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*Charting a Discursive Field: Environmentalists for U.S. Population Stabilization**

Leslie King, *Smith College*

This article seeks to extend our understanding of the forces that shape social movement messages. Using a framework that focuses on a movement's discursive field, I analyze the U.S. movement for population stabilization, which is made up of groups that call for stricter limits on immigration to the United States as a means to forestall environmental decline. Drawing upon data from a range of sources, including the Web sites of 10 environment-oriented immigration-reduction organizations, I make the case that this movement's particular field is composed of the discursive repertoires (or messages) of a set of environmental and nonenvironmental social actors and three central discourses: science, political economy, and nationalism. I argue that the movement's relative lack of success is partially attributable to its position in the discursive field in which it must operate.

In order for social movements to be successful, they must attract adherents, inspire them to act and, in most cases, convince policy makers and a broad public to adopt a particular position. To do this, as many studies have made clear, movement activists must construct messages, typically referred to as "frames," that identify problems and propose solutions (see Snow and Benford 1988). Thus, numerous studies have examined framing processes as fundamental movement activities. Typically, framing has been conceptualized as a strategic activity and it has been a means to explore agency in the context of social movements (Westby 2002). Increasingly, however, researchers (e.g., Crossley 2002; Steinberg 1999) have begun to identify limitations to this perspective.¹ Some scholars interested in exploring the interpretive and meaning-making activities of social movements have criticized the framing perspective for being "overly agentic" or "overly voluntaristic" (see Crossley 2002; McCright and Dunlap 2000; Steinberg 1999). Constraints on movements' messages have not been adequately addressed, nor have the interactive processes through which those messages are constructed. Yet, clearly, an array of forces structure what social movement actors say, how they say it, and how those messages are perceived.

My intent here is to develop a framework that accounts for how movement messages are shaped and, in doing so, examine the relative lack of success of a specific set of organizations concerned with reducing immigration. The movement for U.S. population stabilization has maintained a steady presence for over two decades. These activists resolutely promote stricter limits on immigration

as a means to safeguard the environment. They argue, among other things, that migration to the United States contributes to urban sprawl, loss of farmland, water shortages, and general overcrowding. Some contend that environmental degradation resulting from immigration is ultimately harmful to people living in the global South.²

Immigration-reduction environmentalists³ have not succeeded in translating their concerns into broad support for their cause despite ample media attention⁴ and despite the fact that opinion polls indicate that most Americans favor tighter limits on immigration and that most are concerned about the environment (Carroll 2005; Public Agenda 2005). The central question examined here is why this movement has had difficulty gaining widespread support and why it has had limited success in the policy arena. Why are the messages of environment-oriented activists advocating tighter limits on immigration politically and discursively weak? I will argue that the immigration-reduction environmentalists are hindered by their structural position in the discursive field in which they operate. The discursive repertoires—the messages—of these activists are shaped in part through a discursive environment that currently disadvantages them.

The Discursive Field

The concept of the discursive field is one of many attempts in recent years to better understand culture, not only the notion of culture as a set of possibilities but also as a system of constraints on social movements (for summaries, see Snow 2004; Williams and Kubal 1999). Previous studies have shown that movements respond discursively to the frames of other movement organizations, especially counter movements (see, for example, McCaffrey and Keys 2000). In addition, movements' framing of issues may be shaped, recursively, by master frames (Snow 2004; Snow and Benford 1992) and/or an organization's ideologies (Reese and Newcombe 2003; Westby 2002). The discursive field framework can potentially incorporate these structuring forces; in addition, it allows for the examination of multiple discursive acts by a range of movement and nonmovement actors that shape a movement's discursive repertoires, or messages.

Perspectives centered on the notion of fields have been increasingly used to examine social movement activity (see Crossley 2002; Ray 1999; Schurman 2004; Steinberg 1999). Not surprisingly, several such studies have been influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (see Crossley 2002, 2003; Ray 1999). For Bourdieu, a field is similar to a game. His fields may be professional or semi-professional realms (e.g., the "sports world" or the "world of high fashion") or broader realms (e.g., the "economic field"). Each field has unique rules and knowledge and is simultaneously "a space of conflict and competition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:16–17). The field resembles a game: some have stronger or weaker skills, some have an advantage derived from money or other

resources, such as specific knowledge. Nick Crossley (2003:59) explains that a field “consists of relationships between different ‘positions,’ with various types of ‘resources,’ economic, symbolic, etc., flowing between them.”

Michel Foucault’s concept of discursive field was one which “creates the ‘effects of truth’ by organizing ideas, images, signs and symbols into both a ‘discipline’ or body of knowledge and ‘disciplinary practices’ or techniques of social control” (Kroll-Smith and Gunter 2005:349). While Foucault emphasized social control via institutionally-based discourse, scholars have increasingly sought to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between culture and structure. According to Spillman (1995:142), discursive fields “express patterns of structural relations and are presuppositions in mundane cultural action; they carry the power of structure into meaning-making. They limit the range of potential meanings and values which might sensibly enter an interaction.” Spillman conceptualizes the discursive field as a “tool of meaning” that allows “the production of repertoires of meanings and values” (1995:140). Important for social movement scholars is that a discursive field allows us to examine a movement’s connectedness to other actors and to existing ideas; it calls on us to pay attention to how discourse—“the social production of meaning that is essentially dialectic, dynamic, and riven with contradictions” (Steinberg 1998:851)—of each group of actors is shaped by the broader environment.

Steinberg (1998, 1999) uses the discursive field to examine social movement activity. Under Steinberg’s conceptualization, discursive fields are constituted by speech genres⁵ and by interactions between various invested actors. Steinberg (1999) analyzes a dialogue between cotton spinners and elites, mainly capitalists and others writing in support of the dominant economic system, in nineteenth-century England. He shows how the challengers (the spinners) had little choice but to engage with genres (or discourses) that had been created in part to support an unequal economic system. Though Steinberg focuses primarily on two main groups—powerholders and challengers—the discursive field can theoretically include the discursive repertoires of an array of players, who may be engaging in various broad discourses.

I imagine discursive fields as sets of discourses—such as discourses of “nationalism,” “citizenship,” or “gender”—that change slowly over time. Discourses are relatively stable systems of meaning that shape and are shaped by the discursive repertoires of individual and organizational actors engaging in a particular public debate. There exist relatively few major discourses in any society and thus few that might constitute the field of a given movement. Actors are almost obliged to participate in the discourses that dominate the field; for example, labor movements must engage with a hegemonic political-economy discourse that privileges capitalist agendas. Discourses also tend to overlap in various ways. Antiabortion movements may be connected to a “religion” discourse,

which in turn may be linked to a “family” discourse that is concerned with specific types of gender roles. Any given social movement will have its own set of discourses that dominate its field and broader movements may engage in more discourses than more narrowly defined movements.

When engaging in a particular debate, movement actors cannot always construct messages for maximum strategic relevance but instead typically must participate in central discourses of the movement’s field; this means drawing upon existent discursive repertoires, which they may use and alter in interaction with the repertoires of other groups and individuals participating in the discourses. “Frames” share attributes with “discursive repertoires”; however, framing continues to be associated with strategy and agency and thus is not the ideal concept for the purposes of this analysis. In using the term “discursive repertoire,” I hope to call attention to the notion that repertoires develop relationally and to the idea that movements draw on an existing stock of discursive repertoires just as they draw on an existing stock of tactics.⁶

To summarize, the discursive field is fluid, without fixed borders, and is constituted by a set of often overlapping discourses each consisting of the repertoires of individual and organizational actors engaging in a particular debate. Each movement has its own discursive field constituted by a specific set of discourses that are, in turn, partially constituted by the repertoires of a specific set of “other players.”

I use these conceptualizations to illuminate my question about the relative lack of success of the movement for U.S. population stabilization. I ask: What are the major discourses that constitute the discursive field in which immigration-reduction environmentalists operate? Which other actors contribute to discourses in this field? What ideas and arguments do immigration-reduction environmentalists invoke to make their points and how might these be understood in relation to the discursive repertoires of these other actors? In short, how does this somewhat stable but fluid structure shape the messages of the immigration-reduction environmentalists?

Data and Methods

This study draws on books and articles written by activists on various sides of the immigration debate and also on several interviews.⁷ Most of the data, however, come from the Web sites of 10 organizations that advocate immigration reduction for environmental reasons. Web sites are advantageous for examining discursive repertoires because, like brochures, they are controlled by the individual organizations and not filtered or reinterpreted by the news media. The Internet is now an important medium through which social movement groups reach their members and the public; information displayed on the Internet is important to both recruitment and mobilizing. Thus, as McCright and Dunlap

(2000:507) explain, an “increasing number of scholars have begun to recognize the Internet as a stage upon which movement-counter movement interaction takes place” (see also Van Aelst and Walgrave 2002).

The total number of environmental immigration-reduction organizations is fairly small; thus it was possible to find those groups with Web sites. To identify relevant organizations, I followed the external links of well-known organizations, such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform; I supplemented this approach with extensive Internet searches using Google, Yahoo, and Alta Vista. I then asked movement activists to confirm that I had identified the main organizations. To be included in the study, the “About Us” or similar section of the Web site had to reveal a strong concern with the environment and an emphasis on immigration reduction.⁸ I defined “environment” to include both the built environment and “natural” environment but not cultural or social environment. I omitted sites that clearly had not been updated in the past two years. I included only state and national organizations and omitted local ones, which typically had very small Web sites.⁹ Of the 10 Web sites included, three are state groups (Floridians for Population Stabilization; Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform; and Californians for Population Stabilization); they have a significant Web presence and appeared regularly on Internet searches. The rest are national (in that they mainly attempt to influence national, rather than state, policy). Some are fairly large groups, while others (e.g., the Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America) are run by a just a few individuals.

Table 1 shows the organizations included for study and provides some background information on each group. Of the 10 groups, 3 were formed in the 1970s, 3 in the 1980s, and 5 in the 1990s. All 10 organizations argue that immigration to the United States is a major cause of population growth and that population growth, in turn, leads to environmental degradation. This quote from the homepage of the Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform (2004) illustrates the argument: “[The] U.S. Population will double this century—practically within the lifetimes of children born today. 70 [percent] of this doubling will be caused by mass immigration—that is, by recent immigrants and their descendents. That will require roughly twice as many houses, cars, roads, prisons, hospitals, schools, water treatment facilities, etc. The result will be twice as much pollution, sprawl and pressure on our dwindling natural resources and the resources that we draw from other countries.”

I listed and categorized the common concerns expressed on these Web pages, along with a rough measure of the extent to which the various concerns are explicated in the Web sites (see Table 2). Oft-repeated ideas and types of information were then classified as “environmental” (ecology-related) and “nonenvironmental” (social, cultural, economic). To make their argument that immigration to the United States should be slowed for environmental reasons,

Table 1
List of Immigration-Reduction Environmental Organizations

Organization	Abbreviation	Founded	Geographic	Environmental content*
Californians for Population Stabilization	CAPS	1986	State	2
Carrying Capacity Network	CCN	1989	National	2
Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform	CAIR	1996	State	2
Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America	DASA	1997	National	2
Federation for American Immigration Reform	FAIR	1979	National	2
Floridians for a Sustainable Population	FSP	1994	State	1
Negative Population Growth	NPG	1972	National	1
NumbersUSA	NUSA	1997	National	2
Population Environment Balance	PEB	1973	National	1
Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization	SUSPS	1996	National	1

*1 = environment central (environment clearly the primary issue); 2 = environment relevant but not central (environment discussed but as one of many issues).

Table 2
Primary Concerns Addressed on Web Sites

	CAIR	CAPS	CCN	DASA	FAIR	FSP	NUSA	NPG	PEB	SUSPS	Total sites
<i>Environmental/Ecological</i>											
Loss of wildlife habitat		1			1	1	1	1	1	1	7
Disruption of ecosystems		1	1		2	1		2	3	1	7
Pollution	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	10
Loss of rural land	2	3	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	1	10
Resource depletion	2	3	3	2	3	1	2	1	2	1	10
Loss of forests	1	1	1		2	1	1	2	2	2	9
Water shortages	2	3	2		3	3	1	1	3		8
Sprawl	3	3	1	2	3	2	3	1	2	1	10
<i>Economic/Social</i>											
Standard of living	2	2	2	3	2	1	2	1	1	1	10
Taxes	2	1	3		2	2	1	1	2		8
Unemployment	2	3	2		3	2	3	1	1		8
Declining quality of life	2	2	1	2	3	1	2	1	2	2	10
Traffic/Congestion	2	3	1	1	3	2	1	1	1	1	10
Welfare	1	1	1	2	3	1		1	1		8
Overcrowded jails/crime	2	3	1		3	2			1		6
Overcrowded schools	3	3	1	3	3	3	1	1	1	1	10
<i>National/Cultural</i>											
National security		3	3	3	3		3	1	3		7
Cultural fragmentation			3	3	3	1	1	1	2		7

1 = On list only—no elaboration.

2 = Brief elaboration (four sentences or less).

3 = More elaboration (more than four sentences involving explanations of how issues are connected).

immigration-reduction organizations draw on similar sets of ideas (repertoires), such as preserving the environment for future generations or the idea that the United States, once a land of open spaces, has no more room. These recurring discursive repertoires can be understood as relational products of interactions in the discursive field.

As I examined the claims displayed on the Web sites, I sought to determine whether and how specific discursive repertoires “spoke with” those of other sets of actors. Then, through an iterative process that involved moving between secondary sources, interviews, movement publications, and Web sites, I identified those repertoires as contributing to and structuring three main discourses: science, political economy, and nationalism. Each discourse is discussed below.

In the following sections, I chart the discursive field of the immigration-reduction environmentalists. I begin with an overview of this movement; next, I describe the other main sets of actors with whom immigration-reduction environmentalists discursively interact; and, finally, I examine the three central discourses that constitute this movement’s field.

The Emergence of Immigration-Reduction Environmentalists

Population growth has been a concern for many U.S. environmentalists since the late 1960s and early 1970s. For at least two decades, “overpopulation” with its perceived attendant environmental consequences, reigned as one of *the* central issues for many environmental activists (see Beck and Kolankiewicz 2001). Numerous organizations, such as Zero Population Growth (in existence since 1968—see Population Connection 2004), formed specifically to advocate fertility reduction in all parts of the world.¹⁰ Environmental organizations like the Sierra Club introduced their own population programs (Sierra Club 2004). However, by the mid-1970s, fertility rates in industrialized countries had fallen sharply and population growth was mainly occurring in the global South; thus, the focus of environmentalists concerned with overpopulation shifted almost entirely to fertility reduction in poorer countries.

For some observers, activists, and scholars, the overpopulation discourse blamed environmental degradation on poor people in poor countries while allowing inequitable economic arrangements to go unchallenged (see Hartman 1995). Many on the left viewed the population discourse as a diversion from the real environmental threat, capitalism, and its attendant inequalities. By the 1990s and 2000s, the overpopulation paradigm had lost some of its prominence. Increasingly, environmental justice and human rights frames, which call attention to the unequal distribution of environmental risks, compete with overpopulation as a focus for environmentalists (Beck and Kolankiewicz 2001).

It would be false to assume that the population growth discourse lost ground only because of leftist critiques. It also waned because, in fact, fertility

rates around the world declined throughout the 1990s. In several European countries, where fertility has fallen well below the “replacement” level of 2.1 children per woman, leaders are more often concerned with the problem of population decline (King 2002). In the United States, however, support for population reduction persists in some environmental circles.

As a group, these advocates are not easily categorized on a political spectrum. Some have advocated strict population control programs to limit fertility while ignoring economic inequalities that may contribute to high birth rates; on the other end of the spectrum, others have sought to inject feminist ideals of women’s empowerment into population-reductionist ideology and have critiqued global and local inequalities (see Hodgson and Watkins 1997). But while some political leaders, activists, and academics continue to focus on the population–environment connection, this position is increasingly marginalized. Indeed, one could argue that over time it has gone from being a rallying point—an issue about which a majority agreed—to being a seriously divisive issue.

Meanwhile, a number of population-control activists have refocused or shifted their attention to population growth in the United States. Throughout the 1990s the U.S. population grew by 33 million people; much of that growth was due to immigration. Between 1971 and 1980 the United States admitted 4,493,314 legal immigrants. In the following decade, between 1981 and 1990, the number grew to 7,338,062 and between 1991 and 2000, legal entry was granted to 9,095,417 migrants (Office of Immigration Statistics 2003). These numbers do not include migrants who enter the United States without official permission. The Office of Immigration Statistics (2003) estimates that there were approximately seven million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in January 2000. Concerned that immigration at these levels contributes significantly to an overall increase in the U.S. population, some environment-oriented groups advocate a policy change that would greatly reduce the number of migrants allowed into the United States each year.

For the most part, these are not pre-existing environmental organizations that recently took up the banner of immigration; most of these groups formed specifically to lobby for immigration reduction from an environmental perspective. They differ from other groups advocating immigration reduction in that, first, one of their primary concerns (as expressed on their Web sites and in other writings) is to limit migration to the United States in order to remedy or forestall various environment-related problems/issues. Second, for the most part (though these organizations are a diverse set and I generalize with caution) they often seem to be targeting the political center or even left—not an extreme right that would include nativists opposed to immigration mainly for racist or nationalistic reasons.

Other Actors in the Discursive Field

The immigration-reduction environmentalists described above produce discursive repertoires in interaction with numerous individuals and groups that have an array of positions on migration to the United States. I identified five major sets of actors whose arguments generate responses by the immigration-reduction environmentalists.

The first set of actors consists mainly of the right/centrist business community (from hotel/restaurant associations to big box stores)¹¹ and many political leaders. This large and powerful set of actors supports the immigration status quo and is arguably the most influential in this discursive field. As Jerry Williams (1998:484) explains, “powerful vested interests do have the ability to shape the discourse about environmental problems.” They do this through their enhanced access to the media and by manipulating “the content of the shared stock of knowledge.” The discursive repertoires of this set of actors, then, tend to be hegemonic. Business and corporate leaders typically favor current immigration rules; they rarely favor open borders but instead support an immigration policy that allows a large number of people to migrate to the United States. The status quo allows people to enter the United States in fairly large numbers but in no way assures that they will be treated well once they get here—indeed, under the current system, undocumented people often live in precarious circumstances and can be used as an easily exploitable labor pool.

A second set of actors in this field consists of nonenvironmental organizations, politicians, and activists seeking to reduce immigration for a variety of nonenvironmental reasons. Many of these actors focus on economic issues, such as job loss by U.S. nationals, depression of wages, welfare expenditures, taxes, and/or cultural issues, especially language. Immigration-reduction environmentalists often share these concerns. A subset of this group are right-wing nativists, whose desire to limit immigration springs from nationalist, ethnocentric, or racist concerns (e.g., Pat Buchanan—see Buchanan 2002; on the Web, see *Vdare* 2004; *American Patrol* 2004). Some activists in this subset use fairly radical tactics, such as creating volunteer border patrols and encouraging members to “report illegal aliens.” Others are mainly lobbying groups. In general, their opposition to immigration stems from a larger agenda that opposes multiculturalism. These actors want the government to limit immigration for social and economic reasons that center on retaining privileges for “native-born citizens.” The discursive repertoires of immigration-reduction environmentalists are shaped by these actors in that immigration-reduction environmentalists tend to rhetorically distance themselves from such staunch nativism.

The third large set of actors consists of “mainstream” environmentalists. It is problematic to speak of a mainstream, as the movement is diverse; there is no

single platform or approach but there are certain shared ideas and values (see Dowie 1995). Mainstream organizations would include groups such as the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society that are solidly institutionalized and, in general, reformist; they tend to seek policies to regulate corporate excesses but tend not to oppose the current economic system itself. Many individuals participating in immigration-reduction efforts have been connected to the mainstream environmental movement for some time and tend to share an overall nonradical approach. They have been frustrated, however, with mainstream environmentalism's neglect of the immigration issue (see Beck and Kolankiewicz 2001) and some have tried to steer mainstream organizations, such as the Sierra Club, toward a policy supporting immigration reduction. Some mainstream environmentalists agree with the immigration-reduction argument but believe that, for pragmatic reasons, this issue should be avoided by environmentalists; others fundamentally disagree with the immigration-reduction argument.¹² Division over the migration issue within the Sierra Club has led to intense and widely publicized debates. In general, however, mainstream environmental organizations are for the most part silent on immigration and thus do not explicitly challenge the status quo.

Fourth, progressive social movements concerned primarily with social and environmental inequalities have been significant players in this discursive field. This category includes individuals and groups concerned primarily with social justice, antiglobalization, indigenous rights, peace, antiracism, environmental justice, and other related causes. Often, these activists and participants are concerned with grassroots activism and include local, state, and national organizations. Among the numerous groups that have reacted to immigration-reduction environmentalists are the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Friends Service Committee, the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, the Asian-Pacific Environmental Network, and the Committee on Women, Population, and the Environment. Many are not directly involved in environmentalism though they are almost always sympathetic to it. Progressive movements often view immigration reduction efforts as racist and nationalistic. Some activists advocate open borders (see, for example, Hayter 2000). Written commentaries and interviews tend to reveal that many prefer not to take a stance on numbers of migrants to the United States; when asked if they favor *some* limits on immigration many would say yes (in other words, they do not favor open borders). Those who do not support open borders support, de facto, the numerical status quo.¹³ For progressive organizations, the central issue is typically not the number of migrants but how they are treated once in the United States.

Finally, the discursive repertoires of libertarians and right wing free marketers (e.g., the Cato Institute) comprise yet another part of the discursive field. This group supports limited government and laissez-faire capitalism. Those

adhering to this position often favor open borders as part of their overall economic worldview that advocates a minimal role for government.

The discursive repertoires of each set of actors can best be understood in relation to those of other actors in the field. The discursive repertoires of these actors partially constitute discourses that are connected (or that they consciously attempt to connect) to the issue of immigration.

Three Discourses

Immigration-reduction environmentalists engage with at least three central discourses; these include discourses pertaining to “Western” positivist science, political economy, and the nation-state/nationalism. In the following sections, I briefly describe each discourse and the types of repertoires immigration-reduction environmentalists contribute. I show how those repertoires differ from the repertoires that currently seem to dominate the field and I indicate how other groups of actors engage with these discourses. I explain how, sandwiched between other powerful voices, immigration-reduction repertoires remain weak; they contradict most of the dominant repertoires and are perceived as suspect by some actors who might otherwise be allies.

Science

John Hannigan (1995:38) writes that, compared with other social problems, “environmental problems . . . while morally charged, are tied more directly to scientific findings and claims.” Hannigan (1995:42) argues that science is the “central forum” and the “predominant layer of proof” in assembling (discovering and elaborating) an environmental claim. Here “science” refers to paradigmatic normal science in the Kuhnian sense, in which progressively greater knowledge of the physical and natural world is accumulated and systematically organized.

Immigration-reduction environmentalists use two main types of science-based repertoires. First, they use statistical measures to link demographic and environment-related changes such as sprawl, resource depletion, and loss of farmland. In doing so, they draw on science-based ideas about the power of numbers and statistics. Every Web site in my sample contains expositions of the rates of population growth in the United States and of the extent to which that growth is attributable to births and to immigration (see, for example, NumbersUSA 2004). Larger organizations, such as Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and NumbersUSA, produce illustrative graphs and charts that other organizations put on their Web sites.

In addition, several Web sites provide lengthy sets of numbers-based “immigration facts” that are linked, implicitly or explicitly, to environmental or social problems. Such facts are numerous and extremely varied. For example, the Negative Population Growth (2004) Web site explains that “along our

ecologically fragile coasts, where nearly half the population lives, the [United States] is among the most densely populated countries in the world. The North-east averages 767 people per square mile while Haiti, for comparison, has 580.”

Most Web sites feature opinion polls showing that the majority of Americans favor lower levels of immigration. Web sites also commonly present demographic comparisons between places; for example, the United States is growing at a rate comparable to India (Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization 2004); Florida is growing faster than Haiti, India, and Mexico (Floridians for a Sustainable Population 2004); and Colorado is growing faster than the Philippines (Colorado Alliance Immigration Reform 2004). Immigration-reductionists thus routinely use numbers and statistics to convince people of the trends themselves and of the problematic nature of those trends.

The second type of science-oriented repertoire emphasizes biological limits to growth. Those in favor of limiting immigration for environmental reasons differ from other actors in the field in their embrace of a biological model of the world that emphasizes the carrying capacity of an ecosystem or some defined physical space. This concept from the biological sciences seeks to determine how many people can be supported by a given space. A central notion is that there is finite space and there are limited resources for supporting life; in a healthy environment various species in a given area must be in balance. Immigration-reductionists often argue that the carrying capacity in the United States could soon be exceeded or has already been exceeded; therefore it is imperative that population growth be slowed. Negative Population Growth (2004) states that “NPG has surveyed scientists over 30 years and asked: What’s the optimum population size before you start exceeding an area’s carrying capacity and harming the environment? The scientific consensus is that 150–200 million is the ideal population size for the [United States]. That’s about the size of the [United States] 50 years ago.” Likewise, Floridians for a Sustainable Population state that, “Carrying capacity/sustainability is impossible at present numbers. Biologists and land use planners say our sustainable population size needs to be around six or seven million at the current life styles we are living. Around 150 million is sustainable for the [United States] which is already at 284 million.” These quotes highlight an objectively ascertainable truth about the country’s biological sustainability as determined through the practice of normal science.

The extent to which this perspective is important to environmentalists concerned with population growth is illustrated by the fact that one immigration-reduction organization even calls itself the Carrying Capacity Network. This organization prominently displays its definition of carrying capacity on its home page: “[c]arrying capacity refers to the number of individuals who can be supported in a given area within natural resource limits, and without degrading the natural, social, cultural and economic environment for present and future

generations.” While 7 of the 10 groups in my sample discuss social and cultural issues, such issues are mostly presented as separate from “environment.” In this example, however, note the semiotic conflation through combination—a carrying-over of a science-based perspective on environment to culture and economy.¹⁴

In arguing that there are ecological limits to growth, immigration-reduction environmentalists counter a dominant cultural theme (Gamson 1992:136) that holds that “mastery over nature is the way to progress. . . .” The science-oriented discursive repertoires of immigration-reduction environmentalists emphasize *limits*. Elites and others supporting the status quo (or in advocating even fewer restrictions on immigration) typically use science to show that there are practically *no limits* imposed by “nature” within which humans must live. Immigration-reduction environmentalists occupy a limited discursive space among these economics-based perspectives.

Political Economy

The political economy discourse is concerned with the role of government in guiding the economy. This discourse overlaps significantly with science discourse because the principles of the positivist paradigm of normal science are used to validate and legitimate knowledge claims about the economy. Claims of economic benefits can be objectively theorized, hypothesized, and subjected to systematic (quasi-experimental) testing and validation through data collection and analysis.

The hegemonic or dominant version of political economy in the United States is that government should foster economic growth, which is considered an unequivocal good—an indicator of societal well-being. A neoliberal discourse emphasizes the benefits of market capitalism, free trade, and open markets. Expansion is normalized as progress. Thus, those favoring the immigration status quo (relatively high levels of immigration) use scientific methods to construct arguments that immigration contributes to economic growth, which is viewed as positive (see, for example, Orrenius 2003; Simon 1999).

Most immigration-reduction environmentalists believe in biological limits and they routinely critique the logic of the dominant political economy (the hegemonic “growth is good” theme—see Beck 1994). Most immigration-reduction environmentalists contend that current growth is economically damaging in terms of economic costs (infrastructure, new schools, social welfare), and to the “natural” environment. Floridians for Sustainable Population Growth (2004) state on their Web site: “Too many decisions about land use—rezoning, highway funding, expanded airports—have been made by growth-intoxicated leaders based on the assumption that all growth is good and that business interests and profits take priority over healthy reefs, fisheries, clean water and clean air.” The Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization (2004) Web site displays this

quote by David Brower: “We have this strange addiction to unending growth, and that will not work on a finite planet.” Some groups tell a similar story using pictorial illustrations. The Diversity Alliance for a Sustainable America (2004) homepage juxtaposes a photo of an idyllic country farm scene with an image of 10 lanes of bumper-to-bumper traffic shrouded in smog; NumbersUSA (2004) provides a map showing the extent to which farmland is being lost. These images insinuate that growth is swallowing up a more ecologically idyllic rural heritage.

Immigration-reduction environmentalists also develop and deploy repertoires that attempt to counter the powerful repertoire of the technological fix. Those supporting the immigration status quo often argue that new technologies will solve resource shortages and other environmental problems (see, for example, Simon 1995). *Negative Population Growth* (2004), for example, poses the rhetorical question, “Won’t technology save us from the problems raised by population growth?” Their answer begins: “Despite technological advancements, human numbers will ultimately overwhelm our ecosystems. We will eventually run out of finite resources, such as space and water. . . .”

In presenting such claims, these organizations are responding to the dominant theme that “growth is good;” their discursive repertoires are thus in part relational products. At the same time, some of the current repertoires are drawn from an existing stock of notions or ideas (e.g., an idealized rural landscape), revealing that these discursive repertoires are not simply created by the immigration-reduction environmentalists but are constructed out of existing concepts.

Some immigration-reduction environmentalists join with other (nonenvironmental) immigration-reduction groups in constructing a class-based critique of the dominant political economy, arguing that high levels of immigration hurt American working people. Thus, among other things, limiting immigration is important for protecting workers. They often claim that wealthy elites and corporate leaders support high levels of immigration in order to retain a cheap labor pool and weaken unions (see Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) 2004; NumbersUSA 2004). The Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform (CAIR 2004) explains that “[i]mmigration is a net drain on the economy; corporate interests reap the benefit of cheap labor, while taxpayers pay the infrastructural cost.” The CAIR (2004) quotes Abraham Lincoln: “I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. . . . Corporations have been enthroned, an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money-power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until the wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed.”

Progressive organizations and activists might seem to be potential allies in such critiques of big business and U.S. labor but they increasingly view class in less nationalistic terms and more in terms of international solidarity, preferring

either more open immigration policies that would allow migrants from less wealthy countries entry into the United States or, more often, preferring to focus on policies that would improve the circumstances of immigrants who live in the United States.¹⁵

Nationalism

Ultimately, debates over control of borders, about whether U.S. jobs are rendered less desirable and about the extent to which U.S. land and resources are consumed must also be part of a conversation about the nature of the nation. The nationalism discourse is constituted of ideas, meanings, and stories concerning the United States as a nation. The subject of contention is a national story about who comprises the U.S. people (including who have a right to occupy the physical space defined by national boundaries) and what fundamental principles bind that people. Those supporting some version of the status quo often draw on and create a national narrative of the United States as a haven and a land of opportunity. The Bush administration plan for immigration, discussed on the White House Web site (2004) exemplifies this narrative: "America is a welcoming nation, and the hard work and strength of our immigrants have made our Nation prosperous. . . ."

Immigration-reduction environmentalists attempt to destabilize this construction with discursive repertoires that emphasize other aspects of nationalism. A common discursive repertoire for immigration-reductionist environmentalists stresses preserving nature and the environment for "future generations." The generations of which they speak are necessarily the descendents of those already living in the United States (current members of the nation).

In addition, a central tenet of the nation-state system is a country's right to control its borders. For immigration-reductionists, a nation's prerogative to control who enters the nation-state is unquestioned. This is true of all immigration reduction groups, environmental and nonenvironmental. NumbersUSA (2004) states that: "A presence of 8 million to 11 million illegal aliens in this country is a sign that this country is losing control of its borders and the ability to determine who is a member of this national community. And a country that has lost that ability increasingly loses its ability to determine the rules of its society—environmental protections, labor protections, health protections, safety protections. In fact, a country that cannot keep illegal immigration to a low level quickly ceases to be a real country, or a real community."

Especially since 9/11, some groups voice concern over national security, defined mostly in terms of porous borders and the threat of terrorism. A 2004 Carrying Capacity Network action alert (these are posted on the Web site and emailed to members and others on the group's mailing list) used the events of 9/11 to argue for changes in immigration policy: "The terrible events of

September 11, 2001 should never have taken place. An immigration policy which allows massive numbers of aliens to enter our country without proper background checks and tracking, and to train in our own schools, is one root cause. One conclusion becomes apparent: national security requires an immigration moratorium.” Similarly, the FAIR (2004) Web site has several subsections that address national security, including terrorism, and perceived connections with immigration. FAIR claims that, “[m]any of the serious problems in our immigration system exposed on 9–11—systematic overload, bureaucratic negligence, and dangerous loopholes—still have not been addressed.”

A different set of oft-repeated discursive repertoires of environmental immigration-reduction organizations highlights cultural issues as they pertain to national unity. The FAIR (2004) Web site explains “How Immigration Impedes Assimilation.” An article by former Colorado governor and immigration-reduction activist Richard Lamm posted on the Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform (2004) Web site is titled, “It is a Blessing for an Individual to be Bilingual; It is a Curse for a Society to be Bilingual.” The Diversity Alliance (2004) Web site has a section on “Immigration and Balkanization” displaying a list of headlines of articles “that indicate difficulties in cultural adjustment.” Inherent in these claims is the notion of a culturally unified nation, presumably constituted by a people who share similar values, a language, and other characteristics. These discursive repertoires avoid explicit mention of race and ethnicity, though these are often closely linked with “culture.” Historically, narratives of the U.S. nation are partly constructed through difference and race and ethnicity have been among the quintessential markers of difference. Race/ethnicity is such a central theme that it can act as a filter through which events and actions are understood.

In her discussion of discursive fields, Lyn Spillman (1995)—following Bourdieu—stresses patterns of social relations. Mapped onto the connections between the actors engaging in debates over immigration to the United States, we can think about historical relationships between various groups of actors. Actors may in part base their interpretations of the immigration issue on pre-existing beliefs about other sets of actors. For example, even if one did not know the position of the staunchly libertarian Cato Institute on immigration, one could make a good guess based on their position on other issues and their commitment to smaller government.

In part because they operate in a context—both historical and contemporary—fraught with racism, ethnocentrism, and nativism, some progressives and others view the agenda of immigration-reductionist environmentalists as racist and nationalistic. Rajani Bhatia (2004:211) argues that “anti-immigrant environmentalism is mainly concerned with the construction of a white American identity.” Some refer to immigrant reduction environmentalism as “the greening of hate” (see

Hartman 2003). In certain instances, such descriptions are apt. Virginia Abernethy has been very active in the environment-oriented immigration-reduction movement and is a board member of the Carrying Capacity Network. According to writer Byron Wells, she considers herself a “separationist” and openly states that she believes in the separation of ethnic groups (Wells 2004).¹⁶

According to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC 2002), John Tanton, founder of FAIR and other immigration-reduction organizations, has written explicitly racist memos and has supported racist causes through his Social Contract Press and through U.S. Inc. which, SPLC explains, Tanton created “to raise and channel funds to his anti-immigration network.” A powerful discursive repertoire from progressive activists, then, has emphasized racist motivations in immigration-reduction environmental groups or linkages between nativist and environmental groups. There is a strong sense among some immigration-reduction environmentalists that they should not have to abandon their cause because others seeking similar policy changes do so for racist reasons (Zuckerman 2003). But while many immigration-reduction environmentalists have explicitly tried to distance themselves from racist ideologies (if not always from such people) their activities are often understood—in part because of historical patterning—as being motivated by racism.

The scenario is complicated by the fact that the discursive repertoires of nativist-oriented immigration-reduction groups are often explicitly racist and/or hypernationalist. The Center for American Unity (2004) is “dedicated to preserving our historical unity as Americans into the [twenty-first] century. . . . The Center is concerned with . . . whether the United States can survive as a nation-state, the political expression of a distinct American people, in the face of these emerging threats: mass immigration, multiculturalism, multilingualism, and affirmative action.” The homepage of the American Resistance Foundation (2004) states, “Our nation is being invaded and colonized. As is our duty, We the People will resist.”

Nativist immigration-reduction groups and environment-oriented immigration-reduction groups both want limits on the number of immigrants into the United States. Because the immediate policy goal of the two groups is essentially the same, these sets of actors are easily conflated. The presence of nativist anti-immigration groups in the field coupled with charges of racism by progressives has put immigration-reduction environmentalists on the defensive and led to statements denying racist motivations and denouncing “immigrant bashing.” The more conservative Carrying Capacity Network (2004) uses nationalistic language to make this point: “CCN is anti-mass immigration but NOT anti-immigrant. . . . [I]t is important to note that our battle is being waged for the future of the United States of America—for preservation of quality of life, respect for law, national security and a sustainable population size and level

of resource use. These goals do not threaten immigrants. . . ." Sierrans for a Sustainable U.S. Population (2004) are more emphatic: "We are shocked and repulsed by the actions and statements of Neo-Nazis, xenophobes and racists of any kind. We repudiate any support from people who have racial motives for reducing immigration. Racists and their offensive ideas and actions have no place in modern civilized society." Such antiracist claims on the Web sites of environmental immigration-reduction groups may be seen as a rhetorical distancing from the repertoires of nativist-inspired actors.

Discussion and Conclusion

The field framework reveals the problematic position of immigration-reduction environmentalists. In each of the central discourses, the discursive repertoires of the immigration-reduction environmentalists conflict in important ways with those of the most powerful actors. While in some instances they seem to use methods and repertoires demanded by Western science to their advantage, they are engaged in an ongoing struggle with the hegemonic political economy discourse that idealizes growth and touts technological fixes. Though it draws on normal science concepts of objectivity, the biological-sciences perspective of the immigration-reduction environmentalists opposes "growth is good" and challenges the dominant technological progress worldview. Their engagement with the nationalism discourse is also awkward. Though some of their repertoires are fairly conventional (e.g., nation-states should be able to control their borders), their central message goes against a dominant national narrative; limiting immigration contradicts a national story that sees the United States as a haven for those who want a new start—the ideal exemplified by Emma Lazarus' poem, which begins, "give me your tired, your hungry, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . ." (USINFO 2007). In arguing that the United States is "full" or has reached its carrying capacity, immigration-reduction environmentalists seek to rewrite a long-standing national story.

Because of their structural position in the discursive field, immigration-reduction environmentalists have difficulty convincing policy makers and the public of what they perceive as the urgency, importance, and appropriateness of their agenda. Drawing on science-based repertoires, immigration-reduction environmentalists use a logic of objective, rational "truth claims." My analysis suggests that they are structurally positioned in such a way that they have been compelled to do so. On one side are supporters of the status quo who use "objective," rational discourse to show that economic growth is desirable and that immigration contributes to that growth. On the other side is a moral argument about humanitarian concerns that levels charges of nativism and racism against immigration-reductionists. Immigration-reduction environmentalists respond to the first group by trying to beat them at their own logic of validation.

They respond to the second group by attempting to be hyperobjective, to the point of viewing all people as consuming units, regardless of race, nationality, and so forth, while stressing that they are not “anti-immigrant” but merely “pro-immigration reduction.” However, in constructing all inhabitants of the United States essentially as equal “consuming units” (within, for example, a carrying capacity model), the discursive repertoires of immigration-reduction environmentalists essentially erase race and ethnicity; this is seen as problematic and naïve by progressive actors (see Salazar and Hewitt 2001 for a discussion).

In addition, the field perspective highlights the extent to which immigration-reduction environmentalists are isolated. They are unable to find common cause with potential allies on the left and the right. Their particular goals clash with those of progressive social movements and with most political leaders and economists. Mainstream environmental organizations have chosen not to take on the immigration issue. And most immigration-reduction environmentalists are loathe to publicly ally with nativist immigration-reductionists, from whom they discursively distance themselves. Thus, immigration-reduction environmental organizations are weakly positioned in at least two ways: first, their discursive repertoires clash with hegemonic claims and second, they are unable to join forces with other sets of actors in the field to destabilize hegemonic repertoires.

Charting the discursive terrain of a movement provides a mechanism for analyzing how messages, or repertoires, are structured and thus may be a useful conceptual tool for examining meaning-making activities. The discursive field framework can illuminate a range of ideas and actors and reveal how discursive acts develop interactionally. I do not wish to argue that movements are without agency. Discursive fields are products of social interaction that “both enable and limit meaning-making” (Spillman 1995:148); they structure discourse but are dynamic, without fixed borders. I suggest that movement messages are shaped by the field in which they operate and that their repertoires may be more or less persuasive or powerful depending upon which other actors contribute to the field and the historical connections (and disconnections) between those actors and the discourses through which they engage. Social movement actors may shape and reshape discourses; but their specific agendas will often necessitate participation in certain existing discourses that are germane to their issue and they will be compelled to respond to discursive acts of other participants in those discourses.

ENDNOTES

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¹For recent discussions of the merits of framing, see Benford (1997); Ferree and Merrill (2000); Oliver and Johnston (2000); Williams and Kubal (1999); and Zald (2000).

²For example, it is argued that more people in the United States mean more resource consumption, which may harm less affluent countries that provide those resources. The United States also produces more of the greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming than other countries. Production of greenhouse gases can be slowed, immigration-reduction environmentalists claim, by allowing fewer people to move to the United States, where they will produce greenhouse gas via automobile-based transportation, and so on. The Web site of Negative Population Growth (2004) explains that “[f]rom an environmental standpoint, U.S. overpopulation is far worse for the environment than overpopulation anywhere else, because of our inordinately high use of resources.”

³I describe groups and individuals who express concern with both immigration and environment as “immigration-reduction environmentalists.” This term is imperfect because it sounds as though environmentalism is the primary concern of all such groups, which is not the case. The groups to which I refer, however, do express serious concern for environment-related issues (and some are clearly environmentalists first and foremost). A large part of the Web site of each organization in this study is devoted to environmental concerns.

⁴Media coverage was especially abundant during debates over this issue within the Sierra Club in 1998 and again in 2004.

⁵Steinberg’s framework derives in large part from the theoretical perspectives developed by the Bakhtin Circle (see Gardiner 1992). One way to think of speech genres is as “packages” of ideas (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) or frameworks for understanding the world that are relatively stable and change fairly slowly. Steinberg’s speech genres are similar to Spillman’s discursive fields.

⁶Steinberg (1999:750–1) explains that “[a]s opposed to a frame, we might more accurately conceive of movement- or action-specific discursive *repertoires*. . . . Akin to Tilly’s notion, we can see that a central part of the development of discursive repertoires is done interactionally with opponents and targets through a process of conflict.”

⁷In 2003–2004, I conducted interviews with activists on the debates over immigration policy within the Sierra Club; some of the information garnered for that study was useful for this project. In addition, I communicated, by phone and/or email with three activists involved in organizations that advocate limiting migration to the United States for environmental reasons.

⁸The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) is not primarily “environmental.” I kept FAIR in my sample because it does meet my criteria—environmental issues comprise one of the four main areas of concern described on the Web site and “environment” is one of six “immigration issues” listed on the homepage, with hyperlinks to lengthy discussions.

⁹I also omitted some state organizations whose Web sites were extremely limited. Such organizations include New Hampshire Citizens for a Sustainable Population or the Massachusetts Coalition for Immigration Reform.

¹⁰At least two of the immigration-limits organizations examined in this study—the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and Californians for Population Stabilization (CAPS)—were spin-offs of Zero Population Growth (Californians for Population Stabilization 2004; Gottlieb 1993).

¹¹See for example, statements on immigration by the National Hotel and Restaurant Association, <<http://www.restaurant.org/government/Issues/Issue.cfm?Issue=immigration>> (viewed 2005).

¹²Former Sierra Club Board member Michael Dorsey (2003) explained that, in his experience, many Sierra Club activists believe population growth to be detrimental to the environment but fear the political consequences of taking such a stand. Dorsey himself thinks the population-environment relationship has been overblown.

¹³The position of labor is somewhat similar. Labor unions once supported limits on immigration to keep wages up but now they usually support more open policies regarding immigration (Watts 2002).

¹⁴Environmentalists have been criticized for linking a biological concept (carrying capacity) with a socially and politically constructed entity, the nation (see Aiken 1996).

¹⁵See, for example, Web sites of Center for New Community (2005) and American Friends Service Committee (AFSC 2005). The AFSC Web site has a fairly comprehensive section on immigrant rights that discusses the various groups that oppose immigration or want to limit it. Here is a statement that summarizes the AFSC position: "While they may attract followers with the power of their rhetoric, such anti-immigrant movements do nothing to address the root causes of suffering—the economic, social, and political structures that maintain an unjust and increasingly unequal distribution of wealth, power, and privilege. Instead, they substitute a lethal combination of resentment, scapegoating, and hatred—the classic recipe for fascism" (AFSC 2005).

¹⁶Byron Wells, in a 2004 newspaper article wrote, "Reached by telephone, Abernethy said she considers herself a 'separatist,' not a supremacist. 'I'm in favor of separatism—and that's different than supremacy,' Abernethy said. 'Groups tend to self-segregate. I know that I'm not a supremacist. I know that ethnic groups are more comfortable with their own kind'" (Wells 2004).

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