

11.368 Response Paper 2

The three readings this week trace the development of the environmental justice (EJ) movement at the national and local scales, highlighting the separate and sometimes conflicting goals of the mainstream environmental movement and the emerging EJ movement. Traditional environmentalist aims have been advanced often at the national level through costly litigation and by large membership organizations like Sierra Club and Audubon that lobby and promote policy change via centralized networks of power. In contrast, EJ arose simultaneously in a number of different localities, in response to a variety of environmental threats, often through grassroots, community-led organizing. The Cole and Foster piece offers a useful overview of the contributing paradigms and focus areas that shape this hybrid movement, as well as identifying (in common with Gottlieb) a few key events that catalyzed the movement and brought it into the broader public awareness. Both texts refer to the Warren County anti-dump actions, Cesar Chavez's United Farm Worker organizing, and the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit as seminal moments (among others) in the creation of an EJ consciousness. It is also clear from all three texts that the EJ movement was and is shaped by the research and writings of Robert Bullard, and I am curious as to why that is so. My main question is: with such diverse inputs, where will EJ go from here? The principles of the 1991 Summit can serve as an inspiration point and a vision document, but it is also necessary to investigate the strengths and areas of potential greatest impact for this concept.

I am less interested in the notion of EJ as extending the NIMBY-capacity to disenfranchised communities that previously could not access the means to fight off noxious facilities, and am more interested in a sort of reframing of the understanding of the environment. Although Checker's piece indeed discusses fighting an incinerator, she touches on this reframing as a means for more inclusive coalition-building. She notes that activists are "expanding the meaning of the environment to include a host of urban resources" and that "the built environment historically divided activists into competitive groups that were considered mutually exclusive. The intangible environment, however, in its unhealthy state, provided an initial basis upon which activists could find a common ground." (Checker: 136, 144) The more that the environment can be understood as a determinant of quality of life, with vital interaction effects to other concerns of poverty and crime, the more relevant I believe it can be made to communities of all sorts. My own experiences in urban forestry demonstrated that the environment--in being either a threat or a resource, but ultimately something that is shared and ethereal--can serve as a useful organizing tool. We cannot risk losing the complexity or depth of differing issues, but I believe investigation into this capacity of the environment is worthwhile. Instead of considering the environment as something that is "out there" in Yellowstone, accessible and relevant only to the wealthy, environmental justice can bring an understanding of natural resources back to the places in which we live. I would argue that much of the strength of EJ lies in its place-based, community-led, and often urban approach. The core EJ idea of self-determination is also powerful, in that we as citizens have a right to determine the texture of our physical environments. This concept can allow us to think of broader natural resource issues and socioeconomic structures, along with concerns related to siting noxious facilities. I mean not to eclipse or ignore the efforts of communities of color to advocate on their own behalf; however I recognize that if EJ plays out solely as a series of costly and often unsuccessful legal battles or organizing actions, some of its exciting potential may be lost.