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The Global Treadmill of Production and the Environment

Introduction

The intent of this chapter is to illustrate how the global “treadmill of production” (see the section below) arguably leads to the global “treadmill of destruction”. Drawing upon the theory developed by Allan Schnaiberg (1980), the treadmill of production (ToP) focuses on production as the key process in explaining the increasing environmental problems in today’s globalization of production, especially in developing countries whereby environmental degradation occurs as a direct result of production demand from advanced developed countries. Therefore, with the interaction of state, capital and the environment, ecological resources are increasingly converted into profits via transnational organization of production and market exchange. Consequently, with an intensification of production processes driven by competition and drive to increase profits in the capitalist world economy, there has been a rising amount of both resource withdrawals from and toxic additions to the environment (Islam, 2013; Schnaiberg, 1980). The endless production thus results in a continual process of environmental degradation that impacts ecosystems and human well-being.

Due to globalization of production, the organization of economic production has also become increasingly globalized whereby profit-oriented transnational corporations (TNCs) began to outsource their production plants and operations to developing countries in a bid to maximize profit by reducing production costs and increasing operational flexibility (McMichael, 2008). Under pressure to become more competitive and develop their economies, developing nations also contribute to the endless cycle of production by providing financial incentives, weak environmental regulations and low-wage labor to attract these

corporations from developed countries. Consequently, there is a relocation of deskilled tasks from developed nations alongside the supply of cheap labor from the developing nations, which gave rise to the New International Division of Labor (NIDL). As mentioned in earlier chapters, the NIDL then led to the creation of a “world factory” with a proliferation of export platforms in developing nations such as export processing zones (EPZs) or other special economic zones (McMichael, 2008). As a consequence, environmental destruction became more prevalent in developing nations from the additions of toxic by-products from production processes into their local environment. Thus, with economic globalization, extensive trading in goods and services drives the endless cycle of production processes, which ultimately leads to the global “treadmill of destruction”, whereby environmental destruction and its related problems are generated through these production processes (Islam, 2013).

Clearly then, the central tenets of the treadmill of production theory can be further understood within the broader framework of world systems theory in understanding how the dynamics of political-economic interactions between developed core countries and semi-peripheral/peripheral developing countries lead to an unequal distribution of environmental vulnerabilities (Rice, 2009). Driven to achieve economic growth and development, demands on increased production from the affluent developed nations inevitably led to increased additions of waste and environmental pollution in the semi-periphery/periphery nations where production takes place (Islam, 2013). Such “unequal ecological exchange” is also further perpetuated under the globalization project when financial markets are highly integrated through free trade and economic arrangements such as free-trade agreements. Therefore, an unequal relationship has been forged between the developed nations who dominate the core of the system and other developing countries that are dependent upon them for trade and business, allowing their environments and cheap labor to be exploited. Hence, following the treadmill of production and world systems theories, this chapter further covers analysis of case studies, such as the Chinese world factory, export processing zones (EPZs) in Bangladesh, and *maquiladoras* in Mexico, to illustrate how the treadmill of production leads to increased environmental vulnerabilities faced by these countries in their pursuit of development and economic agendas. Lastly, the environmental laws and regulations implemented in each of the case studies in light of the ecological problems faced will also be reviewed.