[From] Environmental Blackmail in Minority Communities

Robert D. Bullard

Environmental problems have become potent political issues, especially as they threaten public health. Social equity and distributive concerns, however, have not fared so well over the years. Many of the conflicts that have resulted among core environmentalists, the poor, and minorities can be traced to distributional equity questions. How are the benefits and burden of environmental reform distributed? Who gets what, where, and why? Do environmental reforms have regressive impacts? After nearly three decades of modern environmentalism, the equity issues have not been resolved.

Environmentalism in the United States grew out of the progressive conservation movement that began in the 1890s. The modern environmental movement, however, has its roots in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the late 1960s. The more radical student-activists splintered off from the civil rights and anti-war movement to form the core of the environmental movement in the early 1970s. The student environmental activists affected by the Earth Day enthusiasm in colleges and universities across the nation had hopes of bringing environmental reforms to the urban poor. They saw their role as environmental advocates for the poor, since the poor had not taken action on their own. These advocates of the poor, however, were met with resistance and suspicion. Growing tension between the environmental movement and the social equity movement contributed to environmentalism being tagged an “elitist” movement.

Morrison and Dunlap grouped environmental elitism into three types: (1) compositional elitism, i.e., environmentalists come from privileged class strata; (2) ideological elitism, i.e., environmental reforms are a subterfuge for distributing the benefits to environmentalists and costs to non-environmentalists; and (3) impact elitism, i.e., environmental reforms have regressive distributional impacts.
Impact elitism has been the major sore point between environmentalists and the groups who see some reform proposals creating, exacerbating, and sustaining social inequities. The root of this conflict lies in the "jobs vs. environment" argument. Embedded in this argument are three competing advocacy groups: (1) environmental groups concerned about leisure and recreation, wildlife and wilderness preservation, resource conservation, pollution abatement, and industry regulation; (2) social justice advocates, whose major concerns include basic civil rights, social equity, expanded opportunity, economic mobility, and institutional discrimination; and (3) economic boosters, who have as their chief concerns maximizing profits, industrial expansion, economic stability, laissez faire operation, and deregulation.

Economic boosters were somewhat successful in convincing social justice advocates that environmental regulations had regressive distributive impacts. It was argued that acceptance of many reform proposals would result in plant closures, layoffs, and economic dislocation. Kazis and Grossman refer to this practice as "job blackmail." The public is led to believe that there is no alternative to "business as usual" operation. If workers want to keep their jobs, they must work under conditions which may be hazardous to them, their families, and their community. Black workers are especially vulnerable to job blackmail because of high unemployment and their concentration in low-paying (high-risk) blue-collar occupations.

There is inherent conflict between the interests of capital and those of labor. Employers are empowered to move jobs (and sometimes hazards) in a political economic world-system. For example, firms may choose to move their operations from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and Sunbelt, or they may move the jobs to Third World countries where labor is cheaper and where there are fewer health and environmental regulations. Moreover, labor unions may feel it necessary to tone down their demands for improved worker safety conditions in a depressed economy for fear of layoffs, plant closings, and relocation of industries (e.g., moving to right-to-work states which proliferate in the South). The conflicts, fears, and anxieties that are manifested are usually built on the false assumption that environmental regulations are automatically linked to job loss. . . .

Who Benefits and Who Pays?

Poor and minority residents had the most to gain in the passage of environmental regulations such as the Clean Air Act since they lived closest to the worst sources of the pollution. These communities, however, continue to be burdened with a disproportionately large share of industrial pollution problems, even after the passage of all the regulations. Uneven enforcement of environmental and land-use regulations is a contributor to this problem.

Zoning, deed restrictions, and other "protectionist" devices have failed to effectively segregate industrial uses from residential uses in many black and
lower income communities. The various social classes, with or without land use controls, are "unequally able to protect their environmental interests." Rich neighborhoods are able to leverage their economic and political clout into fending off unwanted uses (even public housing for the poor) while residents of poor neighborhoods have to put up with all kinds of unwanted neighbors, including noxious facilities.

Public opposition has been more vocal in middle and upper income groups on the issue of noxious facility siting. The Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) syndrome has been the usual reaction in these communities. As affluent communities became more active in opposing a certain facility, the siting effort shifted toward a more powerless community. Opposition groups often called for the facilities to be sited "somewhere else." "Somewhere Else, USA" often ends up being located in poor, powerless, minority communities. It is this unequal sharing of benefits and burden that has engendered feelings of unfair treatment among poor and minority communities.

Facility siting in the United States is largely reflective of the long pattern of disparate treatment of black communities. There is a "direct historical connection between the exploitation of the land and the exploitation of people, especially black people, ..." Polluting industries have exploited the pro-growth and pro-jobs sentiment exhibited among the poor, working class, and minority communities. Industries such as paper mills, waste disposal and treatment facilities, heavy metals operations, and chemical plants, searching for operating space, found minority communities to be a logical choice for their expansion. These communities and their leaders were seen as having a Third World view of development. That is, "any development is better than no development at all." Moreover, many residents in these communities were suspicious of environmentalists, a sentiment that aligned them with the pro-growth advocates.

The sight and smell of paper mills, waste treatment and disposal facilities, incinicators, chemical plants, and other industrial operations were promoted as trade-offs for having jobs near "poverty pockets." For example, a paper mill spewing its stench in one of Alabama’s poverty-ridden blackbelt counties led Governor George Wallace to declare: "Yeah, that’s the smell of prosperity. Sho’ does smell sweet, don’t it?" Similar views have been reported of residents and community leaders in West Virginia’s, Louisiana’s, and Texas’s "chemical corridor."

The 1980s have seen a shift in the way black communities react to the jobs-environment issue. This shift has revolved around the issue of equity. Blacks have begun to challenge the legitimacy of environmental blackmail and the notion of trade-offs. They are now asking: Are the costs borne by the black community imposed to spare the larger community? Can environmental inequities (resulting from industrial facility siting decisions) be compensated? What are "acceptable" risks? Concern about equity is at the heart of black
people's reaction to industrial facility siting where there is an inherent imbalance between localized costs and dispersed benefits. Few residents want garbage dumps and landfills in their backyards. The price of siting noxious facilities has skyrocketed in recent years as a result of more stringent federal regulations and the growing militancy among the poor, working class, and minority communities. Compensation appears to hold little promise in mitigating locational conflict and environmental disputes in these communities.

Environmental disputes are likely to increase in the future as tighter federal regulations take effect. All states will soon be required to have the treatment and disposal capacity to handle the hazardous wastes generated within their borders. Currently, some industries ship their wastes across state lines. It is not yet known what type of siting pattern will emerge from the new federal mandate. States, however, will need to respond to the equity issue if they expect to have successful siting strategies.

**Mobilizing Black Community Residents**

A "new" form of environmentalism has taken root in America and in the black community. Since the late 1970s, a new grassroots social movement emerged around the toxics threat. Citizens mobilized around the anti-waste theme. The movement has a number of distinguishing characteristics. It

1. focuses on equity;
2. challenges mainstream environmentalism for its tactics but not its goals;
3. emphasizes the needs of the community and workplace as primary agenda items;
4. uses its own self-taught "experts" and citizen lawsuits instead of relying on legislation and lobbying;
5. takes a "populist" stance on environmental issues relying on active members rather than dues-payers from mailing lists; and
6. embraces a democratic ideology akin to the civil rights and women's movement of the sixties.12

These social activists or "toxics warriors" acquired new skills in areas where they had little expertise or no prior experience. They soon became resident "experts" on the toxics issue. They did not limit their attacks to well-publicized toxic contamination issues, but sought remedial actions on problems like "housing, transportation, air quality, and even economic development—issues the traditional environmental agenda had largely ignored."13

There is no single agenda or integrated political philosophy in the hundreds of environmental organizations found in the nation. The types of issues that environmental organizations tackle can greatly influence the type of constituents they attract. The issues that are most likely to attract black community
Type of Environmental Groups and “Issue Characteristics” that Attract Black Community Residents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue characteristic</th>
<th>Mainstream</th>
<th>Grassroots</th>
<th>Social action</th>
<th>Emergent coalition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appeal to urban mobilized group</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned about inequality and distributional impacts</td>
<td>–/+/c</td>
<td>–/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endorse the “politics of equity” and direct action</td>
<td>–/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–/+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on economic-environmental tradeoffs</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champion of the political and economic “underdog”</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–/+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–/+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\( ^a \): Group is unlikely to have characteristic.  
\( ^b+ \): Group is likely to have characteristic.  
\( ^c-/+ \): Group in some cases may have characteristic.

*Source:* Adapted from Richard P. Gale, “The Environmental Movement and the Left: Antagonists or Allies?” *Sociological Inquiry* 53 (Spring 1983): Table 1: 194.

Residents are those that have been couched in an anti-environmental blackmail framework (see the table). They include those that

1. focus on the inequality and distributional impacts;
2. endorse the “politics of equity” and direct action;
3. appeal to urban mobilized groups;
4. advocate safeguards against job loss and plant closure; and
5. are ideologically aligned with policies that favor social and political “underdogs.”

Mainstream environmental organizations, including the “classic” and “mature” groups, have had a great deal of influence in shaping the nation’s environmental policy. Classic environmentalists continue to have a heavy emphasis on preservation and outdoor recreation, while mature environmentalists are busy in the area of “tightening regulations, seeking adequate funding for agencies, occasionally focusing on compliance with existing statutes through court action, and opposing corporate efforts to repeal environmental legislation or weaken standards.”14 These organizations, however, have not had a great deal of success in attracting poor and working class persons, including the large urban black
underclass (that is burdened with both poverty and pollution) in the nation’s central cities or the rural southern blackbelt. Many of these individuals do not see the mainstream environmental movement as a vehicle that is championing the causes of the “little man,” the “underdog,” or the “oppressed.”

The emergence of grassroots environmental groups, some of which are affiliated with mainstream environmental organizations, have begun to bridge the class and ideological gap between core environmentalists and the various orbits around which the movement was built. In some cases, these groups mirror their larger counterparts at the national level in terms of problems and issues selected, membership, ideological alignment, and tactics used. Grassroots groups usually are organized around area-specific and single-issue problems. They are in many cases more inclusive than mainstream environmental organizations. Grassroots environmental organizations, however, may or may not choose to focus on equity, distributional impacts, and economic–environmental trade-off issues. These groups do appeal to some black community residents, especially those who have been active in other confrontational protest activities.

Environmental groups in the black community quite often emerge out of established social action organizations. For example, black leadership has deep roots in the black church and other voluntary associations. Morris contends that the black community “possesses (1) certain basic resources, (2) social activists with strong ties to mass-based indigenous institutions, and (3) tactics and strategies that can be effectively employed against a system of domination.” These indigenous institutions have led the opposition against social injustice and racial discrimination. Many black community residents have affiliation with civic clubs, neighborhood associations, community improvement groups, and an array of anti-poverty and anti-discrimination organizations. A protest infrastructure, thus, is already in place for the emergence of an environmental equity movement in the black community.

Social action groups that take on environmental issues as part of their agenda are often on the political left. They broaden their base of support and sphere of influence by incorporating environmental equity issues as agenda items that favor the disenfranchised and dispossessed. The push for equity is an extension of the civil rights movement, a movement where direct confrontation and the politics of protest were real weapons. In short, social action environmental organizations retain much of their civil rights flavor.

The fourth type of environmental group that has appealed to black community residents grew out of coalitions between environmentalists (mainstream and grassroots), social action advocates, and organized labor. These somewhat fragile coalitions operate from the position that social justice and environmental quality are compatible goals. Although these groups are beginning to formulate agendas for action, mistrust acts as a limiting factor. These coalitions have memberships that cut across racial, class, and geographic boundaries. Composi-
tional factors may engender less group solidarity and sense of "control" among black members, compared to the indigenous social action or grassroots environmental groups where blacks are in the majority and make the decisions.

Thus, environmentalists have had a difficult task convincing blacks and the poor that they are on their side. Mistrust is engendered among economically and politically oppressed groups in this country when they see environmental reforms being used to direct social and economic resources away from problems of poor countries toward priorities of the affluent. For example, tighter government regulations and public opposition to disposal facility siting have opened up the Third World as the new dumping ground for this nation's toxic wastes.\textsuperscript{16} Few of these poor countries have laws or the infrastructure to handle the wastes from the United States and other Western industrialized nations.

- Blacks and other ethnic minorities in this country also see their communities being inundated with all types of toxics.\textsuperscript{17} This is especially the case in the southern United States (e.g., one of the most underdeveloped regions of the nation) where more than one-half of all blacks live.

Toxic waste disposal has generated protests in many communities across the country. The first national environmental protest by blacks came in 1982 after the mostly black Warren County, North Carolina, was selected as the burial site for 32,000 cubic yards of soil contaminated with the highly toxic PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). The soil was illegally dumped along the roadways in fourteen North Carolina counties in 1978. Black civil rights activists, political leaders, and local residents marched in protest demonstrations against the construction of the PCB landfill in their community. Why was Warren County selected as the landfill site? The decision made more political sense than environmental sense.\textsuperscript{18}

Although the protests were unsuccessful in halting the landfill construction, they marked the first time blacks mobilized a nationally broad-based group to protest environmental inequities. The protests prompted Congressman Walter E. Fauntroy (Representative from the District of Columbia), who had been active in the demonstrations, to initiate the U.S. General Accounting Office (1983) study of hazardous waste landfill siting in the South. The GAO study observed a strong relationship between the siting of offsite hazardous landfills and race of surrounding communities. Three of the four offsite hazardous waste landfills in EPA's Region IV were located in black communities, while blacks made up only 20 percent of the region's population.

\textbf{Toward the Politics of Inclusion}

Because exposure to environmental toxins varies across population groups, distributive politics have come to play an important role in explaining the vastly different action strategies employed by middle income white communities and lower income black communities. The middle class-dominated envi-
ronmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s built an impressive political base for environmental reform and regulatory relief. Many environmental problems in the 1980s, however, had social impacts somewhat different from earlier ones. A disproportionate burden of pollution is carried by the urban poor and minority residents.

Few environmentalists realized the sociological implications of the NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) phenomenon.\textsuperscript{19} Given the political climate of the times, the hazardous wastes, garbage dumps, and polluting industries were likely to end up in somebody’s backyard. But whose backyard? More often than not, these locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) ended up in poor, powerless, black communities rather than in affluent suburbs. This pattern has proven to be the rule, even though the benefits derived from industrial waste production are directly related to affluence. Public officials and private industry have, in many cases, responded to the NIMBY phenomenon using the “PIBBY” principle, “Place in Blacks’ Back Yards.”

Social justice movements have begun to move environmentalism to the left in an effort to address some of the distributional impact and equity issues. Documentation of civil rights violations has strengthened the move to make environmental quality a basic right of all individuals. Rising energy costs, a continued erosion of the economy’s ability to provide jobs, and rising real incomes are factors that favor environmentalism of the left blending with the objectives of labor, minorities and other “underdog” groups, and middle class environmentalists.

Mainstream environmental organizations were late in broadening their base of support to include blacks and other minorities, the poor, and working class persons. The “energy crisis” in the 1970s was a major impetus that moved many environmentalists to embrace equity issues confronting the poor in this country and countries of the Third World. Environmentalism, over the years, has shifted from a “participatory” to a “power” strategy where the “core of active environmental movement is focused on litigation, political lobbying, and technical evaluation rather than on mass mobilization for protest marches.”\textsuperscript{20}

Institutional racism and discrimination continue to influence the quality of life in many of the nation’s black communities. For example, the ability to exit a negative or health-threatening physical environment is directly associated with affluence. Federal policies, for example, were key elements in the development of spatially differentiated metropolitan areas where blacks and other visible minorities are segregated from whites and the poor from the more affluent citizens. Moreover, the federal government is the “proximate and essential cause of urban apartheid” in the United States.\textsuperscript{21} The end result of the nation’s apartheid-type policies on black households has meant limited mobility, reduced housing options and residential packages, and decreased environmental choices. For example, air pollution in inner-city neighborhoods can be found at levels up to five times greater than those found in suburban areas. Urban areas, in general, have “dirtier air and drinking water, more waste water
and solid waste problems, and greater exposure to lead and other heavy metals than non-urban areas.”

**Conclusion**

Black communities are beginning to incorporate environmental safeguards into their agendas for economic development. Although economically vulnerable (few business and employment centers are indigenous to the community), a growing segment within the black community has begun to demand an environment-development balance. Job blackmail seems to be losing ground mainly because the promise of jobs and a broadened tax base for local residents has been more promise than anything else. Many communities that host noxious facilities have been left to suffer from the tragedy of poverty, pollution, increased health risks, and lowered property values. Residents also must contend with the stigma of living in a “contaminated” community.

The solution to the current environmental dilemma does not reside in compensation. Proposals that call for those less fortunate to accept risks others can escape will only heighten environmental inequities between poor and affluent communities. Many poor and minority communities, because of economic necessity, would be forced to adapt to lower quality physical environments.

Institutionalized discrimination continues to affect public policy decisions related to the enforcement of environmental regulations. The politics of pollution have placed public officials squarely in the middle of environmental disputes and locally unwanted land uses as in the case of municipal garbage landfills and incinerators, hazardous waste storage and treatment facilities, and chemical plants.

Although the effects of pollution have no geographic boundaries, blacks and lower income groups are often “trapped” in polluted environments because of low incomes, housing discrimination and residential segregation, limited residential choices, discriminatory zoning regulations, and ineffective land use policies. Moreover, black communities are beginning to integrate environmental issues into traditional civil rights agendas and to develop viable action strategies to combat environmental degradation, discrimination, job blackmail, and public policy decisions that have disparate distributional impacts on black and poor communities.

The 1990s offer some challenging opportunities for the environmental movement to embrace social justice and other redistributive policies. Population shifts and demographic trends all point to a more diverse nation. It is time for the environmental movement to diversify and reach out to the “other” America.

**Notes**


10. Ibid., 197.


13. Ibid., 14.


