# The Origins and Future of the Environmental Justice Movement: A Conversation With Laura Pulido

**Kathleen Lee and Renia Ehrenfeucht**

We invited Associate Professor Laura Pulido from the Department of Geography and the Program in American Studies and Ethnicity, University of Southern California, to talk to us about environmental justice. Professor Pulido's publications on environmental justice include ***Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest*** (University of Arizona Press 1996) and "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California" ***(Annals of the Association of American Geographers***, March 2000).

**Lee**: Why did you get interested in the environmental justice movement?

**Pulido**: I grew up here in Southern California and I was always interested in questions about the environment since I was a kid. Questions like why doesn't it snow here? Or why isn't there a forest here? So, I always had an interest in environmental issues. In the second and third grade, I remember becoming conscious about racial inequality, poverty and injustice. I had no idea how to put these two things together. I went to California State Fresno for my undergraduate degree, and I studied geography because of my interest in environmental issues. When I started my Master's degree, there was no language to talk about environmental justice. We used to call it "minorities in the environment." There was no idea of environmental justice or environmental racism. It was very interesting that, just when I finished my Master's thesis in 1987 and came to UCLA, that was just when stuff was beginning to hit the ground. I think the United Church of Christ study came out in 1988. And, Bullard was starting to talk about environmental justice and environment racism. That provided a framework for the type of work I was already doing.

**Lee**: You have made important contributions to the literature on environmental justice. How did you develop the concept of environmental justice for your work?

**Pulido**: I don't think a lot about environmental justice. I have two concepts that have have guided my work. First of all, questions about social movements... How do people organize, how do they coalesce, and how do they come together to fight various forms of injustices? What I looked at mostly are environmental issues that affect low income and marginalized communities. Environmental justice wasn't a key thing. It was mo-

bilization. How do people fight the powers that be? How do they try to create a revolution or change the larger social formation? The other question always has been about the relationship between race and class. In order to understand how racial inequalities operate in all kinds of arenas, including environmental quality, class differences and class exploitation. In particular, I was interested in how these are expressed in the landscape, and how those two dynamics, race and class, intersect. This has been my big passion, more important to me than environmental justice.

**Lee**: What are the problems with the environmental justice concept?

**Pulido**: First of all, it is an incredibly broad term. When I first began doing this kind of work, environmental justice was about non-white people and poor people organizing around environmental issues. From there, tensions have developed within the movement. Some people would take environmental justice and say, "No, it is just about people of color organizing against environmental racism." In order to make the race and class link, other people would say, "No, it also includes poor white people." Lately, some people are saying, "No, it is also about justice for the fish, justice for the trees." They are really pushing [the term] out and expanding it in another way. On one hand, I am in favor of rights for the fish and trees, but how is that different from the original environmental movement? I think the environmental justice movement started with something really different in terms of interjecting the question of social justice into environmental issues. I still think that. And, I am comfortable talking about it that way. I can talk about the work of the environmental justice movement, but I have enormous difficulty talking about it as a concept.

**Ehrenfeucht**: Do issues like parks, safety, and street design fall under definitions of environmental justice?

**Pulido**: That can definitely be part of environmental justice, but it depends on who is doing it and for what purposes. If it is something from a marginalized community itself, then it has to be respected. If they want to call it environmental justice, then call it environmental justice. I think that's great. This disparity in green spaces and neighborhood resources is just another form of inequality. It is important, however, for another reason too. I think it has been unfortunate that so much of the attention has focused on negative environmental problems. There has been the need to do that, but there is also the question about how to create a more positive environment. And, that gets left out.

**Lee**: Who are the major players in the environmental justice movement?

**Pulido**: There are lots of different players, including community organizations, policy-makers, academics and even corporate wanna-be types. Within the movement itself today, I see lots of different lines and splits. One of the most important is around social status or class lines. That works in a couple of ways. First of all, it works in terms of membership–who qualifies to be a member? This is a very tricky question. Clearly you have those groups representing a classic type of environmental justice movement:

working class, brown/black, female, inner city. They are the "authentic" members, so to speak. And, then you have this whole stratum of professionals, people working in the EPA, and the City of Los Angeles, academics, consultants. They are really feeding off of grassroots mobilization.

There is another group who I see as much more allied with the state, for example the EPA. From my point of view, the EPA has approached environmental justice from "how to contain this" and "we have to address these gross kinds of injustices, but we don't want to rock the boat." There are groups of people who ally with the state and corporations.

And, it has become an opportunity particularly for professional people of color to get access to places. I don't begrudge them. I could be in that category myself if I wanted to. But then again, it is very important that we become really conscious of the class politics. What are we about and what kind of politics are we promoting if these are the kinds of activities that we are involved in?

**Ehrenfeucht**: How do corporations fit into the environmental movement?

**Pulido**: Sometimes corporations in fact can do things to benefit people, but there is usually a larger context for why they do what they do. They can be part of a movement because a movement is people and organizations coming together to shift the distribution of power, resources and thinking around a given set of issues. Corporations can be part of that. But, in the movement, you get splits because people say, "No, I don't want to ally myself with a corporation because I am suspicious of anything they do." Another bunch of people say, "But look, they are helping this community, putting their best foot forward, they are changing things, we have to work with them, and we have to live with them." So, we see these splits and different tendencies developing, which all can be contained in one movement. It is misleading to think of movements as consolidated and hegemonic kinds of entities. They are not. They are always tremendously fractured with all kinds of contradictions.

**Lee**: The traditional environmental movement has been criticized by some people for promoting the "not in my back yard" idea. Is NIMBYism an issue in the environmental justice movement?

**Pulido**: I don't see any community that is NIMBY-like within the environmental justice movement. This is because that is not the way people are cultured into the movement. They are taught something else. They are taught it is not ok in anybody's backyard. So, you don't have that problem of people saying: "I just don't want it near me and you can just put it over there." There is much stronger level of solidarity. What you do see though is that people can be really reactionary in other issues. There are struggles within these environmental justice movements around all kinds of political struggles: around worker issues, gender issues, homophobia and immigration. I know a lot of the talking heads for the environmental justice movement who do a very good job of trying to frame issues in a progressive way, hoping that groups in fact would see this and buy into this. A lot of them do. I don't mean to say

that in a cynical way. There is a genuine kind of learning process.

**Lee**: How does the environmental justice movement contribute to democracy?

**Pulido**: Not as much as we might like it to, but it definitely does. We can see it in couple of ways. First of all, when people find out what polluters are allowed to do, they are really outraged. It brings a whole new level of awareness in terms of the power of the state. Second of all, there has clearly been a set of demands to impact the production process. Why are polluters doing this? We have to go back and see what they are making, how are they making it and how can they can do it differently. I think this is one of the weakest links. Often, people in the environmental justice movement don't have the background or the skills and understanding of the manufacturing process, of political economy, to understand the complexities about why in fact we have these ecological chains of environmental destruction that we have. But, they are clearly making demands for democratizing production. We can see the trickle-down effects of the environmental justice movement in terms of political participation and empowerment. It is phenomenal. You know what this movement has created when you look at people who never adventured beyond the home in a public capacity, and then, they are transformed into political activists. So, they in turn go on to create other organizations to address other issues. So, I think it had–I hate to use the term–a capacity-building effect on grassroots communities.

**Lee**: Is environmental justice a coalition building strategy or is it a rethinking the environment itself?

**Pulido**: Absolutely both. It is very much a self-conscious challenge to conventional notions of the environment. People organize around everyday spaces and places in their lives. It is also very self-consciously political about building a network and building a movement. The groups within the environmental justice movement see themselves as the inheritors of the civil rights movement, as people who are bringing together in an effective way a much broader base of people. It is also interjecting a firm kind of class analysis into the political arena. This goes back to the question you asked earlier about parks and the built environment. If your criterion for membership is being involved in an environmental justice issue, the broader you define it the better, in terms of getting people to be part of your network.

**Lee**: Does this broader and more diverse membership fragment and cause conflicts within the movement?

**Pulido**: It does happen, but not the way you would think. The bottom line is, are you a community of color? Are you a working class community? Is this a predominately female type organization? Your class position becomes important and what we have seen is that it doesn't matter so much if you are fighting for a park or fighting against pesticides. It is your political position within a larger social formation which becomes so important in influencing your political line and where you are going to go. So far, it has worked in bringing together a large group of

people. Again, there are differences and tensions, but there is really a high level of consolidation.

**Lee**: How do communities actually mobilize around an issue and what political leverage do they use to get something changed?

**Pulido**: It will start one or two ways. Either someone will notice what is going on or somebody on the outside will go around the community and say, "Look at what is being planned for your community." And, the people in the community will say, "We need to find out what's happening." People don't start out cynical or with the attitude of "Let's get the polluter." They find out what's going on first.

Then there would be a meeting between the powers that be and the community. At that point, people might realize that they are going to get the short end of the stick. Mobilization takes off in a whole different direction once they realize this. They might call another organization that has been through a similar issue. Or someone would hook them up with one of the networks. Other organizations might come and tell them here is what you have to do. They would help them through the whole political mobilization process.

**Lee**: What about environmental issues at the transnational scale? Who are the main players?

**Pulido**: I don't know enough about it, but I know that the environmental movement has been very active on transnational issues. Because of where I live and what I study, I see in the case of the US-Mexican border most clearly where there has been a real sense of solidarity between environmental justice groups. This is one of the most exciting aspects of the environmental justice movement today. It is more difficult to do outreach to the Philippines, other parts of Asia, Africa and deeper Latin America, but people have done that and will continue to make the effort.

**Ehrenfeucht**: What are you doing now?

**Pulido**: I've made a conscious decision to not work on environmental justice issues. For one, within the academic and professional circles, I was becoming a poster child. "People of color care about the environment." I didn't feel comfortable to be seen that way. Also, I could not have the kinds of conversations that I wanted to because I was too focused on environmental issues. My real passions are questions around social movements and political activism and questions about race and class. How do those forces work to oppress people? How do people organize in terms of those forces to build a better tomorrow? Several years ago, I began a comparative history project in which I compare Black, Chicano and Asian-American Leftists in Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1970s. The history of the Left of color is an unknown history. For about ten years, I have been a volunteer at the Labor Community Strategy Center. I knew that there were other histories and I knew some of the founding members and their involvement in revolutionary struggles such as CASA and the August 9th Movement. So, I was curious about this. And, five years ago, there was a big labor struggle at USC. In getting to know the union people, I could discern that there was a stratum of

people that had different histories. I had an idea about how groups are racialized, or differentially racialized, mainly around distinct forms of politics. So, I am looking at the racial order of that time in Southern California, different positions groups had, and how that contributed to the radical politics that they developed. I was definitely informed by the work I was doing on environmental justice. I learned a tremendous amount by studying the environmental groups over time and furthering my analysis about how race and class work in political activism and movement building.

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