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## **Environmental Justice**

### **Introduction**

One of the tragedies of our time is the disproportionate burden of environmental problems borne by the poor and by communities of color. An impressive range of scholarship on the question of what has come to be called *environmental justice* has documented the dimensions of this tragedy. While the early literature on environmental justice primarily focused on questions of unequal distribution of environmental "bads" in the United States, recent years have witnessed studies of environmental justice at a global scale and a broadening understanding of what constitutes environmental justice. Both the US-based and the international studies have had a close relationship with the development of social movements working to overcome these inequalities, a true instance of the mutualism between the academe and civil society that many have called for in all areas of research. Concern for environmental justice has thus significantly grown over the years both within the US and elsewhere.

### **Development of the Environmental Justice Paradigm**

Three prominent research traditions characterize environmental justice scholarship, developing in tandem with social movements in civil society. First, the *macro-structural approach*, as it is often referred to, primarily concerns evidence for racial, ethnic, and class disparities in environmental inequality. Three early macro-structural studies grabbed the attention of scholars and activists. The first study, a General Accounting Office (1983) report,

found that three out of four landfills in the United States were located near predominantly African-American communities. The United Church of Christ (UCC) conducted a second landmark study in 1987, using Zip codes to show that 37.6 percent of US landfills were located in or near predominantly African-American neighborhoods, and that, compared with whites, African-Americans were two to three times more likely to live near a hazardous landfill. A third classic study was that of Robert Bullard who, in 1983, found that 21 of Houston's 25 waste facilities were located in African-American neighborhoods (Bullard 1983).

All three studies found that, after taking class effects into account, race remained an independent predictor of the distribution of commercial hazardous waste facilities and other environmental bads. A range of subsequent case studies presented similar arguments that Native Americans and Latin Americans faced disproportionate impacts from environmental hazards. Additional studies on toxic releases, occupational exposure, waste facility siting, and unequal enforcement also found a race and ethnic effect in the creation of unequal environments. All of these studies contributed an evidence base for social movements protesting *environmental racism*. Indeed, the phrase "environmental justice" was, through to the mid-1990s, far less commonly used, as the focus of so much early work was on the question of race and ethnicity first and foremost.

The 1980s and 1990s were also the time of numerous civil society movements against environmental racism, generally local in focus and generally led by women. The first such movement to get national attention was the fight, led by local resident Dollie Burwell, against the 1982 landfilling of 32,000 cubic yards of PCB-contaminated soil in predominately African-American Warren County, North Carolina. The same year, Hazel Johnson founded People for Community Recovery, which has been fighting ever since to call attention to, and mobilize

action against, the high rates of cancer, asthma, skin rash, and kidney and liver problems in her predominately African-American neighborhood on Chicago's Southside. Since that time, literally hundreds, in not thousands, of local organizations have formed to protest issues of environmental racism, especially in the African-American and Latino communities. Plus there are now a number of national groups such as the Environmental Justice Coalition and the National Black Environmental Justice Network.

Central to this early research and early social movement development was the sense that the environmental movement was "lost in the woods," focusing too much of its attention on biocentric issues of wilderness protection and species loss. But if the environment is everywhere, anthropocentric concerns for conditions in and near where most humans live should be at least equally salient, activists argued. The concern that the environmental movement had potentially racist implications resonated uncomfortably with the observation that, at the time, almost no people of color had a place on the staff or board of the typical mainstream environmental non-profit, nor worked for governmental environmental agencies. The situation has changed since that time, however, and now a number of mainstream national environmental organizations in the US and other countries have significant programs confronting issues of environmental inequality. In 1992, the US Environmental Protection Agency opened the Office of Environmental Justice, and in 1994 President Clinton signed Executive Order 12898, which requires all Federal agencies to take environmental justice concerns into account. The UK Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs has recently engaged in a number of environmental justice initiatives.

Some subsequent studies of environmental inequality in the US, of 18 environmental justice studies between 1998 and 2002, 5 found class significant but not race, 7 found race

significant but not class, and 6 found both significant (Bell 2004). These findings unleashed a storm of debate, not least because the most prominent study that questioned the salience of race in environmental inequality had been funded by Waste Management Incorporated, operator of the largest hazardous waste landfill in the US, which lies in the mainly African American community of Emelle, Alabama. But increasingly scholars argue that this kind of is-it-race, is-it-class, or is-it-both debate is distracting and analytically shallow. Issues of race and class closely intertwine in the US and elsewhere, and are often difficult to distinguish in large-scale survey research. Plus instances of environmental inequality by income are not less appalling than those by race and ethnicity. The struggles of Lois Gibbs in her white working class neighborhood of Love Canal, New York are as significant for human well-being as those of Dollie Burwell and Hazel Johnson, many have argued.

Consequently, the focus of both research and activism has shifted from environmental racism to the more inclusive phrase environmental justice. Associated with this shift has been a new theoretical approach to the study of environmental inequality, the *socio-historical/processual* approach, which shifts the conceptual focus from statistical studies of environmental racism to analyses of the underlying social processes of environmental inequality more generally. This line of research emphasizes the need to adopt a more institutional framework that examines the socio-historical legacies of racism and classism, which limit life choices and deny important political and economic tools to actors for addressing such violations. For example, in their study of environmental inequality in Santa Clara County in San Jose, California, Szasz and Meuser (2000: 15) pointed out that “any attempt to depict industrial siting as the imposition of undesirable development on certain victimizable communities, in spite of misgivings and opposition in those communities, is an anachronistic projection of contemporary

attitude.” Instead, they argued that such association needs to be viewed as products of broader processes of racialization that determine and shape occupation, financial assets, and general life opportunities. They emphasize the embedded nature of racial discrimination in the historical experiences of minority communities and suggest that mere intentionality cannot explain this complex process. Another prominent example of the historical/processual approach is the “Environmental Inequality Formation (EIF)” framework of David Pellow (2000). Moving beyond a simple “perpetrator-victim” formulation, EIF argues that environmental inequities result from actions and interactions of multiple actors—state, corporations, environmental groups, residents, churches and so on—whose cross cutting interests and overlapping allegiances shape environmental discourse and practice.

Finally, Dorceta Taylor presents a third approach, what she calls the *environmental justice paradigm* (Taylor 2000). Drawing upon the literature on how social movements “frame” their arguments, Taylor presents an analysis of the relationship between the ideologies and institutions that underlie the environmental justice movement. The success of the environmental justice movement, she suggests, lies in its effective aligning of the civil rights paradigm with the environmental paradigm. This frame alignment, Taylor points out, helps in building coalitions between environmental, labor, and minority concerns. Emerging environmental issues during the inception of environmental justice movement provided the political opportunities which fostered the movement’s success (Taylor 2000: 73). Indeed, Taylor’s own framing of her research question as the study of the “success” of the environmental justice movement is a testament to how far the movement has already come, in part through frame alignment with another institution: the research community.

## **Changing Nature of Environmental Discourse: A Critique of Existing Frameworks**

Thus, the contours of environmental justice scholarship have changed over the course of the years since its inception. In addition to the rise of historical/processual and environmental justice paradigm studies, macro-structural studies are now increasingly international in focus, examining phenomena such as “garbage imperialism,” the transfer of risks and environmental hazards to developing countries through the export of toxic waste and hazardous industries. As well, it has internationalized through finding common cause with issues of environmental protection that effect the livelihood of people everywhere. Indeed, the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Kenyan professor, activist, and environment minister Wangari Maathai who founded a green belt movement in Africa that has planted tens of millions of trees, so vital to the lives of Africa’s poor.

Yet, while environmental justice has come a long way in theory development and evidence gathering, we still do not have an effective definition of the “justice” in environmental justice. Justice theory has remained an important theoretical concern for political philosophy, but has garnered little interest from social scientists. Yet social scientific judgment can never be, nor should be, divorced from philosophical judgment. To adequately understand an existing phenomenon, we need to begin with how we are to recognize its existence, a philosophical question. Further, social scientific queries allow us to take philosophy a step further by giving us a glimpse of the intricate workings of the social relations that constitute a phenomenon. All these processes of recognizing and seeing, in turn, are shaped by our doings and concerns as social agents. Social science and philosophy thus work hand in hand. The three main traditions of environmental justice speak to these doings and concerns in the form of the outcomes and processes of environmental justice.

The work of Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize, provides one potential approach to uniting the social science and philosophy of environmental justice, and ultimately bringing about better informed social action. In the course of exploring questions of development and social justice, Sen points out that fair distribution of resources remains ineffective unless accompanied by the freedom to choose the resources we want, depending on the contexts in which we live (Sen 1999, 2002). The pursuit of principles of fairness and freedom can only occur by building people's capabilities, which in turn requires a social order based on principles of dialogue and democracy. Hence environmental justice includes not only the distribution of resources (a social scientific concern), but also the capability to pursue these resources within a framework of dialogue and democracy (a political philosophical concern). Environmental justice can thus be conceptualized as a quest for *environmental democracy*.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Conceptualizing environmental justice as a matter of environmental democracy allows us to widen the scope of our vision. To begin with, it opens up possibilities for examining a broader range of inequalities, including questions of the fair distribution of environmental goods, not only the fair distribution of environmental bads. Take for example the question of local cultures and heritages, often ignored in contemporary environmental justice scholarship. The forced removal of local peoples for the construction of dams and implementation of parks and national forests should be seen as equally an issue of environmental justice as the more typically studied problems of the unequal distribution of hazards. As well, an environmental democracy approach more easily allows us to explore the role of cultural perceptions of the environment, so central to

understanding the injustice of the forced removals of local peoples, even when they are given fair-market value compensation for their homes and lands.

In these ways, environmental justice as environmental democracy helps build a “just us”—a society founded on common commitment to, and common consideration for, the fairness of our inescapably environmental lives.

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