

Environmental Racism

(Informal) Definitions

Environmental racism: Poison people according to their race.

Environmental classism: Poison people according to their income.

Environmental equity: Poison people equally.

Environmental justice: Stop poisoning people, period.

Environmental Racism/Classism

Marginalized minorities (the poor, people of color) are disproportionately subjected to environmental hazards and have available to them disproportionately fewer environmental services and benefits (clean air and water, wilderness areas, and so on).

Hazards include municipal landfills and incinerators, toxic dump sites, polluting industries, resource extraction operations (coal and ore mines), etc.

Intra-national and International Racism

When did this become a thing?

1971: Council of Environmental Quality's "Annual Report to the President" (Nixon)

1979: Sociologist Robert Bullard publishes research that exposure to environmental hazards track race, not just income.

1987: Chavis & Lee, "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States" (United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice).

1990: Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*.

1993: *Office of Environmental Justice* formed (under the EPA).

Altgeld Gardens, Chicago (1970s)

Built after WW II for returning veterans, and now surrounded by 53 toxic facilities and 90% of the city's landfills, the Altgeld Gardens area became known as a "toxic doughnut". 97% of the residents are African-American.



Love Canal, NY (1978)

Love Canal was a housing development built in the 1950s in Niagara Falls, NY, on top of a toxic dumpsite. This was discovered in the 1970s and became a national news story in 1978.



New Orleans (2005)

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29. Levee breaches and poor evacuation plans led to hundreds of deaths.



Flint, Michigan (2014-)

Since April 2014, residents of Flint, a city that is almost 57% black and notably impoverished, have been drinking and bathing in water that contains enough lead to meet the EPA's definition of "toxic waste".



A Few Terms

LULU: Locally Unwanted (or Undesirable) Land Use (polluting factories, incinerators, landfills, ...).

NIMBY: Not In My Back Yard.

Superfund Site: The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980 (**CERCLA**) pays to clean-up hazardous sites where the polluter either cannot be identified or cannot pay for the clean-up. Love Canal (New York) and Times Beach (Missouri) motivated the passage of CERCLA.

Explaining the LULUs

- Attracting the Nuisance
- Moving to the Nuisance
- Least Political Resistance
- Deliberate Racism/Classism

CBA and LULUs

Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) instructs us to pursue those policies with the highest net benefits-to-costs ratio.

Wealthy people are willing to pay more money to avoid a LULU than poor people, so LULUs will naturally be located closer to poor people.

Similarly, a LULU always depreciates the value of land it is on, so placing it on land that is already of low value will cost society less than placing it on high value land (e.g., in a wealthy town or neighborhood).

Bullard, “Overcoming Racism”

Equity

Procedural: Fairness in the application of rules and regulations.

Geographic: Fairness in how close people are to LULUs.

Social: Fairness in how environmental decisions are made with respect to race, ethnicity, class, etc.

Five Principles of Environmental Justice

- (1) The Right to Protection
- (2) The Prevention of Harm
- (3) Shift the Burden of Proof (to the polluters)
- (4) Obviate Proof of Intent to Discriminate
- (5) Redress Inequities

Wenz, “Just Garbage”

Argument from Doctrine of Double Effect

“Racial discrimination is blameless because it is simply the foreseeable but unintended consequences of economic and political practices that disproportionately expose poor people to toxic substances. (In other words, people of color are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards because they are disproportionately poor, not because of their race.)”

Wenz, “Just Garbage”

Principle of Commensurate Burdens and Benefits

“Other things being equal, those who derive benefits should sustain commensurate burdens.”

This means that, *ceteris paribus*, the beneficiaries of the processes resulting in toxic hazards should shoulder a burden commensurate with those benefits.

Wealthy people are disproportionately responsible for the toxic waste in this country.

Wenz, “Just Garbage”

Rejected Theories of Justice

Libertarianism: would eliminate any nuisance not agreed upon (and thus would effectively end industrial society)

Utilitarianism: allows sacrifice of one to benefit another + looks only to the future consequences (not to past obligations).

Free Market Approach: this “fails to accord equal consideration to everyone’s interests” (the wealthy will always come out ahead, harming the vital interests of the poorer people).

Cost-Benefit Analysis: this will always locate toxic hazards near poor people (to avoid losing value of land owned by wealthy people).