

Environmental justice: incorporating race and class perspectives into environmentalism

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I recently felt disillusioned by my self-anointed identity as an environmentalist. I realized that the bulk of my exposure to environmentally-friendly information was filtered through a White, middle-class lens. In a literature review of the environmental justice movement, I discovered a counter-narrative to the dominant and normalized manifestation of environmentalism. Through an exploration of the history and contemporary campaigns of the environmental justice movement, a distinct counter-narrative emerges to diversify environmentalism and increase its success as a viable movement for contemporary environmental issues. I propose that sociology in general and environmental sociology in particular should increase funding and scholarly interest in the environmentally-based perspectives and experiences of marginalized populations. Environmental justice is a unique and robust vehicle for accomplishing this task.

Environmental Justice Defined

Environmental degradation does not affect all people equally.¹ Sociologist Robert Bullard contends that the presence of 1.3 billion people in hazardous environments is connected to racial and economic exploitation as well as the devaluation of all forms of life.^{2,3} Accordingly, toxic facilities and wastes are routinely located and dumped in marginalized areas and “offered as short-term remedies for the poverty of the poor.”^{2,3} Toxic facilities and wastes are disproportionately located in poor, communities of color.^{4,5} This connection between race and exposure is explained by environmental racism’s definition: environmental policies and practices which disproportionately affect people of color.^{2,3}

Bullard posits that institutionalized racism transforms communities of color into colonies dependant on dominant society.² It is quite fitting that the environmental justice movement has roots in the 1979 Houston-based lawsuit *Bean v. Southwestern Waste Management*, which was the first to use civil rights law to challenge waste facility placement³ and catalyze the agency of a community of color. As this early civil rights- and race/class-based environmentalism progressed, the term environmental racism was replaced with environmental justice. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines environmental justice as the equitable treatment and involvement of all people, regardless of race, ethnicity or class, in the creation and execution of environmental law.³

Jan Marie Fritz, clinical sociologist and professor of planning and health policy, states that the focus of environmental justice is “environmental problems (in terms of programs, policies, and/or activities) disproportionately faced by those with the least power.”⁶ Even further simplified, the focus of the environmental justice movement is environmental injustice.⁶ It is important to note that, though the original focus was upon disproportionate exposure and environmental racism,⁷ the movement diverged away from environmental racism’s narrow, intention-based model.⁸

Sociologist David Pellow, clarifies that environmental racism, though an important focal point of research, is only one example of environmental injustice.⁹ In fact, environmental *in*justice includes any oc-

currence of disproportionate exposure experienced by a particular social group.⁹ This contemporary focus on environmental inequality increases the movement’s inclusion of affected populations, while it removes the burden of proving *intentional* racist targeting of communities of color.^{10,11} The term environmental inequality, thus, broadens the scope of analysis as it focuses on “the intersection between environmental quality and social hierarchies.”⁹

History of Environmental Justice

Between the 1980s and 1990s, elements of the civil rights and environmental movements combined to form the environmental justice movement.^{2,3} The beginning of this movement can be traced back to a protest in Warren County, North Carolina.^{2,6,7,10,11,12} Soon after this 1982 protest of a toxic landfill, which led to 500 arrests and ignited the movement,^{2,6} research that supported the protest claims of environmental injustice was published. A 1983 United States General Accounting Office study reported that 75% of all hazardous waste sites in an 8 state region were located in predominantly Black communities.^{2,3,4,6,10,12,13,14} Black communities comprised only 20% of the region studied and were clearly disproportionately affected.^{2,6} By 1987, a national study by the United Church of Christ’s Commission for Racial Justice found that race was the most pertinent variable in the prediction of facility placement.^{2,3,4,10,13,14}

This new environmental movement emerged as a race-based critique of the distribution of environmental hazards.⁸ Initial protests as well as regional and national studies led to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. The summit was the most significant single event in the movement.^{2,3} Along with an anti-toxins focus, the summit broadened the movement to include “public health, worker safety, land use, transportation, housing, resource allocation and community empowerment.”² The following year, the EPA offered official acknowledgement of this growing movement when it published a study on the relationship between race and disproportionate exposure² and created the Office of Environmental Equity.^{3,6}

Throughout the 1990s, solidification and institutionalization of the environmental justice movement continued. In 1993, the EPA established the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) composed of members from both grassroots and environmental groups, NGOs, state, local and tribal governments, academia and industry.^{3,6} By 1994, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, which reinforced Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.^{8,10} The order called for increased assessment and mitigation of exposure, more data on low-income and minority exposure, and encouraged the direct participation of affected populations.^{3,13} Clinton’s Executive Order resulted in environmental justice’s introduction to mainstream environmentalism.¹⁰ With legal recognition secured, the environmental justice movement was posed to affect change.

Disproportionately affected residents and activists utilized the new, national-level recognition to accomplish several important victo-

ries. In 1997, Louisiana's Claiborne Parish and its Citizens Against Nuclear Trash (CANT) won an 8-year lawsuit and prevented the construction of a uranium-enrichment plant.^{2,3} The proposed site was within one mile of a 97.10% Black community.³ The following year, St. James parish and environmental justice activists successfully blocked the construction of a Shintech chemical plant. St. James' population was 83% Black, though they constituted only 34% of Louisiana's total population.^{2,3} The proposed Shintech site was in an area with twelve "polluting plants" and 60% unemployment.³ In 2000, residents of Camden, NJ blocked a cement plant from entering an area of 95% people of color who already suffered health effects from industry.³

These isolated victories, though substantial, merely scratched the surface of the issue. The scale of US environmental injustices is illustrated in a study conducted in 1999 by the Institute of Medicine. Despite significant successes spanning two decades, the study found that people of color and the poor continue to face higher rates of exposure to pollution and resultant diseases.^{2,3} For instance, despite its Shintech victory, St. James Parish ranked "third in the state for toxic releases and transfers."² Sadly, a July 1994 *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that Black children suffer from lead-poisoning at a rate more than double that of their White counterparts.^{2,3}

History of Environmental Paradigms

Dorceta Taylor, Associate Professor at the University of Michigan whose research interests include environmental history and ideology as well as environmental justice, posits that because race shapes environmental experience, the environmental activism, agendas, and paradigms of people of color will differ from those of Whites.¹⁴ Essentially, Taylor argues that different locations in society yield different environmental experiences which, in turn, shape the definition of environmental issues in differing ways.¹⁴ Though the United States' environmental movement has been marked by several distinct phases, only the contemporary mobilization of environmental justice has successfully incorporated the experiences, activism and agendas of persons of color and the poor.¹⁴

The environmental mobilization of the early 20th century was catalyzed by Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir.¹⁴ Their collective works led to the development of the romantic environmental paradigm (REP)¹⁴ which criticized natural resource extraction, urged harmonious interactions between humans and nature, and called for government protection of wilderness.¹⁴ This environmental era was most concerned with the human destruction of nature and the how patterns of consumption would affect future generations.¹⁴ Taylor argues that the emphasis on preservation and outdoor recreation attracted the middle class and elites.¹⁴

Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* catalyzed the next environmental mobilization by including environmental issues that affected humans.¹⁴ Industrial chemical hazards were her specific focus.¹⁴ Carson's work did not employ a race or class analysis of exposure. It did, however, raise awareness about the contamination of communities and resulted in the creation of new grassroots organizations.¹⁴ The new environmental paradigm (NEP), which espoused a more fervent pro-environment agenda than the REP, developed in the years following *Silent Spring*.¹⁴ Unlike followers of the REP, adherents of the NEP were less tied to business interests and less interested in hunting and fishing.¹⁴ The NEP has dominated the movement since the 1960s.¹⁴

Despite the post-Carson era's acknowledgement of the degradation

of human environments, the NEP did not appeal to people of color.¹⁴ During the 1980s, people of color organized against chemical exposure and toxic facilities as research exploring a link between race and hazardous exposure was underway.¹⁴ This era of environmental mobilization ushered in the environmental justice paradigm (EJP).¹⁴ Taylor argues that the environmental justice paradigm appealed to people of color because it linked environmental issues to other pertinent concerns, namely labor, human rights, and social justice issues.¹⁴

Racism and Classism in Environmentalism

A lack of racial and class inclusion within the mainstream environmental movement is evidenced by the demographics of the movement's leadership and membership. Such research finds that environmental and conservation groups in the United States are predominantly White and middle-class.³ A 1992 demographic study of 63 mainstream environmental organizations found that the organization's staff, members, and volunteers were predominately White.¹⁴ In fact, a recent University of Michigan study found that one-third of mainstream US environmental groups still lack even one person of color on staff.¹⁵ At the Kyoto Protocol negotiations, for instance, Jerome Ringo was the only African-American delegate in attendance. Further, he was the only African-American in the entire Louisiana Wildlife Federation that boasts 24,000 members.¹⁵ Ringo explained that "Conservationists were sportsmen . . . people who would fish to hang the fish on the wall. Those people who would *fish to put a fish on a plate* [emphasis added] didn't join clubs."¹

In the post-Carson era, mainstream environmentalism's wilderness- and conservation-dominated agenda incorporated an anti-pollution stance and the movement chose national-level policy-making over localized actions.¹ Despite these changes, environmentalism's continued lack of inclusivity was highlighted by its 1960s-1970s campaign to regulate pollution. The movement ignored the affect that their anti-pollution campaign would have on poor communities of color as pollution was shifted to areas lacking the financial and political resources to fight it.¹⁵ As demonstrated in a 1992 National Law Journal study, there are "glaring inequities" in the enforcement of EPA laws.^{3,10,11} Further, polluted inner-city and urban environments were not on mainstream environmentalism's radar.¹ For instance, though the Sierra Club's efforts toward the protection of wilderness and endangered species are quite notable and commendable, the organization lacked an urban agenda.¹⁵

The environmental justice movement was, thus, a counter-narrative to mainstream environmentalism's lack of race and class analysis.¹¹ Sociologist Daniel Faber states that environmental justice gave voice to communities of color and constructed organizations to identify and address the environmental issues these communities face.¹⁶ Environmental justice focused upon the issues which directly affected the "lives and livelihoods" of people.⁵ Accordingly, the 1980s saw a reorganization of grassroots environmentalism, including the addition of race-based analysis, which resulted in the incorporation of a large new group of stakeholders.¹

Political science professor, David Caruthers argues that the environmental justice movement succeeded in the successful combination of civil rights and environmental issues.^{1,5,14} Specifically, it illuminated the burden of disproportionate exposure experienced in poor, communities of color.⁵ Julian Agyeman, professor of urban and environmental policy and planning, points out one positive consequence of this fusion of social movements: environmental and public health laws are more effective than civil rights laws.¹⁰ The environmental justice movement continues to call for inclusion of diverse perspectives by

changing the administration of environmental protection in marginalized communities.³ As Bullard and Johnson contend, this social movement will remain necessary as long as policies favor Whites and those with higher levels of education and income.³

Carruthers posits that the environmental justice movement transformed environmentalism by “altering its scope, character, and tactics.”⁵ As such, environmental justice is a counter-narrative to mainstream environmentalism’s lack of inclusive interpretation and mitigation of environmental protection and exposure. Bullard and Johnson contend that environmental protection must be implemented as a right, rather than experienced as a privilege for those able to prevent or escape “environmental stressors.”³ Clearly, transforming a privilege into a right requires resources. Unfortunately, a study conducted in 2001 found that less than 5% of environmentalist grant monies went toward environmental justice work.¹⁷ Unfortunately, in comparison to other major social movements, the environmental justice movement remains distinctly underfunded.¹⁶

Global Environmental Justice

The environmental justice movement expanded its focus to include global issues.¹¹ It has the capacity to operate on a macro-global level while maintaining adaptability to local issues.⁵ Historically, international environmental justice is rooted in the 1984 PEMEX gas explosion in Mexico City and the Union Carbide explosion in Bhopal.⁷ According to Bullard and Johnson, production and consumption patterns “create and maintain unequal and unjust waste burdens within and between affluent and poor communities, states and regions of the world.”³ For instance, both Louisiana-based African-Americans and Nigerians are negatively affected by Shell Oil refineries.² These disparately located environmental injustices create a global link between groups disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards in the United States to those disproportionately burdened abroad.

Bullard argues that the Global North’s private industry, government and military secure benefits domestically and then shift the costs to the Global South.² Schroeder et al agree that costs are “passed off” to marginalized communities.⁷ This contention is amply illustrated in a 1991 memo written by the World Bank’s chief economist, Lawrence Summers: *Dirty Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [less developed countries]?*^{23,3} This memo explicitly shows that environmental injustice operates in the “international arena between nations and between transnational corporations.”²

Summers’s memo alludes to globalization’s participation in the proliferation of environmentally-based injustice as transnational companies seek out low environmental regulations¹⁶ and cheap labor.² For instance, Semptra Energy and InterGen Services provided energy for Southern California by “installing dirty plant technology in Mexico to evade higher US environmental and community health standards.”²⁵ As sociologists Szasz and Meuser contend, “...environmental inequality is a global phenomenon, routinely generated by the normal workings of international political economy.”¹² For instance, from 1989-1994, 2611 tons of waste were exported to non-OECD countries.² Despite the 1991 Bamako Convention and 1995 Basel Convention bans on the export of waste, implementation and enforcement lag.² Public policies and industry practices continue to provide benefits for the countries in the North while shifting the costs to countries in the South.^{2,3}

One striking example of international environmental inequality lies along the US/Mexican border. The *maquiladora* industry is a microcosm of disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. Despite

a 1983 agreement which called for the return of production wastes from Mexico to the United States, the Center for Investigative Reporting found that the EPA received only 10 notices of waste return during 1989.³ Instead, waste is dumped in the desert, into sewers, ditches, and a water source used by 95% of the region’s population.^{2,3} Effects from high level toxins are often extreme. For instance, in two Border towns, babies are born without brains at 4 times the national average.² Unfortunately, as in the United States, people around the world must decide between the “false choice of ‘no jobs and no development’ versus ‘risky, low-paying jobs and pollution.’”³

Beyond the country-by-country scale of environmental injustice, Bullard argues that global climate change is the most pertinent environmental issue of our time.² He calls for climate justice that “links human rights and ecological sustainability.”² Julie Sze, associate professor and founding director of the Environmental Justice Project at the UC Davis, contends that the environmental justice framework is vital to understanding the context of global climate change, precisely because the Global South is projected to suffer disproportionate negative effects.¹¹ Unfortunately, prevention and mitigation resources are scarce because the international environmental justice movement lacks the level of information and marginal funding found in the United States movement.⁷

There are several challenges unique to the international environmental justice movement. Carruthers, an expert on politics and policy in Mexico and Latin America, contends that severe economic marginalization coupled with fewer resources stunts activism in Central and South America.⁵ It is also of note that the US environmental justice is not a completely transferable paradigm. In fact, international environmental justice differs substantially from its US counterpart due to a “relative absence of environmental regulation” combined with the “relative significance of race.”⁷ For instance, the United State’s environmental regulator, the EPA, does not have a similar counterpart in other countries, nor are categorical distinctions based on race as salient or as notable.

The Green Economy

One contemporary environmental justice campaign centers on the inclusion of marginalized communities into the emerging green economy. Environmental justice activists strive to ensure that the “green bandwagon”¹⁸ has available space for those historically excluded by society in general and environmentalism in particular. While the mainstream environmental movement frames green jobs as a conservation effort focused on solar panel installation and wind turbine construction, the environmental justice movement seeks to broaden the scope to include clean-up and mitigation of industrial sites and the revitalization of urban areas. Activists seek full inclusion of industrial clean-up, lead and asbestos mitigation, water and air quality monitoring, and urban garden implementation into the green job sector.¹⁸ Thus, the environmental justice movement strives to connect the growing “green economy with the needs of urban minority communities” most affected by historic economic and environmental policies.¹⁸

It is important to note that, before green hit the mainstream economy, there was a significant partnership between the environmental justice movement and environment-related federal work programs.¹⁸ Between 1996 and 2000, the Minority Worker Training Program trained 1,647 youths and placed 65% of them in related employment.¹⁸ In 2003, Sustainable South Bronx, founded by Marjora Carter, launched the local green-jobs initiative, Bronx Environ-

mental Stewardship Training (BEST). Within six years BEST has placed 80% of its 100 graduates. Since 2007, Richmond BUILD has offered training in “construction, energy efficiency, and solar power” with aims to counteract the legacy of poverty, violence and toxic waste from 400 industrial sites.¹⁵

“Green-collar jobs,” as coined by professor Raquel Rivera Pinderhughes, are changing “the face of environmentalism” by incorporating those most affected by the “dirty-energy economy” and race and class hierarchies.¹⁵ Initiatives such as BEST and Richmond BUILD fight to ensure that the green economy includes social justice measures, such as a living wage, safe work environments, and union-style worker empowerment.¹⁸ Brentin Mock argues that increasing the scale of these “original green-jobs programs underwritten by federal funds” is vital to communities of color.¹⁸ Sociologist David Pellow maintains that the United States has the ability to increase the scale and scope of “community-based environmental projects.”¹⁸ Recently, the 2009 American Recovery and Investment Act promised \$10 billion for “community-organization work on energy efficiency and pollution education,” though the allocation of funds was not specified.¹⁸

Environmental Justice Criticisms

There are three main criticisms of the environmental justice movement: one is economic and the other two are scholarly in nature. Concerning economics, the environmental justice movement is often accused of blocking jobs to under- and unemployed areas. Bullard and Johnson counter that, though the Black community is often “lured” by the promise of jobs, polluting industries rarely provide work for local residents.³ In fact, there is no correlation between industrial placement and employment opportunity for local residents.³ According to Bullard and Johnson, communities of color mostly gain “pollution and poverty,” while Whites commute to work from less polluted areas.³ Bullard concludes that to choose between a job, on the one hand, and the health of oneself and one’s community on the other is “economic blackmail.”²

The second main criticism of the environmental justice movement claims that research findings that race and income-levels are linked to exposure rates are faulty at best and completely inaccurate at worst. There is a general agreement that environmental injustice exists and a fundamental disagreement on whether the source of injustice is “economic, sociological, or racial” in nature.¹ Upon reviewing Census data and site placement data on facilities for the treatment, storage, and disposal of hazard wastes (TSDFs), Anderton et al found no reliable evidence of racial discrimination in the siting of TSDFs.¹³ They did, however, find patterns of residential discrimination which they believe responsible for the initial environmental justice research results that claim siting discrimination.¹³

Vicki Been, Professor of Law at New York University, takes issue not with the claim of disproportionate exposure, but rather the timeline of siting and community demographics.⁴ She argues that research on discriminatory siting does not take into account whether the toxic facilities chose to site in a poor, community of color, or if market forces relevant to toxic facility siting attracted people of color and the poor.⁴ Been’s central question: which came first, the siting or the people? Because environmental justice research on toxic siting did not account for community demographics *at the time* of initial siting, the resultant findings cannot claim a direct correlation between community demographics and the decision to site a toxic facility.⁴ Further, studying the racialized nature of the economy would in-

crease the understanding and mitigation of environmental injustices.⁸

This attack on environmental justice research and its core belief in the existence of an unjust distribution of negative environmental exposure has been met with a rigorous, research rebuttal. To begin, Hilda Kurtz, Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Georgia, does agree that spatial statistics do not reliably prove racial discrimination in toxic facility siting.⁸ However, she contends that “expert knowledge(s) grounded in Census and other spatial data are in tension with lay and experiential knowledge(s) of the disparate impacts of pollution on people’s health and livelihoods.”⁸ Further, she adds that spatial analyses lacked data on “social, political and economic context in which inequitable distributions of pollution occur.”⁸

Analyzing environmental justice literature itself, Brulle and Pellow’s 2006 meta-analysis found that race and class were significant factors related to exposure and remediation.¹¹ Similarly, Evan Ringquist’s meta-analysis of 49 environmental equity studies found that:

Some scholars have protested that race-based inequities are limited in scope, produced by misspecified models, or are the artifacts of aggregation bias. While the magnitude of race-based inequities does vary with respect to these factors . . . the results of the meta-analysis show that protests claiming that these factors can explain away such inequities are empirically unsustainable.¹⁹

The accusations of faulty or inflated science, thus, do not hold up, as race and class remain substantial factors of environmental exposure.

Finally, the third criticism of the environmental justice movement concerns its methodology. David Pellow, professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, contends that the terms environmental racism and environmental justice are consistently and inaccurately treated as interchangeable.⁹ Pellow proposes the use of the Environmental Inequality Formation (EIF) perspective, which includes and links three major points: process and history, multiple stakeholder relationships, and the inclusion of a life-cycle approach to production and consumption.⁹ Thus, the EIF perspective defines environmental inequality as a process with multiple stakeholders, rather than a unilateral imposition of hazard by one group upon another, that occurs throughout the life cycle of production and consumption, rather than a singular focus on waste disposal.⁹

A case study of a Chicago recycling center illustrates the “promises and pitfalls” of the environmental justice movement.⁹ An environmental justice success, closing an incineration plant and replacing it with a recycling center, appeased government, business interests, activists and local job seekers alike.⁹ The incinerator closing and recycling center opening seemed a perfect match for the national environmental justice group, Communities United for Justice (CUJ) mantra of ‘too much pollution and not enough jobs.’⁹ Unfortunately, the social construction of an environmental justice success engendered a lack of acknowledgement for environmental hazards experienced by African-American workers at the recycling center. As Pellow argues, though the recycling center was socially constructed as a safe and environmentally-friendly alternative to the incinerator, the recycling center produced environmental inequalities for its African-American workers.⁹

Applying the EIF perspective to the Chicago incinerator vs. recycling center case study, the sociohistorical process of shifting allegiances (environmentalists once endorsed incinerators) and shifting social constructions of hazard emerges.⁹ Further, moving beyond environmental racism’s perpetrator-victim dyad, the EIF perspective emphasizes the

role of multiple stakeholders and transforms the African-American workers, or the “would-be victims,” into complex actors with the agency to resist and shape outcomes.⁹ Finally, the EIF perspective adds a life-cycle analysis to the study of environmental inequality by connecting the post-consumer recycling hazards to the hazards experienced in the production and consumption of products.⁹

Conclusions and Recommendations

Fritz, a sociology professor of planning and health policy, contends “There is a tragic reluctance to solve and prevent the environmental problems that are facing minority and low-income communities as well as low-income countries.”⁶ I argue that this reluctance relates directly to the evidenced invisibility of marginalized perspectives on and experiences of environmental issues. For nearly a century, the environmental movement has excluded marginalized populations from participation in the construction of environmentalism. This systematic lack of representation translated into a systematic lack of protection of people of color and the poor. The environmental justice movement seeks to remedy environmentalism’s blind spot and is a crucial step forward in environmental history.

The redefining of environmental issues, “not (only) as wildlife, recreational or resource issues, but as issues of justice, equity and rights gave birth to the environmental justice movement.”¹⁰ Accordingly, environmental justice could transform mainstream environmentalism into a far more diverse and powerful social movement. This transformation requires a reframing that includes marginalized communities and human habitats into mainstream notions of species and environments worth protecting. Specifically, environmental justice calls for the equal protection of humans of all races and classes, as well as the protection of human settings such as the inner-city and rural town.

I posit that environmentalism’s lack of inclusivity clouds the realities of the complex interactions of social and natural systems while it simultaneously marginalizes the experiences of groups and nations. These two acts prevent the scale of collaborative, human ingenuity needed to remedy global environmental issues. As a remedy, I call for increased sociological funding for research on the environmental justice movement as a means to illuminate overlooked and overexposed humans and human settings. It is my belief that research is a tool of inclusion and that environmental justice is a movement most deserving of our support. Further, the burgeoning field of environmental sociology is best positioned to remedy the social failings of environmentalism and must dedicate itself to this mitigative task. As social scholars we must not fall prey to the tragic reluctance¹⁷ inherent in exclusive constructions of environmentalism.

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