Race, Waste, and Class: New Perspectives on Environmental Justice

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Many of our readers may already be familiar with evidence suggesting that residents of poor communities and in communities of color in the United States bear a "disproportionate" burden of toxic contamination, both through the generation and release of hazardous chemicals in their neighborhoods, and via the location of waste management facilities. This is an outcome that the landmark 1987 United Church of Christ (UCC) report on toxic waste and race claimed was not the result of mere coincidence (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987). Indeed, empirical evidence of disproportionate economic impact from environmental mismanagement, as well as through the regulatory response to air pollution, was already considered a decade earlier by geographers and economists, albeit without the suggestion of discriminatory intent (e.g., Berry, et. al., 1977; and Harrison, 1975).

In this special issue, our contributors consider both the evidence supporting the conclusion that race is the central determining factor with toxic exposure and, of greater consequence, they explore the political implications of such for community organizing and empowerment. Addressing the former agenda, a recent report by the U.S. Government Accounting Office examines the racial composition and income level of people living near municipal solid waste landfills and reviews research on the demographics of hazardous waste facility location. It concludes that people of color and low-income people are not over represented at nonhazardous municipal landfills and, furthermore, that ten major studies on hazardous waste facility location, including the UCC report, collectively yield an inconclusive range of results depending upon the type

1990; and Gerrard, 1994, p. 90). The most recent major commercial hazardous waste management sitings were a landfill in Adams County, Colorado, and an incinerator at East Liverpool, Ohio, both with majority Caucasian populations, while three of the largest hazardous waste landfills, containing over forty percent of the total national permitted commercial capacity, remain in just two African American communities (Emelle, Alabama and Alsen, Louisiana), and one Hispanic community (Kettleman City, California) (See United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Jutice, 1987).

Our authors, however, are not bogged down with inconclusive demographic evidence, nor by the trendy debates spawned, such as whether class or race is a better predictor of hazardous waste facility siting; which came first, the facility or the impacted population; and whether disproportionate siting, when it does occur, results from true racism or mere market efficiency (c.f., Anderton, et. al, 1994; Been, 1994; Bullard, 1994; Hamilton, 1995; Mohai and Bryant, 1992; and Zimmerman, 1993). With ethnic and class

Dr. Goldman clearly positions the environmental justice movement as arising out of the anti-racist struggles of the Civil Rights Era, with many participants drawing inspiration and employing tactics from the earlier efforts. In this view, the environmental component commenced with the 1982 Warren County protest over the siting of a landfill for PCB-contaminated soils in a predominantly African-American section of North Carolina. Here over 500 were arrested for civil disobedien

reasonable to lay the burden for social challenge against the forces of capitalist production at the feet of materially disadvantaged communities. If the negative externalities of industrial production are now to be more equitably distributed, we might instead find protest arising in wealthier communities so targeted. Indeed, the modern environmental movement, at least in its regulatory mode, can be traced to a middle-class awakening that the pollutants of industrial production were no longer limited to already-blighted, working- class, inner-city neighborhoods--a realization arising from the publication of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (1962) documenting the ubiquitous spread of pesticides throughout everybody's food chain. As anticipated from the basic contradiction for capitalism between the social nature of production and its private appropriation, solutions will be offered--such as the sanctity of residence space or "nature" as a refuge from the forces of production--that can only be temporary given necessary requirements for economic expansion. As such, revolutionary consciousness may arise among those very classes that materially benefit from the existing social structure of production, however long, drawn-out, and painful in the interim this awakening may be (Heiman, 1988).

Professor Lake notes that we will not have eliminated environmental inequity, let alone the process generating it, if well-intending regulatory agencies just succeed in moving the waste around. As he demonstrates though several case studies involving waste management proposals for impoverished communities, procedural equity must encompass a process of community empowerment leading (m)6 Tw 19.gJs9(ene basic)]TJ0.001 Tc 0 Tw -1.c

victories across South Carolina with labor, housing, and environmental battles. As they suggest, CAFE's success in no small measure lies with the ability to provide a larger social structure for local struggles, a structure that directly questions both the power and the ideology of ruling political and economic elites so long dominant in the state.

The fact that CAFE is worker-based is not surprising, given the legacy of racial segregation with residence in the South, and the generally higher levels of integration in the workplace. Much of the environmental movement has been residence-based, with activists mobilized by perceived threats to their place of residence or, if you will, their space for consumption and reproduction. CAFE, on the other hand, provides a model where social and ethnic barriers, long the bane of community organizing, can be overcome through reference to the workplace experience, even as the agenda reaches to such consumption issues as housing access and, in the case before us, recreational opportunities. The Highlander Center based in New Market, Tennessee, Los Angeles' Labor/Community Strategy Center, New York State's Labor & Environment Network, and the Southern Appalachian Labor School in West Virginia, provide other well-known models for worker-centered, multi-issue, and socially balanced organizing in racially segregated regions.

As with Ben Goldman, Gardner and Greer take aim at the conservative right-wing agenda currently sweeping the nation. While the ideology spawned tends to further environmental discrimination, with its support for a devolution of regulatory power to the states, deemphasis on affirmative action, and support for private property rights (or at least those of production interests), we must remember that capital interests are not unified in their support for this political agenda. Indeed, large-scale capital interests active across many states and regions have al

active against the proposed siting of a solid waste incinerator successfully managed to broaden the agenda to consider local economic and social development (see also Blumberg and Gottlieb, 1989). This broadening is common with "garbage wars," for the struggle against landfills and incinerators leads many to consider labor-intensive

oppressed people residing and working among the toxic contamination of industrial society. If we settle for liberal procedural and distributional equity, relying upon negotiation, mitigation, and fair-share allocation to address some sort of "disproportional" impact, we merely perpetuate the current production system that by its very structure is discriminatory and non- sustainable.

The road ahead will not be easy with the globalization of capital hindering solidarity and union formation, and a new conservative political climate giving corporate polluters the upper hand. Many of the national umbrella coalitions serving the grassroots groups are also downsizing for lack of funds (e.g., the Jobs and Environment Campaign, CCHW, and Greenpeace). Nevertheless the inherent contradiction for capitalism, one demanding structural change, will not go away. Ever more poor and working-class people are waking up to the realization that the current production process no longer serves their needs. In this climate there is no substitute for basic organizing as the best way to challenge corporate hegemony. The authors in this special issue provide abundant evidence for the wisdom of the alternative path.

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