

The Emergence of the Environmental Justice Movement and Its Challenges to Planning

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Environmental justice activism has created its own ideology and begun to shift the power relationships of the environmental movement and the federal government. In doing so, this emerging environmental activism has established a multi-issue, place-based social movement. By reestablishing environmental justice within the political framework from which it originally emerged, I highlight key challenges for the field of planning and policymaking that address the environmental issues of low-income communities of color.

Introduction

The concept of environmental justice has found its way into the planning field, focusing planning on issues of race and class in theory and practice. Within planning, environmental justice includes two types of literature. The first and more extensive literature tests the disproportionate impact of environmental, industrial and land use policies on particular disadvantaged groups of people and their communities. A seminal study by the United Church of Christ in 1987 was one of the first to use the term “environmental racism” to describe both the concentration of toxics in communities of color and inequities in the way federal environmental laws were applied in these communities. Research on the role of race and income (Bullard 1993; Lee 1993), industrial siting (McEvoy 1980) and immigrant status (Marcelli, Power and Spalding 2001) attempts to identify the key factors that explain disproportionate impacts and negative environmental conditions in low-income communities of color.¹

This first type of environmental justice literature also includes research on the inequitable distribution of public resources and regulatory protections in low-income communities of color (Bullard 1994; Pulido 1993). A 1992 study by the National Law Journal was one of the first to document disparities in environmental regulation enforcement by the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In its review of census data, civil court dockets and the EPA’s own records, the study found that penalties imposed under hazardous waste laws at sites with high populations of whites were 500 percent greater than penalties for those sites located in communities with fewer whites (Bullard 1994: 9).

The second type of environmental justice literature positions environmental justice within a framework of activism and social movements (Bullard 1993, 1994; Castells 1997; Harvey 1996; O'Connor 1997; Pulido 1996b; Szasz 1994; Taylor 1997). This literature documents a number of grassroots struggles, including the United Farm Workers campaign against the use of pesticides (Pulido 1996a), organizing by the Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles to stop the siting of an incinerator (Hamilton 1994), and a campaign by People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO) that forced Alameda County and the City of Oakland in California to take responsibility for the removal of lead from homes and public spaces in low-income neighborhoods (Calpotura and Sen 1994; Sandercock 1998). This literature also documents the use of legal strategies, such as the formation of a coalition of legal advocates that won an out-of-court settlement worth \$15 million for a blood-testing program of low-income children in Alameda County (Bullard 1994).² Such strategies are increasingly documented in the planning literature as ways in which communities facilitate change, often through institutional and regulatory procedures put in place by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Executive Order on environmental justice signed in 1992.

Environmental Justice as a Social Movement

Academic interpretations of environmental justice as a social movement have been provided from different perspectives, ranging from identity politics to Marxist doctrines to cultural politics. Among other things, this work debates whether the environmental

justice movement is distinct from the earlier struggles of the civil rights, environmental and feminist movements.

Harvey (1996) sees the environmental justice movement as a link between environmental struggles and struggles for social change, and therefore believes that it outlines an agenda for an eco-socialist politics. Similarly, O'Connor (1997) understands environmental justice as an illustration of socialist ecology doctrines, and argues that socialism can be achieved by highlighting the contradictions between the social organization and the ecological conditions of production, rather than simply class contradictions.

Sandercock (1998: 129), on the other hand, refers to environmental justice struggles as a new cultural politics, because environmental justice brings to life "new kinds of cultural and political literacies which constitute a new radical praxis for planning." She cites environmental struggles by PUEBLO and by the Mothers of East Los Angeles to illustrate how local communities have struggled within and against the state on urban and environmental issues. Though she does not fully examine the specific structural dimensions of the two grassroots struggles, she argues that they share similar historic and economic processes that define the condition, space and place of their "insurgent practices." These processes are rooted in their shared history and relationships to capitalist society—a long cycle of industrial pollution, non-compliance by industries, lack of state regulatory enforcement and local government accountability, multigenerational poverty, cycles of immigration,

disinvestment of public services, and industrial restructuring and job loss.

Castells (1997: 132) describes the environmental justice movement as “an all encompassing notion that affirms the use value of life, of all forms of life, against the interests of wealth, power, and technology” and represents a new stage of development of the environmental movement. Szasz (1994) sees the movement as a growing environmental populism emerging from the organizational and ideological development of the hazardous waste movement. Taylor (1997) argues that environmental justice is its own social movement and is distinct from earlier environmental, civil rights and feminist movements.

Not only does this literature situate environmental justice in a political framework, it also demonstrates the range of perspectives that attempt to explain environmental justice as a social movement. A closer historical examination identifying the conditions and factors that catalyzed environmental justice as a concept and emergent social movement is useful to clarify the relationship of environmental justice to planning and policymaking.

The Emergence of the Movement

The term “social movement” requires definition. Garner (1977: 1) defines a social movement as a set of collective acts that “are self-consciously directed toward changing the social structure and/or ideology of society, and are carried on outside of ideologically legitimated channels of change or use these channels in innovative ways.” Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks (1995: vii) further define social movements as collec-

tive efforts by politically and socially marginalized people to examine the conditions of their lives:

“These efforts are a distinctive sort of social activity: collective action becomes a “movement” when participants refuse to accept the boundaries of established institutional rules and routinized roles. Single instances of such popular defiance don’t make a movement; the term refers to persistent, patterned, and widely distributed collective challenges to the status quo.”

While Garner’s definition points out the importance of the strategy used to challenge the dominant social structure and ideology, Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks suggest that such challenges to the status quo must reach beyond single instances of protest in order to constitute a social movement. Both definitions situate the collective challenge of power and ideology as a central tenet in defining a social movement, and provide a useful starting point to examine the emergence of environmental justice as such a movement.

Environmental justice as a political and social movement emerged in the 1980s as part of the growing activism of low-income communities of color responding to environmental hazards in their communities. Civil rights protests, grievances, actions and social movements focused on the environment had occurred years before, in the form of struggles over environmental resources such as land, water and air, as well as workers’ rights to safe working conditions. Resource struggles included resistance by Native Americans to land appropriation and relocation programs and conflicts between farmers and urban in-

dustrialists over resource ownership and use. Workplace struggles began as early as the 1930s. During the Gauley Bridge incident, for example, immigrant and African American workers organized and filed suit against Union Carbide because of the company's failure to provide protections against dust emissions that caused the deadly lung disease silicosis. More recently, the United Farm Workers has sought to secure the rights to organize for agricultural workers exposed to environmental hazards, such as the growing use of pesticides in the 1950s and 1960s (Gottlieb 1993).

The emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and its challenge to racism, segregation and discrimination, also included struggles over environmental issues. In 1967, a student protest erupted at the predominantly African American Texas Southern University in Houston following the drowning death of an eight-year old African American girl at a garbage dump. A subsequent lawsuit filed by African American homeowners in Houston charged racial discrimination over the proposed location of a municipal solid waste landfill in their community.

The framing of these environmental protests reflected a civil rights approach to an environmental issue. These environmental struggles remained localized protests until 1982 when 500 protestors, including national leaders of the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Congressional Black Caucus, were jailed over protests of the Warren County, North Carolina polychlorinated biphenyls

(PCB) landfill. The protest focused on the selection of a rural African American community in that county as the burial site for 30,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with PCBs. It marked the first time African Americans mobilized a national campaign against what they called "environmental racism" (Bullard 1994).

The marches in Warren County and the coalition of politicians and national church leaders were a direct application of strategies previously learned and practiced as part of the civil rights movement, such as direct action, protest and nonviolent action. The ability to launch a national campaign against environmental racism demonstrated the powerful national organizational infrastructure and the ideology of that movement. The civil rights movement had what resource mobilization theorists have identified as the resources necessary to generate and sustain collective action—a national infrastructure, pre-existing networks and indigenous organizations (McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Piven and Cloward 1977).

Prompted by the Warren County protest, a study by the US General Accounting Office (1983) found a strong correlation between the location of hazardous waste landfills and the race and income of the communities in which the landfills were located. A subsequent study by the United Church of Christ (1987) argued that race, more than any other indicator, was the primary predictor of where industrial pollution was reported and where hazardous waste sites were located. These studies, and others that documented environmental degradation in low-income commu-

nities of color, as well as regulatory negligence in environmental oversight, helped fuel the growing grassroots environmentalism led by people from the civil rights, Native American, feminist and environmental movements.

Building on its civil rights history, the growing environmental justice movement targeted two key actors in national environmental policy: mainstream environmental organizations and the federal government. In 1990, more than a hundred activists and representatives of community-based groups, organized by the New Mexico-based Southwest Organizing Project, issued a letter to the “Big 10” national environmental organizations arguing that they had failed to consider issues pertaining to communities of color.³ The letter demanded that the organizations review and revise their policies relating to economic development and toxic hazards in low-income communities of color, and that the organizations address their poor record of hiring and promoting people of color at the board and staff level (Gottlieb 1993).

“We Speak for Ourselves”

In the fall of 1991, environmental justice activists held The First People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC. The summit symbolically launched a movement led by people of color on an issue that had traditionally reflected white middle class interests (Bullard 1994). The summit drew more than 650 delegates, participants and observers, consisting of environmental activists, civil rights advocates, trade unionists, farm workers, sci-

entists, environmental lawyers and participants from the philanthropic community. The 301 delegates from communities of color included fifty-five Native Americans, 158 African Americans, sixty-four Latinos and twenty-four Asian Pacific Islanders, with equal gender representation (Lee 1993: 51). If the Warren County protest sparked a national movement of civil rights on environmental issues, the Summit catalyzed the development of a distinct environmental justice ideology and helped clarify the relationship between environmental justice and the civil rights and environmental movements.

The stated purpose of the summit was to “redefine the environmental movement and develop common plans for addressing environmental problems affecting people of color in the United States and around the world” (Bullard 1994: 7). Although leaders from the mainstream environmental movement attended the summit, the explicit focus was on the grassroots struggles of the people of color who had planned it, and it was those delegates who crafted the resulting seventeen-point set of Environmental Justice Principles. The slogan “We Speak for Ourselves” emerged as a key theme. The slogan was a public assertion of the importance of the perspectives of low-income communities of color in environmental planning and policymaking.

Gottlieb (1993) notes that activism leading up to and following the summit focused on addressing the unequal power relationships that characterized national environmental policymaking. Environmental justice activists demanded a transformation of the paternalistic relationship between national environ-

mental organizations and grassroots environmental justice organizations to “a relationship based on equity, mutual respect, mutual interest, and justice” (Alston, as cited in Gottlieb 1993: 5). This relationship applied not only to powerful mainstream environmental interests but to federal decisionmaking agencies as well. A key environmental justice principle states: “Environmental justice demands the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decisionmaking, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement, and evaluation” (Environmental Justice Principles 1992).

In response to environmental justice activism and the increasing number of studies that showed a disproportionate impact of environmental hazards in low-income neighborhoods, President Clinton signed Executive Order No. 12898. The order established an office of environmental justice within the EPA, set up a National Environmental Justice Advisory Commission, and required all federal agencies to review their policies and programs to estimate negative environmental impacts on low-income communities of color and to develop plans to address these impacts. The institutionalization of environmental justice principles marked a significant victory for activists, who now had an institutional framework that linked race with the environment and within which they could continue to push for changes in their communities.

“Where We Live, Where We Work and Where We Play”

In challenging the Big 10 environmental organizations and policymakers, environmental justice activists asserted an alternative definition of the environment:

For us, the issues of the environment do not stand alone by themselves. They are not narrowly defined. Our vision of the environment is woven into an overall framework of social, racial, and economic justice... The environment, for us, is where we live, where we work, and where we play. The environment affords us the platform to address the critical issues of our time: questions of militarism and defense policy; religious freedom; cultural survival; energy and sustainable development; the future of our cities; transportation; housing; land and sovereignty rights; self-determination; employment—and we can go on and on. (Alston, as cited in Gottlieb 1993: 5)

The reframing of the environment as “where we live, where we work, and where we play” is a definition that reflects the large leadership role by women of color in the movement. In her discussion of environmental justice, Krauss notes that the particular position and narrative of women of color “grow[s] out of concrete immediate everyday experience of struggles around issues of survival” (1994: 256), in which race plays a central role. In a comparison of women involved in toxic waste protests, she found that for white blue-collar women, the critique of the corporate state and the realization of full democratic participation by women are central tenets of environmental justice. For women of color, on the other

hand, narratives link race to the environment more strongly than they do to class (Krauss 1994: 270).

The early and ongoing struggles by women of color and their leadership in the movement reflect this point. Concerned Citizens of South Central, led by African American women, organized to stop the siting of an incinerator in a low-income African American community in Los Angeles. Women leaders of the Asian Pacific Environmental Network organized Laotian girls and their families to secure a multilingual early warning system to notify the low-income residents near a Chevron refinery in Richmond, California about explosions and hazardous leaks. Currently, women also lead environmental justice organizations such as the Southern Organizing Committee and the Northeast Environmental Justice Network.


Taylor (1997: 70) argues that the central role of women of color in the movement is a reason why environmental justice as a movement emerged apart from the civil rights and environmental movements:

If women of color could have fit their activism within the framework of one of these three already existing movements (ecofeminism, feminism and other sectors of the environmental movement), they would have done so. Precisely because of the complexity and uniqueness of the issues women of color fight, and their approach to tackling these issues, there wasn't a perfect fit with any of these movements. If there had been, there wouldn't have been a need for the environmental justice movement and the movement wouldn't have grown so rapidly.

The Movement's Critique of Capitalism

In addition to addressing waste, exposure to toxics, and occupational health and safety, the environmental justice movement has linked these issues to housing, jobs, economic development and transportation. Because of the integration of these issues, Taylor (1997) suggests that the environmental justice movement resists the modes of capitalist production and consumption that generate environmental hazards. This critique of capitalism is reflected in the seventeen-point Environmental Justice Principles. Three of these principles include demands for the cessation of production of all toxins, hazardous wastes and radioactive materials; the right of all workers to a safe and healthy work environment; and opposition to the destructive operations of multinational corporations.

While Harvey (1996) recognizes the environmental justice movement's critique of capitalism, he argues that the movement raises the political problem of the possibility for infinite particularisms ungrounded in a universal, and concludes that class politics must be strengthened for the movement to be successful. However, an alternative view has asserted the environmental justice movement's permanence: "For the environmental justice movement the theme of solidarity, although not present in all contaminated communities, implies a nationwide movement 'community' transcending racial, geographic, and economic barriers and resting on the claim that no community's solution should become another community's problem" (Capek 1993: 8).



This vision grounds “militant local particularisms” into a possible universal “permanence,” giving rise to the possibility of a politics transcending a Not-In-My-Backyard (NIMBY) attitude to arrive at a politics of Not-In-Anyone’s-Backyard (NIABY). This new politics represents a combination of the ideology drawn from civil rights, the emergence of a redefinition of the environment as a place to live, work, and play, and a critique of capitalism.

The Movement’s Challenges to Planning

Despite Harvey’s critique of the environmental justice movement, he views the movement as “an intense politics of place” (1996: 371). This new politics of place establishes a context that enables people of color to form an identity politics rooted in place but with space for coalition politics to form. Grace Lee Boggs, a scholar and environmental justice activist in Detroit, argues that the movement’s focus on place provides the cohesion necessary to cross disparate identities and perspectives:


Place-based civic activism...has important advantages over the activism based on racial and gender identity that in the last few decades has consumed the energies of most progressives... Thus they have tended to isolate rather than to unite different constituencies. On the other hand, place-based civic activism provides opportunities to struggle around race, gender, and class issues inside struggles around place. (Boggs 2000: 1)

By refocusing environmental justice on the political framework from which it originally emerged, this new politics of place raises key challenges for plan-

ning and policymaking. First, the environmental justice movement has heightened awareness of issues of race and class in public participation and policymaking. The Executive Order, for example, mandates federal government agencies to include the public in their development of programs and plans through public participation and outreach. The environmental justice movement has asserted new definitions of the environment and in doing so has also shifted power relations within the landscape of environmental policymaking.

Second, the environmental justice movement suggests that traditional conceptions of the environment ignore key aspects of daily life in communities. If the full integration of such a principle challenges planners to critically examine how public participation involves low-income communities of color, it also forces planning to substantively consider how issues of hazardous waste, occupational health, public safety, and natural resource preservation and conservation are linked to housing, transportation and jobs. Redefining the environment as the place where “we live, work, and play” challenges the traditional understanding of the environment as the place for the conservation of natural resources and challenges planners to integrate environmental planning with employment, public health, job security and safety, shelter, economic development and gender relations.

Finally, the environmental justice movement reveals the limits of the authority of environmental planning institutions to order, regulate, distribute, and manage polluting industries and uses. The



movement's Principles of Environmental Justice assert that issues of equity and justice should be at the core of environmental planning. While the concepts of equity and justice require further definition, environmental justice activism raises the potential for translating these concepts into new planning approaches. Social impact analysis might, for example, be integrated with traditional environmental impact reports. Similarly, risk assessments for the environmental cleanup of military facilities and brownfield sites might be based not only on scientific analysis but also on the perceived sense of safety and security of nearby residents. Planners might refer not only to the Executive Order on environmental justice but also to principles of environmental justice for guidance on addressing issues in low-income communities of color.

Conclusion

As a movement, environmental justice has challenged policy at the local, state and federal levels. The inclusion of environmental justice concepts in planning has begun to assert race, class and gender as core aspects of planning analysis and practice. An increased focus on land, political struggle, equitable distribution of public resources and equitable standards of protection has influenced how participation is conducted and analysis of impact performed. Yet if environmental justice is to build a sustained movement based on the principles of environmental justice, there is much more to be done.

Ongoing environmental justice activism suggests potential for advances in environmental planning

and policymaking. The legacy of the movement today has resulted in institutional reforms and suggested alternative conceptions of the environment. The growth and strength of the movement, however, will depend on its ability to continue to target the structural relationships that undergird policymaking. The movement must include planners and policymakers working in alliance with environmental justice leaders and activists. Hamilton (1993: 75) provides a useful framework that challenges not only environmental justice activists but planners and policymakers as well:

Individuals and societies can no longer stand apart from nature and other people. Overcoming the divisions within society and between society and the natural world must be the goal of the environmental justice movement. Only this struggle against alienation's perversion of humanistic and ecological values can bring us closer to an alternative way of life predicated on a healthy, just, and sustainable relationship to the natural world and each other. This must be our ultimate task.

Endnotes

¹I use the term "communities of color" to refer to communities where the majority of residents are non-white. For the purposes of this paper, and unless otherwise noted, Native American peoples are included in this definition.

²Members of the coalition included the Natural Resources Defense Council, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Legal Defense and Education Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Legal Aid Society of Alameda County.

³The “Big 10” national environmental organizations consisted of: National Wildlife Federation, Izaak Walton League, National Audubon Society, Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Defense Fund, Environmental Policy Center, Friends of the Earth, and National Parks and Conservation Association.

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