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The Environmental Justice Movement in the United States

“The Environmental Justice Movement in the U.S.: Sticking with grassroots diversity, or giving in to expansion, homogenization, and the system?”

“People don’t get all the connections. They say the environment is over here, the civil rights group is over there, the women’s group is over there, and the other groups are here. Actually all of them are one group, and the issues we fight become null and void if we have no clean water to drink, no clean air to breathe and nothing to eat.”

- C. Tucker, as cited in Pezzullo and Sandler 2007

Introduction

The Environmental Justice Movement in the U.S. is a relatively new social movement, with its roots in the Civil Rights and various social justice struggles of the 1950’s and 60’s. Continuing in the tradition of these struggles, the Environmental Justice Movement began as somewhat radical, localized grassroots campaigns fighting the unequal distribution of environmental hazards in low-income, working-class, African American and Latino communities (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998). As this paper will show, the Environmental Justice Movement has retained much of its original diversity and grassroots organizational structure; however, formalizing their organizations and making ties with the mostly white elites of the sociopoliticoeconomic system which created and continues to perpetuate the environmental inequalities the movement is fighting against threatens to undermine the Environmental Justice Movement’s effectiveness and original goals as a modern American social movement.

What is the Environmental Justice Movement?

Although there are conflicting views, even within the Environmental Justice Movement itself, regarding who exactly should be involved in and leading the movement, how it should be organized, and what some of its more peripheral and/or general goals should be (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998), there is a relatively strong consensus as to what “environmental justice” is, and how the movement has generally, at least up to the present time, fought for it. In its most basic conceptual frame, environmental justice is (or would be, if it existed) the equal distribution of the negative environmental consequences (hazards) which result from 1) human existence generally, but 2) from the capitalist need for growth, expansion, and profit more specifically, (e.g., toxic waste dumps, refuse incinerators, landfills, pollutions of all kinds, etc.) over all socioeconomic, race, class, and ethnic strata, communities and neighborhoods in society (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998).

As it stands in the U.S. today, however, environmental justice for the most part does not exist; in fact, environmental *in*justice actually abounds. That is, there is an *unequal* distribution of these hazardous environmental consequences of production and consumption, with the overwhelming majority of them being placed in low-income, African American, and/or Latino neighborhoods throughout the U.S. (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998). Some examples: three-quarters of the nation’s hazardous waste landfills are sited in poor (mainly African American and Latino) communities; three out of five African Americans and Latinos nationwide live in communities that have illegal or abandoned toxic dumps; communities with one hazardous waste facility have twice the percentage of people of color as those with none, while the percentage of people of color triples in communities with two or more waste sites (Faber 1998:6); 60 percent of African American and Latino communities and over 50 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders and Native Americans live in areas with one or more

uncontrolled toxic waste sites, and 40 percent of the nation's toxic landfill capacity is concentrated in three communities: Emelle, Alabama (78.9 percent African American population), Scotlandville, Louisiana (93 percent African American), and Kettleman City, California (78.4 percent Latino) (Di Chiro 1998:109). Additionally, toxic waste sites are likely to be cleaned 12 to 42 percent later in communities of color compared to white communities, and penalties for violations of hazardous waste laws in "colored" communities average only one-sixth (\$55,318) what they do in predominantly white communities (\$335,566) (Faber 1998:6).

These exemplify environmental injustice, and they are only the relatively "easily" observed and documented *toxic waste site* statistics! There are myriads of other negative environmental effects which go "unaccounted" for simply because direct cause and effect linkages (between environmental hazards and the negative environmental/health effects which they cause) are hard to definitively prove (Di Chiro 1998). In general, however, the EPA has found that 57 percent of all whites nationwide live in areas with poor air quality, compared to 80 percent of all Latinos (Faber 1998:5). And in Los Angeles, 71 percent of the city's African Americans and 50 percent of the Latinos live in what are categorized as the "most polluted areas," compared to only 34 percent of whites (Faber 1998:5). Basically, examples of environmental injustice in the U.S. just go on and on, but they represent the simple, undeniable fact that negative environmental consequences of the capitalist system are overwhelmingly disproportionately placed in low-income, African American and/or Latino communities throughout the U.S., resulting in much higher rates of harmful health effects and qualities of life in the populations in which these sites are placed (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998).

The Environmental Justice Movement, then, is a somewhat loosely organized social movement against these human-produced and human-perpetuated inequalities. The following section will delve deeper into more specifically who and what the Environmental Justice Movement is, and how it has developed over time.

The Environmental Justice Movement: History and Initial Development

There are two landmark events which are seen as crucial to the development of the Environmental Justice Movement, which sprung up in the late 1970's and early 1980's (Bryant and Hockman 2005; Di Chiro 1998). The first event took place in the township of Love Canal in upstate New York during the late 1970's, where the mostly working-class community residents joined together and fought a successful battle against a large chemical company, Hooker Chemical, forcing it to be accountable for its role in contaminating their local environment with hazardous wastes (Di Chiro 1998:108). This episode is seen as the beginning of the "antitoxics" movement in the U.S., and it was the first highly publicized message to potential polluters that low-income communities would no longer passively accept the brunt of companies' negative environmental impacts on their neighborhoods (Di Chiro 1998:108).

These early antitoxics groups, which eventually evolved into the Environmental Justice Movement, began as very localized, individual cases of communities standing up to proposed plans for environmental hazards to be placed in *their* neighborhoods specifically (Di Chiro 1998). Also called NIMBY's (Not In My Backyards), these groups are usually characterized as taking on a single issue and engaging in specific actions with specific tactics that are meant to begin and end with their immediate, local crisis (Di Chiro 1998). They do not view themselves as a "class" of oppressed people, and they tend not to have an overall "question authority" outlook (Di Chiro 1998); in other words, their grievances are local, they have one goal, and if

that goal is accomplished and *their* community is better off from the result, they're happy. They generally do not aspire to grander schemes of what would sociologically be termed "social movements."

The development of the Environmental Justice Movement, however, seems to somewhat follow Sidney Tarrow's (1998) chronology of the development of the modern social movement in general, in which he claims that early movements' "repertoires of contention" moved from very parochial (local) to more cosmopolitan (broad) protests, as well as from particular (local/direct action) to more autonomous grievances (protesting a more general "authority") over time.

The second major event in the Environmental Justice Movement's history, then, marks this transition to a more *organized* struggle against more *generally* racist practices in hazardous waste management in the U.S. (Di Chiro 1998:109). The mainly African-American, working-class, rural communities of Warren County, North Carolina had been targeted as the dumping site for a toxic waste landfill in 1982, so hundreds of predominantly African American women and children took part in a large-scale demonstration of civil disobedience by using their bodies to prevent trucks loaded with the poisonous PCB-laced dirt from dumping it in their communities at the proposed site (Di Chiro 1998:109). Unlike the earlier isolated antitoxics movements like the one at Love Canal, however, "...this action began to forge the connections between race, poverty, and the environmental consequences of capitalism's industrial waste problems" (Di Chiro 1998:109). In other words, the Environmental Justice Movement as we know it today, with broader, autonomous grievances against an inherently unequal socioeconomic/political "system," was beginning to emerge in the early 1980's.

It wasn't until 1987, however, that an awareness of the widespread existence of "environmental racism" entered the mainstream, with the publication of a report sponsored by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice (UCC-CRJ), which was presented to the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. (Di Chiro 1998:109). The report compiled the results of a national study and concluded that race was the leading factor in the location of commercial hazardous waste facilities in the U.S., providing many of the statistics on environmental injustice given above. Thus, in the mid- to late 1980's, "...this process of naming and researching the material realities of environmental racism made possible a significant transformation in what would count as properly 'environmental' concerns," as well as providing "...an organizing tool that could function to galvanize into action the diverse communities and constituencies for whom 'environmental racism' was a painful reality" (Di Chiro 1998:110). And, in the spirit of Tarrow's (1998) cosmopolitan, modular, and autonomous "repertoires," "The movement grew in the 1980s as particular struggles built on lessons learned from previous conflicts and as activists convened regional and national gatherings to exchange ideas, tactics, and strategies" (Pellow and Brulle 2005).

By 1990, then, a variety of coalitions of people of color environmental justice organizations had emerged, all with their locally-specific goals and interests, but all establishing the importance of race and class in organizing for truly effective environmental change, as well as sharing common grievances and goals against a common "oppressor" (Di Chiro 1998:109-110). Using Tarrow's (1998) definition of a social movement, then, namely that they are collective challenges based on common purposes and social solidarities in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities (Class notes), the Environmental Justice Movement seems to qualify as a legitimate social movement, especially when viewed in the context of their self-

proclaimed “important networks beyond the local movements themselves” (Brulle and Essoka 2005:210).

The next section, however, will look at Environmental Justice organizations more specifically, their grievances with mainstream environmentalism, and the diversity within the Environmental Justice Movement as a whole and how that has affected its development.

The “Modern” Environmental Justice Movement: A Symbol of Diversity?

Contrary to popular belief, the Environmental Justice Movement is not simply a new strand of environmentalism (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Di Chiro 1998). Coming predominantly out of low-income, working-class communities of color, the Environmental Justice movement’s roots actually lie more with civil rights and various other social movements of the 1950’s and 60’s (labor/worker’s movements, women’s movements, welfare movements, etc.) which the people of these communities were already fighting for and/or struggling with (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007). As Pellow and Brulle (2005) state, “...a significant component of this movement involved the reformulation of the goals of existing civil rights and community organizations to include environmental concerns” (8). The Environmental Justice Movement, then, is less the old mainstream environmental movement simply with a new social justice spin (as many assume that it is) than it is a social justice movement where the inequality happens to present itself through “environmental” means (i.e., the distribution of environmental hazards) (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Bryant and Hockman 2005; Di Chiro 1998; Faber 1998). More so, especially since at least the early 1990’s, environmental justice activists and scholars have consistently criticized what they consider to be the mainstream environmental movement’s “racism, classism, and limited activist agenda” (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007:2), and have focused much of their attention on distinguishing themselves from what they see as the

strictly white, inherently paternalistic, hierarchal, top-down, and thus unequal mainstream environmental movement (Bryant and Hockman 2005).

As was stated above, the Environmental Justice Movement was born out of low-income, working-class communities of color and their previous civil rights and social justice struggles (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007), and without a doubt it is at this level of local community struggles that the movement has had its clearest victories (Pellow and Brulle 2005). These local movements, however, were led by local people (mostly women of color) with local ties to and interests in their own races, classes, and communities (Di Chiro 1998). Thus, at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 (the first national gathering of Environmental Justice activists and scholars), those present distinguished themselves from the mainstream environmental movement by "...commit[ing] themselves to the social construction of diverse, egalitarian, and nonhierarchical leadership and to decentralized structures that were democratic and locally and regionally based" (Bryant and Hockman 2005:27). Again, in direct contrast to the mainstream environmental movement, "Summit activists rejected not only any top-down approach, but even the formation of a national organization or national leadership, because they felt such an approach was disempowering, paternalistic, and exclusive" (Bryant and Hockman 2005:26).

Thus, in accordance with earlier Environmental Justice organizations' (the Gulf Coast Tenant Leadership Development Project, and the Southwest Organizing Project) letters to the "Group of Ten" mainstream environmental organizations, which overtly accused the Group of Ten of "...ignorance, ambivalence, and complicity with the environmental exploitation of communities of color within the United States and abroad," Environmental Justice Movement "leaders" at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit dedicated

themselves to "...a movement for justice for 'all peoples,'" stating that, "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," and that, "...our communities and our people are endangered species, too" (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007:2-7).

In other words, the early Environmental Justice Movement was engaged in serious issues of framing. They in no way wanted to be associated with what they viewed as the unequal, patriarchal, lily white mainstream environmental movement, and so they did everything in their power to make sure that *their* movement would not turn out to be, or be perceived to be, anything like it (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007). Some even went as far as to say that environmentalism actually promotes injustice for the poor, but as Environmental Justice scholar Peter Wenz (2007) points out, "...genuine conflict between environmentalism and the welfare of poor people are rare," and, "...achieving environmental goals generally helps poor people most" (64).

Nevertheless, the Environmental Justice Movement was at least ideally based on strictly egalitarian, democratic principles, with a large emphasis on local autonomy and continued local (i.e., indigenous, or, "colored") control of local organizations (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007; Di Chiro 1998). As was stated earlier, they actively opposed figurehead leaders, a national organization, and ties with elites (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007; Di Chiro 1998), which left the doors open to any number of diverse, local community organizations contributing to the overall goals of the movement. Environmental Justice Movement "leaders," then, adhered to Piven and Cloward's (1978) conclusion that once especially poor people's movements are formally organized into legitimate institutions, the movement loses its radical, disruptive power because they then have to go through more "legitimate," bureaucratic means of protest *within* the very system that they are trying to change/fight against. Also, as McAdam (1982) points out, social

movement organizations that were successful in the Civil Rights Movement, such as the NAACP and Black churches, were indigenously led and stayed separated from white control. The Environmental Justice Movement, then, being a poor people's movement and an evolution of the Civil Rights Movement itself, at least attempted to adhere to both McAdam's (1982) and Piven and Cloward's (1978) social movement research conclusions by staying indigenously led and not having hierarchal organizations with ties to especially white elites. Brulle and Essoka (2005), for example, state that, "To date, most scholars of environmental justice and social movements have summarily labeled EJ as a grassroots phenomenon, citing among other things its lack of a nationally recognizable structure and its reliance on local groups" (206). Thus, at least ideally, the Environmental Justice Movement should be as diverse as the many differing communities, and thus essentially community organizations, which make it up.

The "Real" Diversity of the Environmental Justice Movement

The reality of the Environmental Justice Movement situation, however, may be slightly different than some of the bold, egalitarian/democratic/indigenous-leadership/free-of-ties-to-white-elites-and-"the-system" claims that were made at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. For example, Brulle and Essoka (2005) go on to point out that actually, in their study of 49 Environmental Justice organizations (the largest sample undertaken of the movement), just over 61% of them had an "oligarchic" form of government, while only 14% had truly "democratic" governance, with the other 25% somewhere in between. These are not great percentages for a movement which proposed egalitarian, nonhierarchical governance structures. Brulle and Essoka (2005) do go on to point out, however, that their sample was only taken from "...formally structured environmental justice organizations that actually have written bylaws" (214), which brings up Piven and Cloward's

(1978) conclusion that once formally organized, poor people's movements lose their radical power, and thus possibly their whole initial underpinnings as a movement. Also, Brulle and Essoka (2005) point out that in comparison with all nonprofit organizations at the national level (of which 81% have an oligarchic governance structure), the Environmental Justice Movement is still more "democratically" governed than they are. Simply the mere fact that there are Environmental Justice organizations that are formally structured and have written bylaws, however, seems to undermine the initial goals of the movement.

Nevertheless, in terms of racial diversity, the Environmental Justice Movement is still as diverse as the communities which make up the organizations which comprise the movement itself. Although inherently a working class, "people of color" movement, that category of people is ever-expanding and evolving, especially with the enhanced rapidity of the process of globalization (Di Chiro 1998). Thus, although the category of oppressed people fighting for environmental justice in the U.S. may have started out as simply African American and/or Latino, new "races" and ethnicities (also "of color") are constantly moving and/or being forced into neighborhoods where environmental injustice abounds, and thus more multiracial Environmental Justice coalitions have been forming (Di Chiro 1998). For example, in Los Angeles, a multiracial coalition of women community activists and scholars has recently organized the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, whose mission is to aid in the creation of partnerships between diverse communities by working with local women's health groups, the Phillipine Action Group for the Environment, and various Third World struggles against the international hazardous waste trade in Asia and the Pacific Islands (Di Chiro 1998). Also, the Highlander Center in Newmarket, Tennessee has instituted Stop the Pollution Schools, which bring together grassroots activists from poor and racially diverse

communities to share resources and strategies (Di Chiro 1998). And in San Francisco, the Alliance of Ethnic and Environmental Organizations provides a forum for multiracial dialogue and recently convened such groups as the Japanese American Citizens League, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Latino Issues Forum, and Citizens for a Better Environment to discuss environmental justice issues (Di Chiro 1998).

Even with ever-greater racial diversity, however, from the beginning and still to this day the Environmental Justice Movement has been predominantly an “unmarked women’s movement” (Di Chiro 1998:117). There are many theories as to why specifically women would organize *as women* in their struggles for socioenvironmental change, but many ecofeminist writings construct theories suggesting that, “...women possess unique knowledge about the connections between human health and survival, the environment, and their ever-increasing destruction by the ‘capitalist-militarist-patriarchal’ complex” (Di Chiro 1998:117). Women are seen (and may see themselves) as caregivers and nurturers of children, families, and communities, which may also have something to do with their impetus to fight for environmental justice, and thus the protection of the things which they inherently are drawn to protect (Di Chiro 1998). Either way, it has been *women* of color that have been overwhelmingly more active in organizing for environmental justice, especially at the grassroots level, than men of color since the beginnings of the movement, and they continue to be the chief organizers to this day (Di Chiro 1998).

Another important aspect regarding diversity in the Environmental Justice Movement is its ties and alliances with the “white elite.” In contrast to the movement’s original goals and intentions to steer clear of the white, patriarchal leadership of this country which is at the heart of the capitalist system which they were fighting against, the Environmental Justice Movement has

made that connection, whether they like it or not, and caught the attention of high-level elected officials (Pellow and Brulle 2005). As a response to the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Conference in 1991, even, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency of the George H. W. Bush administration created the Office of Environmental Equity, which issued reports outlining the EPA's strengths and weaknesses in addressing environmental equity concerns (Bryant and Hockman 2005). Also in the early 1990's, Environmental Justice activists pushed for the EPA to create the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council and to have President Clinton sign Executive Order 12898, both of which directed federal departments to take stock of themselves and to plan and implement an environmental justice strategy (Bryant and Hockman 2005).

Although these "successes" may seem like causes for celebration, more critical Environmental Justice scholars see these "acknowledgments" of the issues by political leaders as simply facades putting out the image that they care (Pellow and Brulle 2005). When in reality, these government-issued orders and committees are still part of the neoliberal agenda of the U.S. government, focusing on benefits for and putting power back in the hands of the very capitalist market of ever-increasing production, profits, and consumption which has created many of the environmental hazards in the first place (Pellow and Brulle 2005). And as evidence, as numerous Environmental Justice scholars have pointed out, these acknowledgements of environmental justice issues by the U.S. government have little to show for themselves in terms of real progress towards becoming more environmentally just (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998). Just mere weak attempts at appeasing an otherwise radical social movement, I suppose.

Conclusion: What's next for the Environmental Justice Movement?

As this paper has shown, the Environmental Justice Movement has a relatively short history, stemming from Civil Rights and various other social justice movements of the 50's and 60's, emerging in its "purest forms" in the late 70's and early 80's, and quickly becoming more formalized in the 1990's (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998). Originally formed by and in working-class, people of color communities (mostly by the women of these communities) with local goals for environmental justice, the movement has retained much of its grassroots emphasis and general racial and gender diversity (or lack thereof) (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998).

The big question that remains in terms of the future of the Environmental Justice Movement, however, is how much of its original local, grassroots organizing structure of networks of localized struggles can be retained in the face of a system which almost demands nationalization, prominent figureheads, and working *within* the inherently paternalistic and unequal capitalist/"democratic" system for success? Environmental Justice scholars and activists alike debate how much must be "given in" to the system to produce success, and also how many movements and struggles can be incorporated under the umbrella of "Environmental Justice" and still continue to be successful (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Pellow and Brulle 2005; Faber 1998). If McAdam (1982) and Piven and Cloward (1978) are correct in their conclusions regarding social movements, however, the Environmental Justice Movement must retain as much of its indigenous leadership and original local grassroots organizational structure and as little formality and ties with elites as possible in order to retain its power as a poor people's movement and its radicalism against the system in general.

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