

Environmental Justice: A Deadly Symptom of Larger Problems A Response to the Plenary of Dr. Beverly Wright

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Abstract

Environmental justice describes the movement to challenge and avert the disproportionate burdening of pollution on people of color and poor and working class communities. Air pollution, water pollution, and waste disproportionately burden the most vulnerable and least protected communities of the nation. Race and class best predict where polluting facilities are located despite claims from business, government, political leaders that the race and class make up of communities does not affect environmental decision-making. Environmental justice concerns grow out of the longstanding fight for racial and economic justice in America. In light of the civil rights legislation and social welfare programs of the 1960s, contemporary America has little interest in claims of racial discrimination made by people of color or in the well being of the poor and needy. Although race and class identity continue to exert undue influence over everyday decision making throughout the society, most Americans are oblivious to the way race and class influence their thinking and practices. Viewing the world from an individualist perspective, America's racial majority fails to recognize how their "racially neutral" policies and practices continue to perpetuate status quo racial advantages across a broad spectrum of social institutions. Likewise, the economic and social disadvantages facing poor and working class people are exacerbated and overlooked in order to increase and maintain the advantages of the wealthy and the upper middle classes.

Keywords: Environmental justice, class, race, pollution

Introduction

Ecological and environmental discourse suffers from a major shortcoming. Mainstream environmentalists and authors fail to connect environmental and ecological problems with the racism and economic injustice that directly relates to many of the national and international environmental issues of the day. In contrast, communities of color confronting environmental issues, maintain the importance of recognizing the interrelatedness of ecological issues with other social problems and phenomenon.

African Americans specifically and people of color generally receive a disproportionate share of America's social ills: infant mortality, premature death, health ailments, poor education, unemployment, illiteracy, police brutality, incarceration, execution, and exposure to harmful pollutants. America's poor and working class also find themselves disproportionately suffering from societies adversities. The communities these groups reside in and their well-being demands specific attention to the environmental issues they face. Air pollution provides an important example of one significant environmental threat as studies indicate that asthma rates have been increasing since the 1980s and continue to increase for African Americans, Hispanics, and other marginalized groups, leading to serious illness.

Many of the most common air pollutants can cause or contribute to respiratory illnesses, including asthma, which is now the leading cause of hospital admissions for our nation's children. More than 25% of the nation's children live in areas that don't meet national air quality standards. (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 1996)

Air pollution represents a significant factor in triggering asthma attacks and causing other respiratory ailments. From 1970 to the mid-1980s America made great strides in improving air quality, primarily through legislation. However, urban sprawl and increased vehicle miles traveled have resulted in increased air quality deterioration in areas that formerly enjoyed superior air quality. Decreased air quality in America's cities means decreased air quality for many people of color, poor and lower strata urban residents, which can have deadly consequences for the young.

Air pollution has long been implicated in childhood deaths and hospitalizations, and reduced quality of life resulting from respiratory trauma and disease. A number of studies have associated childhood exposure to air pollution (ground level ozone, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide) with increases in school absences, decreased lung function, and increased incidences of bronchitis and asthma. According to the CDC, asthma is the most chronic childhood illness in the U.S., affecting some 4.8 million children below the age of 18. Between 1980 and 1993, asthma alone accounted for 3,850 deaths among people under 24 years of age. During the same period, the annual age-specific death rate from asthma increased 118%, and the hospitalization rate increased 28%. (United States Environmental Protection Agency, 1996)

As shown by the research of Robert Bullard and others, people of color are disproportionately burdened by toxic waste and other pollution (Bullard, Mohia, Saha, & Wright, 2007). While whites in the lower economic strata also bear an unfair burden of

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pollution, racial makeup is the best predictor of zip codes hosting toxic waste sites. The greater the concentration of blacks, Hispanics, and other groups the greater the likelihood that one or more toxic waste sites is present. Efforts to stop this and other disparities in pollution exposure are part of a domestic and global movement for Environmental Justice.

Advocates contend that government officials, businesses, politicians, and even environmental groups routinely neglect them in the environmental decision making process (Bullard, 2007). Across the board, representatives of these groups deny affording less protection to communities based on their race or their economic standing. They maintain, almost uniformly, that they provide equal regard for everyone irrespective of race or economics. Moreover, some scholars dispute the allegation that race bears a more significant relationship to the location of polluted and polluting facilities claiming that the income level of the residents best predicts where waste sites will be found (Bullard, Mohia, Saha, & Wright, 2007). Environmental justice detractors also contend that people of color and other residents live in close proximity to facilities by moving to the areas where waste sites exists. These scholars often seem preoccupied with showing that environmental decision-making lacks racial bias and that lower strata residents choose to live in polluted communities.

No one explanation can accurately describe the relationship between pollution and every American locale. Each community has a unique history that answers the questions these scholars address. However, America's centuries long legacy of open housing discrimination across the country certainly provides a context for considering the relationship between race, housing, and pollution. Scholarly examinations of the relationship between housing and pollution that neglect the legally required and socially dictated practice of housing segregation and the associated phenomenon of white flight from America's cities lack the social analysis necessary to understand concerns about environmental justice and their roots.

Environmental justice in America is not a new problem but the symptom of two older unresolved social problems—class and racial dominance. Although these problems clearly emerge out of well-known aspects of America's history, they function at subaltern levels influencing institutions, individuals, and groups in unrecognized ways. They masquerade as logic and rationality that seem unassailable because of the basic underlying assumptions that drive the American ethos—rendering these forces and the injustices they create invisible to many Americans.

In his seminal work *Spheres of Justice* (1983), political philosopher Michael Waltzer provides an insightful explanation of how justice is expressed across different facets of America and other societies. He refutes the claim that the greatest threat to justice is monopoly power or the concentration of a particular social good in a small number of people or organizations. Rather, he explains that the greatest threat to justice across societies historically has been dominance rather than monopoly (Waltzer, 1983). Dominance represents the ability of a particular social good or characteristic to be valued above other important criteria for measuring merit in a particular aspect of life. For example, in Western monarchies, nobility dominated opportunity throughout the society. It provided power and influence over other aspects of life outside of the political sphere such as commerce and religion. Likewise, under theocracies religion often dominates providing persons in the church or religion who have high positions unfair advantages and opportunities in other aspects of life including education and economics. Dominance is a fundamental injustice

in society because merit is not determined based on internal criteria that have meaning with in the diverse spheres or aspects of life but instead is based on some external criteria that improperly influence opportunities across the spectrum (Waltzer, 1983). Dominance is particularly threatening because it destroys the natural checks and balances that otherwise exist and provide people opportunities to achieve and excel in areas where they concentrate their time, energy, and talents. Dominance causes criteria that have nothing to do with those aspects of life to guide opportunities and decisions improperly.

Racial Dominance

Applying Waltzer's theory of dominance to race, I maintain that America's racial problems were and remain are more than the effects of individual biases in employment, housing, education, health, politics, and wealth but a system of racial dominance across almost all aspects of American society.

This pervasive system permeates our set of social expectations, beliefs, values, and rationality. The creation and use of intelligence tests to sort the population into deserving and undeserving students and employees masks mechanisms that maintain white racial dominance in law, medicine, education, business, finance, science, media, and politics through facially neutral practices and policies. Despite its prominence, white racial dominance remains largely invisible. Decisions that continue the centuries long American tradition of white superiority across the varied spheres of society continue unabated under the banner of racially neutral decision making. "Neutral criteria" for measuring intelligence, competence, and capability legitimate and justify the continued promotion and advancement of white men and to a lesser degree, women over people of color. Accordingly, racial dominance continues unacknowledged, unrecognized, and unquestioned in public discourse and especially in juridical decision-making. While merit represents the presumptive basis for accomplishment and success in America for white men, women and people of color are readily presumed as inferior until providing evidence to the contrary. Tokenism across American institutions provides the thinnest veil of legitimacy to many institutions that would otherwise like racial diversity in their professional staff. The institutions lacking diversity are nonetheless presumed fair, just, and lacking in racial bias--representing mere victims of a constant draught of qualified diverse candidates (Waltzer, 1983).

The "perpetrator perspective" provides a cogent explanation of the phenomenon. It explains discrimination as a set of individual decisions by bad individuals. This approach dominates anti-discrimination law and practice and requires proof and evidence of individual discrimination. Professor Allen David Freeman provides a cogent and persuasive explanation of this in his article *Legitimizing Racial Discrimination through Antidiscrimination Law: A Critical Review of Supreme Court Doctrine* (Freeman, 1978). In the groundbreaking work, he describes the existence of two perspectives on racial discrimination; that of the perpetrator and that of the victim and that they diverge significantly (Freeman, 1978). The "perpetrator's perspective" sees discrimination as discrete and independent events conducted by unrelated individuals against unrelated victims. This perspective views racial discrimination as historic and isolated events. America's history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation are irrelevant under this view, unless directly linked to the alleged violation. He contrasts this view with the victim's perspective. That perspective sees current social conditions in relation to historic societal discrimination.

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This perspective includes both the objective conditions of life—lack of jobs, lack of money, lack of housing—and the consciousness associated with those objective conditions—lack of choice and lack of human individuality in being forever perceived as a member of a group rather than as an individual (Freeman, p. 1052).

From the victim's perspective, contemporary acts of racial discrimination against African Americans will continue to relate to historic racial discrimination until the social inequities historic discrimination created have been eliminated. This view clearly contradicts the perpetrator's perspective that views the legal prohibitions pronounced against racial discrimination as the conclusion of racially based social inequities. Under that view, no further social response to past discrimination was required so contemporary actions of discrimination must be viewed as the discrete and unrelated actions of individuals.

Freeman (1978) explains that the twin concepts of fault and causation frame the perpetrator perspective. Antidiscrimination law uses fault to single out the bad actors traversing society's norm of racial neutrality. People who are found guilty of intentionally discriminating against blacks and others are the cause of racial discrimination today and are solely at fault for contemporary racial inequity and injustice. Except for their anomalous behavior, racial justice and fairness pervade American society. Through this perspective, America's white majority constitutes a class of "innocents" who lack legal and moral responsibility for the discriminatory effects of their individual or collective actions as long as they act without "the intent" to cause those effects (Lawrence, 1987). The pervasiveness of this perspective among Americans can be seen in the wide spread responses of "innocent" members of the racial majority rejecting remedial measures for historic discrimination like affirmative action and reparations (Jones, 2005). This perspective cannot see the racially based social advantages of membership in the white majority. When Freeman wrote the article, there was a vision of America as an equal opportunity meritocracy only occasionally sullied by aberrant discrimination against blacks and others (1978). Contemporary views have moved that one step further, as increasing numbers of whites see themselves as the primary victims of racial discrimination.

Causation connects with fault in the perpetrator perspective. It establishes that "some objective instances of discrimination are to be regarded as mere accidents". Accordingly, disparate racial impacts of policies and practices do not constitute racial discrimination when they are not the exclusive causes of the harm they inflict. Consider city or state government policies that disparately impact racially segregated neighborhoods. These policies are not discriminatory from the perpetrator perspective because they did not cause the segregated housing patterns (Freeman, 1978). Further, causation renders activities with a discriminatory intent lawful when they have an ostensibly race neutral effect. This explains why the Court could find no violation of the Equal Protection Clause when jurisdictions across the American South openly closed down public facilities and services rather than provide them to blacks on an equal basis. Freeman cites, as examples of this, the post-Brown cases upholding state actions of closing public schools, swimming pools, and other segregated public facilities, rather than complying with desegregation orders (1978).

Professor Freeman's article skillfully traces the Court's adoption of the "perpetrator perspective" and the challenge it faced in crafting remedies for violations it did find that did not overly embrace the "victim perspective." It describes the conflict between some Court

decisions across the twenty-five year period following *Brown* as exemplifying the Court's ongoing efforts to legitimize the continued material subordination of blacks in the country while at the same time proscribing formal discrimination by public officials (1978).

The “perpetrator perspective” provides the framework for American antidiscrimination law. In turn, it represents the analysis courts use in hearing environmental racism claims. Typically, environmental racism claims are based in the experience and the perspective of victims of polluting facilities. For many claimants, their experiences as racial minorities in America place them within a historical narrative rife with political neglect and economic exploitation. Housing discrimination, school segregation, and limited employment opportunities all shape claimants perception of the government and businesses in their communities. On the other hand, courts begin with a blind eye to these other factors. Judges focus exclusively on determining whether plaintiffs have presented sufficient evidence that government actors acted with racial malice in approving a commercial or public use of property or in permitting the release of pollutants into the environment. The courts require that evidence prove that government officials acted on racial rather than commercial or environmental grounds in making their decision. Otherwise, courts find that officials lack fault for the disparate racial effects resulting from their decisions.

Moreover, the technical nature of environmental decisions taken in tandem with the commercial interests that drive them give officials abundant racially neutral reasons to approve the placement of polluting facilities in minority communities and to grant requested pollution permits. From the “perpetrator perspective,” environmental decision making seems unlikely to be associated with improper racial motives because government actors lack “fault” for the disproportionate impacts that often result from their use of race neutral decision making criteria. This perspective also means that judges will consider pollution facilities and activities that impact whites and racial minorities as evidence that race was not the basis of a government decision. Even when the exposures experienced by racial minorities are higher than those facing whites, courts will view the impact on whites as evidence that something other than race “caused” the alleged harm.

Understanding racial dominance, reveals that America does not and never has operated as a racially neutral society with individuals violating an otherwise neutral norm as the “perpetrator perspective” suggests. Instead, white social dominance has led to group based discrimination against blacks and others across each era of American history. Neither geography, nor chronology interrupt the racial dominance exercised by whites as a group in this regard. Although membership in “whiteness” expanded in the early years of the Twentieth century to allow in a range of European immigrants, the group dominance exercised toward blacks, Latinos, tribal nations, and Asians remained (Jacobson, 1998). Across the centuries, this racial dominion has been exercised through various social mechanisms—custom, culture, law, education, commerce, financial practices and regulations, economic policies and practices, religious instruction, religious practice, political practices and restrictions, mob violence, incarceration, enslavement, genocide, relocation, social exclusion, etc.

The well documented experiences of tribal nations, Asian workers and immigrants, Latinos, and blacks reflect group based practices intended to maintain racial superiority across economic, political, educational, and other the social spheres. The genocide, forced

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relocation, child assimilation, and property acquisition of tribal nations all resulted from collective or governmental action. Exclusion laws, internment, discrimination in employment, education, housing, and elections likewise resulted from collective decisions made by white organizations, unions, clubs churches, and governments. The arbitrary removal, expropriation of land, and segregation of Latino Americans all represented collective practices, and legal dictates. The system of chattel slavery, disenfranchisement, and exclusion from juries, schools, communities, unions, workplaces, political offices, hotels, restaurants, ferries, trains, and military ranks were based on collective action established through law, custom, practice, policy, and norm. Until the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, these represented the prevailing and typically lawful means of racial domination by whites North and South, East and West.

However, after the 1960s racial discrimination was recast as an individual choice and practice rather than a systematic means of maintaining racial advantage for whites as a whole. People were subject to legal sanction for open racial discrimination and presumably racial discrimination against people of color ended (Katznelson, 2005). Legal opinions, commentary and opinion focused heavily upon the absence of racial discrimination and the newly created norm of equal opportunity irrespective of race. It was much less clear, how racial dominance as collective practice was expected to disappear. School boards, admissions committees, housing associations, boards of directors, partnerships, private clubs, fraternities, and sororities were deemed neutral bodies operating without bias or favoritism from the date legislation was passed. Moreover, centuries of racial domination were interpreted as a matter of individual choice. Collective dominance through law, custom, and practice was immediately overshadowed by “racists” or persons openly espousing racially biased views. Persons guilty of such infractions were thoroughly assailed while the former systems of racial dominance remained largely unchallenged despite the ongoing operation of “racial cartels.” (Roithmayr, 2010).

[W]e can better understand the dynamic of historical racial exclusion if we describe it as the anti-competitive work of “racial cartels.” We can define racial cartels to include a range of all-White groups-- homeowners’ associations, school districts, trade unions, real estate boards and political parties--who gained significant social, economic and political profit from excluding on the basis of race. Far from operating on the basis of irrational animus, racial cartels actually derived significant profit from racial exclusion. By creating racially segmented housing markets, for example, exclusive White homeowners’ associations enjoyed higher property values that depended not just on the superior quality of the housing stock but also on the racial composition of the neighborhood. (p. 48)

Racial Cartels continue to operate today though perhaps in some cases without the true understanding of the participants. When racially homogeneous organizations express their bias for individuals who mirror their own experience and background they often operate as racial cartels by using their power and influence to ostensibly select people, contractors, businesses, politicians, and communities on “neutral grounds” that lack genuine neutrality. Participants need not bear any animus towards members outside of their group in making their decisions but also have unacknowledged and unrecognized biases towards their own experiences and persons like themselves as well. These cartels take part in zoning and

land use decisions, political elections, contractor selection, admissions and hiring decisions, and many other facets of American life. Because groups focus on “neutral criteria” they often fail to see how their evaluations of these criteria are in fact shaded by their own biases and preferences (Lawrence, 1987).

As a result, racial cartels historically created and still create economic benefits for their members. Although many racial cartels today likely reject the explicit language of white supremacy openly used in the past by some groups, the more polite tradition of bias that claims nondiscrimination and racially neutral judgments but replicates the segregated communities, clubs, associations, churches, schools, businesses, business groups, management ranks, planning boards, and political groups continues. These entities routinely use social and cultural norms that reflect and reinforce white dominance in ways that replicate racial exclusion and isolation. Operating without the benefit of counter perspectives, well-meaning people and others perpetuate practices and policies that maintain segregated housing, racially isolated schools, limited opportunities for employment, and the inequitable distribution of environmental benefits and adversities. Assumptions about competence, diligence, and morality routinely reflect biased standards that favor a continuation of the racial dominance of the past (Wang, 2006). However, these assumptions today often hide beneath seemingly objective criteria that reflect subjective biases towards white superiority. The subjective interpretation of facts is unwittingly colored by interpretations that favor the racially biased status quo under the assumption of unbiased consideration (Wang, 2006). Across the society, these groups operate in similar ways that replicate and reproduce racial hierarchy throughout the institutions of the society. Sadly, many of these groups would assert pure objectivity and colorblind decision-making as if racial bias was not an endemic part of American society that required a conscious and deliberate effort for elimination from our institutions. Couple the oblivious cartel members with their counterparts who consciously support a continued racial hierarchy and the prevalence and power of cartels becomes apparent. Racially homogenous decision-making bodies continue to make decisions that favor members of their racial group with the benefit of the presumption that race had no bearing on the decision and was irrelevant unless the members explicitly espoused racially biased motivations (Wang, 2006).

Racial tokenism serves as a means of refuting claims of systemic racial discrimination and bias. Tokenism is used to project equality of opportunity in American society and signal the absence of racial bias while in truth it masks the exclusion of substantial majorities of blacks and Latinos from integrated housing, education, equal employment, and a host of economic and political opportunities. Although racial cartels continue to operate, the large numbers of blacks and Latinos excluded from educational, economic, professional, and political success have been and continue to be described, as victims of an impoverished culture and a lack of personal responsibility. White America’s collective action remains largely ignored and rejected as a reason for the continued lack of parity.

Through token representation in decision making bodies, people of color ostensibly legitimize decisions that promote racial hierarchy and continue racial dominance. Whether voted against, overruled, or politely disagreed with, token representation in these bodies provides the imprimatur of non-biased decision making. This presumption is faulty as nonwhite members of these groups often feel vulnerable and tenuous in their positions; as a result they are typically hesitant to voice race-based concerns. People of color in these

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bodies may also fear derision and branding by their white peers as well which chills dialogue about biased assumptions and views. In some cases, token members of groups raise concerns and are simply out voted by the dominant majority. All too often, token representatives are selected based on how comfortable they make their white counterparts feel. Accordingly, these members often reflect the same biases and views as their white counterparts, which affirm the group's confidence in the nonbiased nature of its decisions. Consequently, overwhelmingly white groups with token representation continue to function as racial cartels distributing the spoils of social competition along the same racial axis as their homogenous counterparts. Together these groups reflect the engine of racial dominance—operating independently but with very similar racial assumptions and implicit biases (Wang, 2006).

This domination causes housing to be one of the most segregated aspects of American society. Today only minimal progress has been made in achieving real integration of American housing. This is especially true of black and to a lesser degree Latino Americans. “Although the US minority population grew at five times the rate of White’s since 2000, the average White resident lives in a tract that is 79% white. The average black resident lives in a track that is 46% black. And while Hispanics comprise only 15% of the population fully 45% of their neighbors are also Hispanic...” (Frey, 2010). This significant degree of segregation in housing also leads to substantial segregation in education employment and in environmental quality (Bullard, 2007). The deep racial undertones of housing echo loudly in local land-use decisions about the placement of environmental amenities and dis-amenities. Environmental injustices are symptoms of the larger dynamic of racial dominance prevalent throughout American society. To forestall these injustices we must address the continued existence of racial dominance. Beyond wishful thinking, colorblind rhetoric, and supposedly neutral criteria, America needs to come to grips with the continued lack of equality across the spheres of American life.

Class Dominance

Much like race, class transcends the boundaries where it has relevance and improperly influences decisions upon which it should have no bearing. Academic performance, political representation, and governmental services should all be determined and distributed on other grounds yet we sense and we suspect that students, constituents, and benefit recipients routinely gain and lose opportunity and advantage based on their economic status. Environmental Justice is also a symptom of this problem that I call “class dominance.” Class dominance reflects the inherent and seemingly natural bias toward the wealthy and upper class members of the society. This bias causes us to think that it’s natural that wealthy people should enjoy pristine environments with green spaces while the poor and people of color live with polluted air, contaminated water, and toxic waste. This dominance also causes us to believe that a higher-class status should mean superior education, superior opportunity, superior political representation and a superior experience across the spheres of American life.

Class dominance does not reflect the intrinsic values that all Americans are entitled to basic levels of protection regardless of their income and wealth. Economic status has no natural relationship with exposure to environmental harms and injuries. The relationship that exists is socially constructed through political and economic policies and practices (Bullard, 2007). Though largely unacknowledged by commercial and government decision makers,

the phenomenon perverts the ideal of equal environmental protection for everyone. Instead, it communicates to the communities burdened by these pollution sources that they cannot and should not expect the same quality of protection from exposure to pollution. Although environmental regulators ostensibly do their best to set standards that are fully protective of residents and community members irrespective of their economic status, the laws and regulations they execute rarely provide consideration of the human and environmental effects that multiple pollution sources have on communities (Kuttner, 1997). Needless to say, white communities and to a lesser degree communities of color with higher-class status suffer fewer and less significant environmental burdens.

Our society accepts and promotes this unfair distribution of environmental protection. Politicians and business leaders claim that it provides economic benefits that community members need, yet they reside in communities free of the same environmental burdens and risks (Bullard, 2007). While it is true that communities saddled with the nations environmental burdens do provide economic benefits, those benefits inure primarily to society members outside of those communities. Environmental injustices frequently represent sacrifice zones that suffer risks and burdens that enable wealthy and middle class members of our country to enjoy a higher quality of life and comfort based on educational advantages, economic opportunities, superior retirement plans, health care benefits, and political advocacy. To provide one group of a city or county's residents with the benefit of educational institutions, medical facilities, green spaces, and desirable commercial services and establishments others live with landfills, waste transfer stations, toxic waste sites, lead laden soils, waste treatment facilities, incinerators, water treatment plants, and untreated sewage from combined sewer overflows. Class dominance excuses and justifies unequal environmental protection to create environmental injustices that seem logical and appropriate.

Class dominance so pervades our society and our thinking that it is accepted and expected. Education, police protection, city services, healthcare, and so many social goods are distributed based on economic status that environmental injustice falls in line with existing social norms and biases that comfortably associate class status with the "good" and "bad" things of life. Recent studies have shown how class status affects not only the amount of food available in homes but also the quality of foods to which poor and working class people have access. Food desserts in America's metropolitan areas routinely limit residents' access to fresh, meats, fruits, and vegetables. Instead, these areas have an oversupply of processed foods, starches, and sugary snacks contributing to almost epidemic levels of obesity in poor and working class homes (Bullard, 2007).

The inequitable burden of harms and injuries that people color and poor whites face from the environment represent the social construction of who deserves the benefits and who bears the burdens of development and the pollution it produces. This economic model has a long history in the United States and across the world but it faces a challenge domestically and internationally from some segments of the sustainability movement. Though not uniformly committed to equity movement supporters internationally and a growing segment domestically connect sustainability with environmental justice and equity. Under this theory, commercial and industrial practices should not overburden the environments natural ability to sustain them in the long term. More expansive definitions also require that practices achieve social sustainability by rejecting the traditional distribution

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of burdens on the poor and working class and in order to confer benefits on the upper middle class and wealthy members of society. When sustainable development follows this definition it genuinely offers a bright spot on an otherwise bleak horizon. Its logic rejects the association of class with environmental quality and the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits--a critical development in the struggle for environmental justice and social equity (Fisher, 2003).

Despite the lip service that some businesses and politicians give to sustainable development, free market idolatry accompanies class dominance as a driving force in American society and economic policy. Even when meaningful effective regulation protects the health and well being of people and communities conservative economists and political opponents representing corporate interests label it as an expedient to economic growth and human well being (Kuttner, 1997). Purveyors of this constant barrage of regulatory skepticism, which blames regulations and regulators even when failures result from lax regulation or enforcement as with the American financial crisis of the late 2000s and the Deep Water Horizon Gulf Oil Disaster, idolize corporate interests and activities that operate without regard to human health and well-being or environmental consequences.

I use the term idolatry because adherents express a blind allegiance to "free market" principles that disregard the critical importance of past and current regulation of the market to American society. Overt and open racial and gender discrimination in employment, abuse and mistreatment of workers, dangerous and life threatening practices in food preparation, transportation, and construction were ended through important government intervention and the regulation of commercial activity (Kuttner, 1997). Anti discrimination law, labor law, health and safety law, environmental law, antitrust laws, and financial regulation distinguish the United States from nations where the well being of the masses has been traded wholesale to benefit an elite class of politicians and business leaders. Nonetheless, America's commitment to the health and safety of all citizens sustains constant assault by those who place corporate profits of the long-term well being of people and communities. Environmental injustices flow from the nation's failures to uphold this commitment for all its citizens. While middle class and wealthy whites enjoy fairly strong protection against the worst environmental threats, low-income whites and people of color across a wide range of the economic spectrum suffer injury, exposure, and risk from which others are protected (Bullard, 2007).

Despite the harm this causes, free market ideology only attends to the benefits to shareholders, executives, and a small numbers of workers who primarily reside outside the community where facilities are located. Using a bottom line approach to business, these priests of free market capitalism ignore the externalized costs omitted from prevailing American business models. The externalized costs represent costs created by the businesses operation but paid by other entities. In the environmental arena, this means that the pollution of the air and the water permitted by state and local environmental protection authorities costs community members in their health and wellbeing. Air pollution increases asthma attacks, physician and emergency room visits, absenteeism from school and work and decreases, quality of life, property values, lung capacity of children, physical fitness, and the wages of parents with children with children who are affected. The economic and health costs of the air polluting facilities are ignored by the polluters and absent from their spreadsheet. Instead, these costs are paid by the workers, children, parents, and other residents who live

in those communities. Free market adherents discount the relevance of these costs and the people who bear them in favor of the profits and benefits that these facilities provide to their shareholders and executives. Consistently, new regulations are opposed and existing regulation are derided as stifling business development and economic progress. Debate and discussion of Green House Gas regulation, a Canadian oil pipeline, and more stringent limits on toxic air pollutants reflect an obsession by many politicians with preserving and growing profits over protecting people and preserving natural resources. In political rhetoric, conservative political candidates call for EPA's elimination. Forgetting that the purpose of business is to serve human needs and to promote human flourishing, these leaders disregard the harm and suffering certain industries inflict on communities and the government's responsibility to protect citizens from harming their neighbors when possible. Sadly, the benefits derived from dangerous and polluting industries blind elected officials at all levels from recognizing the responsibility they have to the victims of pollution (Bullard , 2007).

These two structural rifts in America's commitment to social equality, betray our ideals of equality before the law and equal protection. Environmental injustices arise from these phenomenon of racial and class dominance. They are symptomatic of these systemic unresolved problems. They remain, however, of great importance to those confronting them and to the broader society. The risks they pose and the damage they cause are substantial and of great importance. In turn, they demand action and attention from political officials, business leaders, and public health advocates in order to be corrected. To be prevented, I suspect the same leadership has to reject racial and class dominance as ways of doing business when locating land uses, distributing commercial benefits, making zoning decisions, developing regional plans, cleaning up toxic waste sites, setting acceptable pollution levels, designing and operating waste treatment systems.

The brunt of the hardships caused by environmental injustices falls squarely, though not exclusively, upon poor and working class people of color who experience the greatest disadvantages and have the fewest options to address them. In this regard, many suffer exposure to multiple polluting facilities in addition to limited access to healthy foods, medical services, employment options, and necessary transportation (Bullard, 2007). Too many people have to confront environmental injustices as one of many routine problems plaguing their communities. Although deeper rooted causes rest at the heart of the issue, persons facing the worst environmental risks and exposures should receive immediate relief through governmental policies that restrict the pollution load that any single community bears (Fisher, 2003). Unfortunately, existing laws offer no assistance to community residents.

Federal environmental laws disregard the social and human aspects of facility location. The presence of hospitals, schools, daycare centers, homes, community centers, and children's sports fields have no bearing in determining allowable pollution levels. Instead, these laws depend on the judgment of state and local officials to decide acceptable locations for facilities. In many cases, these officials cater to the economic interests locating and operating facilities without regard for the effects that multiple pollution sources have on already vulnerable populations. Unfortunately, the decades long assault on civil rights laws has rendered them ineffective in challenging the placement of polluting facilities by local officials as well. However, the resourcefulness and strength of these communities should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

Many of the most threatened and burdened communities have organized and resisted existing and new pollution sources (Bullard, 2005). Some have developed working relationships with regulators and business representatives to mediate environmental harms and risks. Others have obtained millions of dollars in federal, state, and other grant funds to create environmental and other amenities sorely needed in their communities. These organizations typically see and embrace environmental justice as part of the larger struggle for racial and economic justice. Accordingly, their efforts confront the broad spectrum of problems and symptoms facing their communities in light of the underlying issues they face (Bullard, 2005). Their persistence and dedication continue to inspire additional communities to resist these inequitable burdens and to inform politicians, businesses, and government officials that they will not sit idly by while their communities are saddled with the burdens of pollution so other communities can enjoy the benefits. Fortunately, unlike the ongoing struggles against racial dominance and class dominance in the society, the fight for environmental justice continues to flourish and grow at the grass roots. Perhaps these groups' struggles against race and class dominance in the environmental context can awake and inspire others to continue to strive against these forces to promote justice in all aspects of American life.

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