's most immediate communities, from which they learn and through which they speak, is the community of their peers. For some children, an epiphany can occur when they observe groups of kids speaking in public forums to political candidates about children's environmental concerns:

DK: Do you think that adults will listen to kids?

Devin: Actually, you know, this is an interesting question, because if one kid were to tell a... if one kid were to go up, or two kids were to go up to a Democrat and say, "If you were elected president,

please try and help the environment", (almost shouting this last phrase, for emphasis) I doubt the Democrat would really listen. But I was (carefully chosen word here) glancing at a television when I was visiting my grandmother, and a whole big group of children got together, and they went on to the television with microphones and everything, and they were talking to the Democrats. And one kid said, "Do you follow me?" He was talking about... I will help save my environment, and [he was telling the Democrat] to, like, answer all, to repeat what I say. And he was doing all kinds of things like, I will help my environment, I will protect the earth. And two of the Democrats did it. So, if a big group of children gets together, it would work.

DK: I think you've got a good idea. It must have been exciting to see that on television.

Devin: And to actually see a child standing up there at a podium and everything, with a microphone, and there were four Democrats sitting at a table, actually listening to the children.
(8 year old white boy, going into third grade).

Once again children are empowered by the dawning recognition that they are members of a political constituency, and as such have voices that can be heard. Interestingly, Devin's insight into political empowerment came via television, that much maligned medium that Postman and others argue is "amusing us to death" (1985). Of particular interest is the fact that Devin attends a private school in the Waldorf tradition that discourages television watching of any kind in the home as a prerequisite for enrollment in the school. The fact that popular culture is "fractured and saturated with meaning" is evident here. While Captain Planet and "green advertising" shamelessly sell useless commodities to kids in the name of "saving the planet", on the same convex tube children experience for the first time a heady

sensation of political empowerment. However fleeting its effect on the environmental behavior of political candidates, something profound is going on for many children who are concerned about the environmental crisis. But kids don't want to do it alone:

Katherine: Yeah, but we need our parents' help. We can't just go out and do all this stuff. We need our parents help.

(11 year old white girl, going into 6th grade).

Mathew: You'd be surprised. You think, oh well, the adults go around and have their meetings, and have their plans, and have their (takes a breath) things, but kids have almost as much power. Because we can go out and like organize a tv show with a little help... It's hard, but still, it's just as easy for kids as for adults. We just need a little help with tv, or anything really special like getting in with the town hall or something [like that]... But otherwise they're almost, the kids, we can go out and fundraise on our own. Just have us, drive us somewhere, and we'll do the rest.

(9 year old white boy, going into 4th grade).

"Just drive us somewhere and we'll do the rest". Something important is going on here beyond the shouldering of an environmental burden created by adults. A genuine children's culture of environmentalism is emerging in the call to save the planet. And while for many it remains at the vague and relatively unformed level of "picking up the earth", the message holds a subversive potential which many children are realizing.

And even when children express bitterness at the ecological legacy left for them to both literally and figuratively clean up, many still empathize with parents who

are slow-going in embracing environmentalism as a way of life:

Mandy: Like my parents, I mean, they do stuff, you know. I've got them... I'm always screaming at them for not doing things. I'm always doing that. And we haven't been recycling. We were recycling paper but like we haven't really put together a recycling program in our house. And I'm like, I saw recycling bins on sale, [and] I'm like, "We're going out and buying those." I don't even ask them because they know... They care, it's just there's a lot of other things on their mind... It's like grown-ups are so worried about money, so worried about um paying the mortgage, and keeping the bills up-to-date, that they don't, they don't even, I don't know, they don't seem like they have enough time. But what happens? This is what I tell my parents all the time: What happens when the planet blows up? You're not going to have to worry about stuff like that.

(12 year old white girl, going into 7th grade).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The liberal environmentalization of children can be attacked with equal passion from either end of the political spectrum -left and right targets of criticism are practically identical - but analyses and alternative solutions to the liberal environmental agenda differ radically and fundamentally depending on socio-political perspective.

I have tried to show how, in contradictory and largely fantastical ways, children in popular media about environmental crisis are portrayed as either icons of innocence and vulnerability or overly-zealous and tyrannical taskmasters. I argue that these constructions are no happenstance and that they reflect an ambivalent, if not overtly hostile, attitude toward children, particularly toward children who express concern about social issues and who would exhibit power and political clout in their interactions with adults.

I have explored the pervasive targeting of children for "save the planet" messages, and have analyzed a popular environmental cartoon, Captain Planet and the Planetegers, as representing a liberal paradox in environmentalizing kids. This paradox is evident in the many contradictory calls liberal environmentalism makes to children. Children are told repeatedly that they must help save the planet: they

must turn out the lights, tune up the car, turn off the water, reduce their consumption. But at the same time, in the very same breath, kids are incessantly hawked by fast-paced, glitzy, raucous, and inevitably attractive, commercials to buy any number of useless commodities designed to fall apart or be discarded after only a short season of use. Even taking into account theories from cultural studies on the pleasures of consumption, there is no getting around the fact that the liberal environmental paradox, wittingly or unwittingly, naively or cynically, exploits children by targeting them for two completely, utterly, contradictory messages about how they should think, feel, and ecologically behave.

Exploiting kids as a commercial market for "planetary" concern is only one obvious way in which liberal environmentalism sells kids short. Another troubling aspect is the way liberal environmentalism actively and aggressively promotes children's environmental concern but supplies them only with pat slogans and simplistic solutions. Reducing complex economic, political, and ideological problems to simple, easy-to-handle, and ultimately individualistic solutions effectively diffuses responsibility for global environmental degradation and disaster to a universalized "fault", in which no one is "really" to blame. While not surprising, given the unreflective assumptions inherent in a liberal ideology that

emphasizes abstract individualism, the necessity of a market-driven society, the sanctity of private property, and the inevitability of bureaucratic nation-states, it is problematic at best, and cynically hypocritical at worst.

The Corporate Connection

The scope of environmental crisis facing the planet is vast, unprecedented, and expanding (Brown 1991):

...the extent of the environmental damage to the planet and the inadequacy of efforts to cope with it are becoming all too apparent. During the 20 years since the first Earth Day, in 1970, the world lost nearly 200 million hectares of tree cover... deserts expanded by some 120 million hectares... Thousands of plant and animal species with which we shared the planet in 1970 no longer exist... and the world's farmers lost an estimated 480 billion tons of topsoil, roughly equivalent to the amount on India's cropland (3).

To this devastating list of damages one might add a compendium of others: an ever-increasing accumulation of toxic wastes, greenhouse gases and holes in the ozone layer; acid rain and lifeless lakes; global warming; air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, oil spills... the list is virtually endless. In order to understand the root causes of this continuing global degradation one need look not at individual practices of average consumers but at the symbiotic relationship between multinational corporations and nation states:

The nation-state and the business corporation are, by their very nature, designed to enclose ecosystems, commodify and privatize nature, optimize the expropriation of scarce resources, expand production and consumption, and advance utilitarian self-interest. The present environmental and economic crises have been brought on, in large part, by these self-same

institutions (Rifkin 1991:95).

There is much documented evidence to support Rifkin's contention that corporations, not individuals or "consumer demand", are the real culprits of environmental disaster. I will illustrate this by citing just a few of many available examples. From a historical perspective, Snell (1991) shows how:

the rise of the private automobile and the decline of other, more efficient and less polluting means of transportation was, in large part, the result of a conscious policy by the auto and oil corporations - especially General Motors - to destroy other forms of ground transportation in order to create dependency on the automobile" (318).

Exploring the intersection of environmental issues and social justice, Bullard (1990) details the routine corporate practice of locating toxic waste and other environmentally noxious facilities in predominately poor and black communities. Nelson (1992), a Canadian, analyzes how multinational corporations appropriate the jargon of environmentalism in order to undermine the potential political influence of grassroots environmental activists demanding radical economic and environmental change (203-217). Each of these examples demonstrates the extent to which corporate, not individual, practices are responsible for creating and maintaining environmental crisis.

I have singled out Captain Planet and the Planeteers as epitomizing the liberal environmental paradox, showing how the cartoon's producers, plots, and practical suggestions

about "saving the earth" embrace fundamental liberal values that are at odds with basic environmental ideology. By downplaying the need for government regulation on corporate practices ("we are pro-responsible business... Business is changing of their own free will), liberal environmentalism preserves the sanctity of private property, while at the same time invoking notions of individual autonomy ("the power is yours!") as the best solution for structural social and economic problems. Coupled with aggressive marketing tactics aimed at kids, valorization of the nation-state system in the person of the planeters, reproduction of militaristic hierarchy basic to liberal geopolitics in the person of "Captain" Planet, the cartoon is a microcosm of liberal values transformed to an environmental agenda that is contradictory and ultimately doomed to fail in its mission to "save the planet".

But while I use the Turner Broadcasting System's Captain Planet to demonstrate my point, there are many, many venues in the mainstream culture targeting children with the exact same contradictory liberal environmental message. The children's cable channel Nickelodeon, for example, regularly broadcasts environmental messages to children without ever questioning basic liberal assumptions. And the market for books, magazines, and other paraphernalia selling kids on saving the planet is booming, as any visit to a children's bookstore will easily attest.

The Kid Connection

Having analyzed contradictory ways children are depicted in media about environmental crisis, and the ideological underpinnings of liberal environmental messages being targeted to kids, I looked next to children themselves and their experience of "saving the planet." Initially I wanted to know how aware children are of environmental crisis, and whether they are feeling overwhelmed or unduly burdened by messages telling them to "save the planet". Looking at children's drawings of saving the planet I discovered that children are very much aware of environmental crisis, and that most children feel not only that they are supposed to do something about saving the planet, but that they can. At first this coupling of personal responsibility and personal empowerment by children in the face of global ecological crisis surprised and confounded me. Liberal environmentalism appeared to be very effective in supplying children both with a powerful message (the planet needs saving and you need to help) and an easy solution (if you see a piece of litter, pick it up).

I decided to talk in more depth to children in summer camps and elementary schools about their experience of environmental crisis. I wanted to find out what it means to children to save the earth. Through talking to children, alone and in small groups, the broad outlines revealed in children's drawings of environmental concern gradually were

filled in with rich ethnographic detail, revealing more complex, and in some significant ways, more promising, responses by children to the demands for ecological action than I had at first believed.

It seems children are picking up a subversive message in the call to save the planet. Despite liberal environmental (and politically conservative) calls for individual solutions to social problems, children are realizing, often from each other, that it takes more than one kid to save a planet. Kids recognize the environmental crisis as their issue, and an awareness is dawning among children that collectively they form a political base. This, of course, is exactly what conservative critics of environmental education are most in fear of - really empowered children as a social category and political constituency with social, political and environmental demands that would require the total restructuring of systems of privilege for the few that impact in negative and devastating ways on the rest of the inhabitants of the planet, human and unhuman alike.

How do Kids' Interviews and Drawings Mesh with the Messages?

As I have shown in Chapters Four and Five, children both accept and reject messages they get from liberal environmentalism about saving the planet. Many, if not most children in the United States, regardless of race, class, or gender, have heard about the environmental crisis. And the

moral aspect of the liberal environmental message has made its impact - children feel personally responsible to do something to save the planet. For many children this means keeping the earth clean, picking up trash, not littering:

My picture is about me, my brother, and my dog picking up litter on a sunny day in the forest. I think it is bad to litter because it can ruin the environment (Shannon, 8 year old white girl in 3rd grade).

While for others it means raising others' environmental consciousness:

My picture is what I would do to save our part of the world... I have signs, a yard, and a compost. Our signs [read]: "recycle, help save our earth, you can save our animal friends by saving their homes, don't pollute, save our rainforests, you can help save the earth, have composts." I really like the country[side] and I hope you do too. You can tell other people to start composts, recycle, don't fill up the landfills, save our animals, and try to save the endangered species. I hope that you can do this, or part of it. I'd thank you very much if you would, for we all need animals sometimes, and we need growing stuff. So let's not have, let's have a clean country if we're going to have a country. And let's not have a junky environment... (Ann, 8 year old white girl in 3rd grade).

Another side of the moral aspect of individual autonomy being accepted by kids is evident in the reports of many children who feel personally responsible not only for saving the planet, but for causing the problems:

It's everyone. Everyone does something not good for the environment. It's nobody's real fault...(Eddy, 10 year old white boy going into 4th grade).

But while many liberal environmental messages are being accepted by kids, some subversive content fundamental to environmental ideology is making its impact as well:

Well, I watch tv and stuff and I see all the commercials for all the Worldwatch or whatever it is, and it just makes me think that we don't need that stuff. All it's doing is ruining the world, and if we don't have a world to use it, then I mean, we really shouldn't...

It's really useless if you don't have a place to use it.

(Melanie and Francesca, two 11 year old white girls, going into 6th grade).

In sum, let us be clear: there is an environmental crisis; it is one of the crucial social, economic and political problems of our time, and it must be resolved. Children are being made aware of this environmental crisis and they are getting the message that it is a problem they must help to repair. Children are both willing, and able, to help save the planet. They have demonstrated this not only in their pictures and interviews, but in their political acts.

Saving the planet means more than recycling bottles, turning off the water, picking up the trash, and buying "green" products. Saving the planet means changing not only our patterns of consumption, but the material conditions of our mutual existence, and the epistemologies through which we understand human and nature relations. Captain Planet and the Planeteers graphically demonstrates the liberal misdirection of children's very real willingness to help save the planet. In particular, through contradictory promotion of conservation and consumption, and by exposing children to huge complex environmental problems but

providing them only with simplistic, individualistic solutions, Captain Planet and the liberal environmental ethic provide salve but little substance for avoiding further environmental disaster. Making a place for children in a new configuration of the environmental crisis is a radical social project, one that may better address the pressing needs of "the seventh generation":

Executive producer of Captain Planet: You know, the people who have made the greatest mistakes on this planet... they have not been done intending to sabotage the seventh generation... [In the] Native American perspective... the Iroquois always thought of every decision they made and how it would impact on the seventh generation....We think of what, the seven months, yeah, forward thinking people think seven years. Those are real visionaries.

DK: And would you say that you're a person who's thinking for the seventh generation?

EP: Absolutely.

There are many questions about children's experience of environmental crisis that still need to be addressed. My findings from children's drawings indicate that there are race/class and gender differences in areas of environmental concern where problems and problem-makers are emphasized. These need to be more fully and systematically explored. To what extent, if any, do race, class, and gender determine which children do not feel empowered to save the planet?

Why do more girls and low-income Black children draw problems without solutions than do white children or boys? What is the relationship between social marginality and perceptions of empowerment for children? For those children

whose drawings of saving the planet suggest a sense of personal power, there are virtually no differences according to gender or race/class. But for children who express powerlessness in their drawings tend to be members of socially marginal categories (girls, poor Blacks). What factors determine which girls and low-income Black children will feel empowered, and which will not? Only a sociological approach that grounds children as people with race, class and gender differences can begin to address these concerns.

There is much left to be discovered about children's experience of the natural environment. Do children have a "natural" affinity for nature, as many environmentalists would have us believe? This assumption demands careful critical attention. What is the meaning of nature for children? How do children encounter "the environment"? We need to learn more about the social construction of nature for children, including theme parks, summer camps, "wildlife", etc.

What impact, if any, does gender, ethnicity, class, and/or, geographical region have on children's experience of the environment? I would like to conduct a study of children from very different cultures within the U.S. - Hopi desert dwellers, inner-city urban Latinas, Pennsylvania Dutch Amish children, children of displaced loggers in the Pacific Northwest - to compare experiences of saving the

planet and children's relationship to nature from a cross-cultural perspective.

Another area ripe for further research is the transmission of culture from kids to kids. David Goode (1986) argues that kids have a unique culture of their own, separate and distinct from that of adults. There is evidence that environmentalism is an area of "kids culture". What is kids culture? How is it transmitted from kids to kids? How distinct is kids' culture from that of adults? What significance does it have for our understanding of children and the process of socialization?

Since the seventies not much has been written about children as political actors. What does this mean for kids in the 1990s? We need to start looking at children's political activities in a much broader light than simply party politics and knowledge of government. Are children a political constituency? What ramifications would a politicized identity politics for children have for child and adult relations? And what are its implications for liberal education and social policy? It would be of great interest to follow children longitudinally throughout the "child" life course, from an early age until post-adolescence, to see how the experience of empowerment changes as children grow and enter the world of adult "compromises".

Along a similar line, we need to reevaluate stage

theories of child development. How do the "stages" children go through differ according to race, class and gender? culture? historical period? political climate? I am arguing here that these and other methodological issues in doing sociological study with children are "cutting-edge".

TABLE 1
CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN BY GRADE

TYPE	GRADE				Total
	2 - 3	4 - 5	6 - 8	k - 1	
Frequency					
Expected					
Cell Chi-Square					
Percent					
Row Pct					
Col Pct					
Everything's ok	24	5	0	4	33
	10.931	13.95	3.4353	4.6845	
	15.627	5.7417	3.4353	0.1	
	7.57	1.58	0.00	1.26	10.41
	72.73	15.15	0.00	12.12	
	22.86	3.73	0.00	8.89	
Personal Action	42	71	9	30	152
	50.347	64.252	15.823	21.577	
	1.3838	0.7086	2.9424	3.2878	
	13.25	22.40	2.84	9.46	47.95
	27.63	46.71	5.92	19.74	
	40.00	52.99	27.27	66.67	
Call for Action	20	31	15	5	71
	23.517	30.013	7.3912	10.079	
	0.5261	0.0325	7.8329	2.5593	
	6.31	9.78	4.73	1.58	22.40
	28.17	43.66	21.13	7.04	
	19.05	23.13	45.45	11.11	
Depict Problem	12	11	6	0	29
	9.6057	12.259	3.0189	4.1167	
	0.5968	0.1292	2.9437	4.1167	
	3.79	3.47	1.89	0.00	9.15
	41.38	37.93	20.69	0.00	
	11.43	8.21	18.18	0.00	
Problem-makers	7	16	3	6	32
	10.599	13.527	3.3312	4.5426	
	1.2223	0.4522	0.0329	0.4676	
	2.21	5.05	0.95	1.89	10.09
	21.87	50.00	9.38	18.75	
	6.67	11.94	9.09	13.33	
Total	105	134	33	45	317
	33.12	42.27	10.41	14.20	100.00

* category 6 collapsed, due to small n.

STATISTICS FOR TABLE OF TYPE BY GRADE

Statistic	DF	Value	Prob

Chi-Square	12	54.139	0.000
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	12	58.023	0.000
Mantel-Haenszel Chi-Square	1	1.243	0.265
Phi Coefficient		0.413	
Contingency Coefficient		0.382	
Cramer's V		0.239	

Sample Size = 317

WARNING: 30% of the cells have expected counts less than 5. Chi-Square may not be a valid test.

TABLE 2

CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN BY GENDER

TYPE	GENDER		Total
	girls	boys	
Frequency			
Expected			
Cell Chi-Square			
Percent			
Row Pct			
Col Pct			
Everything's Ok	18	15	33
	19.165	13.835	
	0.0708	0.098	
	5.59	4.66	10.25
	54.55	45.45	
	9.63	11.11	
Personal Action	88	64	152
	88.273	63.727	
	0.0008	0.0012	
	27.33	19.88	47.20
	57.89	42.11	
	47.06	47.41	
Call for Action	48	22	70
	40.652	29.348	
	1.3281	1.8397	
	14.91	6.83	21.74
	68.57	31.43	
	25.67	16.30	
Depict Problems	21	7	28
	16.261	11.739	
	1.3812	1.9132	
	6.52	2.17	8.70
	75.00	25.00	
	11.23	5.19	
Problem-makers	9	23	32
	18.584	13.416	
	4.9425	6.8462	
	2.80	7.14	9.94
	28.12	71.87	
	4.81	17.04	
Recast problem	3	4	7
	4.0652	2.9348	
	0.2791	0.3866	
	0.93	1.24	2.17
	42.86	57.14	
	1.60	2.96	
Total	187	135	322
	58.07	41.93	100.00

STATISTICS FOR TABLE OF TYPE BY GENDER

Statistic	DF	Value	Prob

Chi-Square	5	19.087	0.002
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	5	19.342	0.002
Mantel-Haenszel Chi-Square	1	1.971	0.160
Phi Coefficient		0.243	
Contingency Coefficient		0.237	
Cramer's V		0.243	

Sample Size = 322

TABLE 3

CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN BY REGION

TYPE	REGION		Total
	north	south	
Frequency			
Expected			
Cell Chi-Square			
Percent			
Row Pct			
Col Pct			
Everything's OK	30 22.745 2.3144 9.23 90.91 13.39	3 10.255 5.133 0.92 9.09 2.97	33 10.15
Personal Action	92 104.76 1.5549 28.31 60.53 41.07	60 47.237 3.4485 18.46 39.47 59.41	152 46.77
Call for Action	53 48.935 0.3376 16.31 74.65 23.66	18 22.065 0.7488 5.54 25.35 17.82	71 21.85
Depict Problems	26 19.988 1.8085 8.00 89.66 11.61	3 9.0123 4.0109 0.92 10.34 2.97	29 8.92
Problem-makers	20 22.055 0.1915 6.15 62.50 8.93	12 9.9446 0.4248 3.69 37.50 11.88	32 9.85
Recast Problem	3 5.5138 1.1461 0.92 37.50 1.34	5 2.4862 2.5418 1.54 62.50 4.95	8 2.46
Total	224 68.92	101 31.08	325 100.00

STATISTICS FOR TABLE OF TYPE BY REGION

Statistic	DF	Value	Prob

Chi-Square	5	23.661	0.000
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	5	26.168	0.000
Mantel-Haenszel Chi-Square	1	0.527	0.468
Phi Coefficient		0.270	
Contingency Coefficient		0.261	
Cramer's V		0.270	

Sample Size = 325

TABLE 4
CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN BY RACE

TYPE	RACE		Total
	black	white	
Frequency			
Expected			
Cell Chi-Square			
Percent			
Row Pct			
Col Pct			
Everything's Ok	8	25	33
	4.9754	28.025	
	1.8387	0.3264	
	2.46	7.69	10.15
	24.24	75.76	
	16.33	9.06	
Personal Action	20	132	152
	22.917	129.08	
	0.3713	0.0659	
	6.15	40.62	46.77
	13.16	86.84	
	40.82	47.83	
Call for Action	11	60	71
	10.705	60.295	
	0.0082	0.0014	
	3.38	18.46	21.85
	15.49	84.51	
	22.45	21.74	
Depict Problem	5	24	29
	4.3723	24.628	
	0.0901	0.016	
	1.54	7.38	8.92
	17.24	82.76	
	10.20	8.70	
Problem-makers	1	31	32
	4.8246	27.175	
	3.0319	0.5383	
	0.31	9.54	9.85
	3.12	96.87	
	2.04	11.23	
Recast Problem	4	4	8
	1.2062	6.7938	
	6.4715	1.1489	
	1.23	1.23	2.46
	50.00	50.00	
	8.16	1.45	
Total	49	276	325
	15.08	84.92	100.

STATISTICS FOR TABLE OF TYPE BY RACE

Statistic	DF	Value	Prob

Chi-Square	5	13.909	0.016
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	5	12.823	0.025
Mantel-Haenszel Chi-Square	1	0.051	0.822
Phi Coefficient		0.207	
Contingency Coefficient		0.203	
Cramer's V		0.207	

Sample Size = 325

WARNING: 33% of the cells have expected counts less than 5. Chi-Square may not be a valid test.

TABLE 5
CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN BY RACE/CLASS

TYPE	R_C		Total
	ny black	ny white	
Frequency			
Expected			
Cell Chi-Square			
Percent			
Row Pct			
Col Pct			
Everything's Ok	5	23	28
	2.2243	25.776	
	3.4638	0.2989	
	2.34	10.75	13.08
	17.86	82.14	
	29.41	11.68	
Personal Action	3	88	91
	7.229	83.771	
	2.474	0.2135	
	1.40	41.12	42.52
	3.30	96.70	
	17.65	44.67	
Call for Action	4	46	50
	3.972	46.028	
	0.0002	171E-7	
	1.87	21.50	23.36
	8.00	92.00	
	23.53	23.35	
Depict Problems	5	21	26
	2.0654	23.935	
	4.1695	0.3598	
	2.34	9.81	12.15
	19.23	80.77	
	29.41	10.66	
Problem-makers	0	19	19
	1.5093	17.491	
	1.5093	0.1302	
	0.00	8.88	8.88
	0.00	100.00	
	0.00	9.64	
Total	17	197	214
	7.94	92.06	100.00

* category 6 collapsed, due to small n

STATISTICS FOR TABLE OF TYPE BY RACE/CLASS

Statistic	DF	Value	Prob
Chi-Square	4	12.619	0.013
Likelihood Ratio Chi-Square	4	12.743	0.013
Mantel-Haenszel Chi-Square	1	0.099	0.753
Phi Coefficient		0.243	
Contingency Coefficient		0.236	
Cramer's V		0.243	

Sample Size = 214

WARNING: 40% of the cells have expected counts less than 5. Chi-Square may not be a valid test.

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