How the Pulp Industry Tries to Manage Resistance

Pulp mills' extremely large scale makes it necessary for them to simplify under a central authority not only landscapes, biological diversity and genetic diversity, but also political systems. The sheer size of the mills and the landscape they reorganize around them means that to survive, they need constantly to attract subsidies, stimulate demand – and above all, control resistance, both from ordinary people and from the landscape.

Where opposition does not challenge the pulp and paper industry's most fundamental interests, it will attempt to contain it by internally redistributing its considerable resources in various ways, relieving tensions in one area through slack in another. For example, the industry will try to:

* Buy off resisters or attempt to demonstrate to them how their concerns can be "met" within the industrial system, through, for example, bribes, contract farming schemes, promises of "economic development".

* Help see to it that resisters are crushed by force, assuming that they are isolated, small-scale, poorly-coordinated, and out of the public eye, and the government sees it as in its own interest to foot the military bill.

* Insist on discussing the issues in public only in the idiom of orthodox economics and "global demand" rather than in the languages of ordinary farmers or of politics.

* Give in to certain demands made by opponents, if they cannot be bought off or persuaded to modify their demands, if suppression is difficult, or if industry interests are relatively unaffected. Japan's paper industry, for example, has had simply to accept environmentalist resistance to its exploitation of Western North American lands and shift its search for raw materials elsewhere. By the same token, Western industry is slowly capitulating to opposition to the use of chlorine in pulp treatment, and finds it easy for the industry to give in to demands for more recycling given that it is long accustomed to using waste paper as a raw material.

Some opposition, however, presents deeper threats. No paper corporation possesses the resources to adjust itself to falling demand for all its products, nor, faced with community-based opposition to plantations across very large areas of the South, to buy it off everywhere it arises, smash it wholesale, or shift its search for raw materials to another planet.

Such challenges, impossible either to accommodate or to crush outright, are met most intelligently by the ancient strategy of divide and conquer. Abandoning attempts either to conciliate or to wipe out groups with which it has irreconcilable conflicts at the grassroots, industry instead concentrates its attention on keeping those groups divided from potential allies in bureaucracies and in urban and Northern middle classes.

Thus pulp and paper interests in Indonesia and other countries have resorted to repression and abuses at home while hiring public relations firms such as the US's Burson Marsteller to present a

softer picture to customers and legislators in the West, as well as to infiltrate, undermine and monitor Western environmental groups. Industry-retained public relations firms also attempt to marginalize as "radical" or "irresponsible" movements for reduction of paper consumption in the West.

Some years ago Arjo Wiggins Appleton executives O. Fernandez Carro and Robert A. Wilson summed up such strategies when they urged their colleagues not to target "apparent opposition" if that means "forgetting the vast mass in between: the public"; not to "respond to the mobile agenda of others" but rather to "write the agenda and diffuse negative issues". Politics, they went on, “provides the packaging and the vehicle to achieve the industrial objectives. Success is measured by the freedom to plant fibre crops, recognizing the sum total of all the political forces (in the broadest sense). There are two elements to the political subsystem [of the total quality system of industrial forestry]: the message and the target. The message needs to be short, nontechnical, and fundamental: for example, ‘Trees are good. We need more trees not less’. Our objective should be to create and move inside an ever-increasing friendly circle of public opinion.”

In addition to “trees are good”, many other oversimplified "messages" have also proved to be useful to the pulp and paper industry in its divide-and-conquer strategy:

* Indefinitely rising paper demand is either inevitable or desirable or both.

* Demand for paper comes not from particular groups, classes, or societies, but rather from "the globe" or "the nation" as a whole, which is seen as having a moral status superior to that of local people defending their land or water. This idea helps license cross-regional and cross-class subsidies for the industry, as well as large forced evictions.

* Pulpwood plantations are an economically productive use of unoccupied, degraded land. This "message" is effective only with environmentalists unaware of industry thinking and practice at the grassroots. As the Asian Development Bank and Shell International have both pointed out, industry is not particularly interested in degraded land. What it requires instead is contiguous chunks of "land suitable for superior biological growth rates for those species the market wants" as well as "year-round water" and easy access to transportation. The message also cannot be used with groups who understand that what counts as "degraded" or "unused" depends entirely on who is talking.

* Plantation expansion helps make underdeveloped countries "self-sufficient" in paper. This "message" can be usefully employed with audiences unaware, for example, that Indonesia's or Brazil’s new pulp capacity is aimed largely at export; and that “self-sufficiency” in one or another paper grade counts for little in the face of the liberal trade policies advocated by the industry itself, which will push pulp and paper imports into any country not producing them more cheaply.

* Plantations are up to ten times more productive than natural forests. This "message" narrowly defines "productivity" as "productivity of trees with market value as pulpwood over two or three growing cycles". It is useful only with audiences unaware of other ways of being “productive” of more interest to local peoples, such as growing crops and maintaining surface water and community woodlands.

* Promulgating plantation "guidelines" will make plantations "sustainable". This message appeals mainly to Northern academics, technocrats and environmentalists unaware of or indifferent to what actually happens on the ground in areas in which pulp plantations have been, for example, certified by the FSC.

Such "messages", used selectively, encourage the globalization of the pulp and paper industry by helping block alliances between grassroots groups fighting monoculture pulpwood plantations and environmental groups elsewhere, particularly in the North.

Yet the converse is also true. It is only the global reach of the contemporary pulp and paper industry -- its ability to exploit the spatial and cultural distance between residents of rural areas in plantation zones and intelligentsias elsewhere -- that allow it to spread its oversimplifications and falsehoods to ensure acquiescence in industrial tree plantation development among largely urban and Northern power bases.

This support is crucial, since a ballooning "free market" in wood fibre, pulp and paper can be constructed and coordinated only if the subsidies given to consultants, foresters, aid agencies, and non-governmental organizations to promote plantations can be justified before a large and diffuse public.

To use such mystifications, however, is always to gamble that they will not be exposed through the international coordination of plantation opponents.

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