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# SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT

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**Abstract:** *This paper is organized around two points. The first concerns the literature on environmental justice (EJ) studies and its lack of incorporation of social scientific theories and concepts concerning racism. This is surprising, given EJ studies' strong interest in challenging a form of racism – environmental racism. This, in turn, allows for a critique of theories of racism for their lack of attention to the ways in which society-environment relations structure racist practices and discourses, and a critique of scholars who have understated the continuing impact of racism on communities of color. The second point concerns the degree to which modernization has led to an improvement in the environmental impacts associated with market economies and their production systems. Drawing on ecological modernization, risk society, and the treadmill of production theories, I argue that, as with popular and scholarly views on racism, many scholars have overstated the level of progress society has made on this front. I also argue that this is largely because – via practices such as environmental racism and globalization – many of the worst dimensions of the market economy's externalities are out of sight and out of mind (due largely to spatial and residential segregation and international hazardous waste exports), making it possible to either ignore or dismiss claims to the contrary.*

**Keywords:** *ecological modernization, environmental justice, environmental racism, risk society.*

**Resumo:** *Este artigo está organizando em torno de duas questões. A primeira diz respeito à literatura sobre estudos a respeito da justiça ambiental e sua ausência de incorporação de teorias sociais e conceitos científicos que digam respeito ao racismo. Isso é surpreendente tendo em vista o forte interesse dos estudos sobre justiça ambiental em desafiar uma forma de racismo – o racismo ambiental. Isso, por sua vez, permite uma crítica das teorias sobre o racismo por sua falta de atenção às formas em que as relações sociedade-meio ambiente estruturam práticas e discursos racistas, e uma crítica dos estudiosos que subestimam o contínuo impacto do racismo em comunidades de cor. A segunda questão diz respeito ao grau ao qual a modernização levou a uma melhora nos impactos ambientais associados com economias de mercado e seus processos produtivos. Baseando-se na modernização ecológica, na sociedade de*

*risco e no trabalho árduo das teorias de produção, argumento que, do mesmo modo que os pontos de vista populares e eruditos sobre o racismo, muitos estudiosos sobreestimaram o nível de progresso que a sociedade teria feito nessa frente. Argumento também que isso se generaliza porque – através de práticas como o racismo ambiental e a globalização – muitas das piores dimensões das externalidades da economia de mercado estão fora da visão e da mente (devido em grande medida a uma segregação espacial e residencial e uma exportação internacional de resíduos perigosos), tornando possível ou ignorar ou descartar reivindicações que digam o contrário.*

**Palavras-chave:** *justiça ambiental, modernização ecológica, racismo ambiental, sociedade de risco.*

## Introduction

On one morning in 1987, on the far Southeast Side of Chicago, several African American community activists, along with their Anglo allies from an environmental organization, engaged in an act of civil disobedience against a hazardous waste incinerator operator located in the neighborhood. They coordinated a “lock down,” wherein they chained themselves to vehicles placed in the path of trucks bringing in hazardous waste materials for incineration. In defiance of the company and state law, the coalition of activists held their ground for several hours. They were opposing just one of dozens of polluting operations in this community of mostly poor or working class people of color. By the end of the day, the coalition turned away 57 waste trucks, a notable accomplishment and a disturbing indicator of how much waste was being shipped into and burned in this community. Hazel Johnson, founder of the environmental justice organization People for Community Recovery, recounted this story on several occasions and was always proud of the fact that she and her group led the demonstration. Indeed, this was a remarkable mobilization and impressive act of resistance from within a small, desperately poor community.

People for Community Recovery was born out of a conflict over health and environmental justice that had both deep local roots and an international reach. This organization faced insensitivity from elected officials and government agencies whose charge was to protect the environment and public health. In this particular struggle, local activists succeeded by building a support base at

home and from outside their community to raise the stakes for the transnational corporation operating the incinerator, who now faced formidable opposition and a public relations catastrophe if they continued on their original course. This struggle was also a response to ecologically harmful economic development projects that are deeply racialized. Communities of color in the U.S. and nations in the global South confront a disproportionate burden of toxic waste (e.g., hazardous waste dumps, polluting industries, etc.), at the hands of states and industries that produce and distribute these poisons unevenly across the landscape. This phenomenon is usually referred to as environmental racism or environmental inequality. Typically scholars view the roots of the problem in terms of economic efficiencies, political expediency, or as examples of the violation of civil rights through institutional racism (Been, 1993; Bullard, 1993, 1994, and 2000). But I would like to argue that the struggle for environmental justice represents two trends that are generally not linked together: 1) the continued oppression of people of color in this society and 2) the continuing if not worsening environmental crisis in the US and globally. I explore two questions in this paper: 1) how well do scholarly models of racial inequality explain racism when we examine the impact of environmental harm on people of color? And 2) Are environmental conditions improving in the U.S. and globally?

### *Environmental justice studies*

Environmental Justice Studies is the interdisciplinary body of literature that has developed since the early 1970s, by a growing group of scholars in the U.S. (and now increasingly in other nations), who are documenting the unequal impacts of environmental pollution on different social classes and racial/ethnic groups. Hundreds – perhaps thousands – of studies have concluded that ethnic minorities, indigenous persons, people of color, and low-income communities confront a higher burden of environmental exposure from air, water, and soil pollution associated with industrialization, militarization, and consumer practices. Known variously as environmental racism, environmental inequality, or environmental injustice, this phenomenon has captured a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years (Bullard, 1993, 1994, 2000; Gedicks, 2001; Hurley, 1995).

Although environmental justice (EJ) studies are focused primarily on a form of racial inequality, this literature surprisingly makes little use of existing and well-established theories of racism or racial inequality. This is unfortunate

because there are many productive links to be made between these areas of inquiry, the most interesting of which occurs when we reconsider theories of racism in relation to environmental impacts on communities of color.

### *Ecology, race, and modernization*

One of the current debates in studies of race and racism concerns the centrality of race in the context of modernity and the question of racial progress. In the U.S. context, many modernists view racism as peripheral to, or an unfortunate aberration within, our nation's development and contemporary social terrain (Thernstrom; Thernstrom, 1997). Hence, racism lies "outside" the mainstream American experience and set of values (Schlesinger, 1992; Wilson, 1978, 1987). When whites (or any person or persons, for that matter) make the claim that we live in a "color blind" society, despite the obvious stark racial inequalities that persist, they are articulating what Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003) terms the discourse of the "new racism". There are many related terms that others have used to describe this phenomenon, including "post-racialism" (Winant, 2001), and "colorblind racism" (Omi; Winant, 1994). Following a number of other scholars, I reject this view of modernity and write racism into the center of that discourse (Barlow, 2003).

In their classic book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant (1994) introduce the concept of "racial projects" and Winant (2001) later extends this idea to the global scale. Racial projects are the intersection between racial ideologies and racist practices. They are marked by material/structural practices that divide groups by access to various resources (social inequality), and by discursive practices and ideologies that serve to justify those group hierarchies (ideology). Racism is a fact of life in the modern world. This is a framework that is easily applied to EJ studies because of the prevalent practice of relegating people of color to harmful environmental spaces that is supported by an ideology of free markets.

Many leading social scientists argue then that racism is primarily a material and structural practice that, although central to modernity, has changed in the U.S. and globally, over the last several decades, as today it is less pronounced, less overt, embedded in the everyday operation of institutions, and therefore less visible (Barlow, 2003; Bobo, Smith, Kleugel, 1996; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Winant, 2001). While racism remains observable as a material or structural

force of inequality, what seems to have changed most in recent years is the softening of the language and discourse around racial difference and equality. As under the old regime (i.e., the era of racial domination) whites still maintain their power today, only without overtly naming it as such and therefore securing the consent of oppressed peoples of color (Gramsci, 1971). Yet, as prevalent as racism may be in this model, these scholars – like those advocating the “post racialism” viewpoint – acknowledge that race relations have changed, and, to some extent, improved. In other words, there has been progress since, at the very least, racism has become less crude, more sophisticated and modernized.

In addition to being overly ambitious in the claim that we have achieved a higher plane of racial progress, this literature also reveals the limitations of theories of racism because they rarely extend the idea of “material” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003) domination or the “totality” and “systemic” nature (Feagin, 2000; Feagin; Vera; Batur, 2001) of racism to the kind of physical control that environmental racism exacts on populations, a physical control that is made possible by the mobilization of natural resources.

Racism is, unfortunately, only subtle and invisible in certain places and contexts. For many of the world’s people of color, it is indeed quite readily apparent in workplaces, schools, housing markets, and the media. Environmental racism, for example, can be a totalizing form of control over one’s surroundings, body, health, and life. There is little that is subtle about this because it is not just about hierarchy and privilege versus disadvantage, but about the “violence” of racism. Perhaps if scholars of racism were to consider the links between the violence and control over people’s bodies *and* physical/natural space, the idea of aggressive and overt racism would not be so foreign. Considering the continuing stark patterns of residential and occupational segregation by race in the U.S., the continued practice of racial profiling and police brutality by law enforcement across the nation, and the recent extraordinary intensification of surveillance and detentions of people of color via the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border (and the deaths of thousands of migrants attempting to move North), and the Bush regime’s “War on Terror,” it is simply untenable to argue that racism today is mostly a patchwork of subtle, opaque, and covert practices.

The community that Hazel Johnson calls home, for example, is not just a low-income, housing project, isolated from the rest of the city of Chicago: it is a majority African American community that was built on top of a toxic dump in the middle of a heavily industrialized and polluted zone. Residents are exposed to hundreds of thousands of pounds of air pollution emitted from scores of factories,

landfills, and automobiles in the area on a daily basis. Disease rates in the community are as startling as the poverty and political powerlessness that engulfs it. This is violence, hidden only by the strong hand of residential segregation.

## Environmental studies and modernization

Here I consider two broad schools of thought with respect to modernization and the relationship among capitalism, the environment, and society. The first is exemplified by the growing group of scholars writing on and advocating the idea of Ecological Modernization – the view that states and industries are improving their environmental performance with remarkable results that benefit the natural and social worlds (Mol, 1995, 1996; Mol; Sonnenfeld, 2000). The second school of thought is characterized by scholars who view modernization as a process that has created grave environmental and social problems around the globe. Within this second school, I group together and consider the work of scholars of environmental justice studies, scholars advancing the Treadmill of Production model, and researchers employing the “risk society” thesis.

### *Ecological modernization*

The core hypothesis of ecological modernization theory is that the design, performance and evaluation of production processes have been increasingly based on ecological criteria, rather than simply being rooted in a narrow economic calculus. Leading ecological modernization theorist Arthur Mol acknowledges that modernity appears to be predicated on environmental destruction, but only insofar as this is a ‘design fault’ that requires a basic correction. So, in a problematic logical maneuver, ecological modernization scholars like Mol maintain that both the cause of and solution to the environmental crisis lies within the structure of modernity itself (Seippel, 2002). Mol and others maintain that economic development and rising environmental standards “go hand in hand.”

### *The treadmill of production*

In contrast to Ecological Modernization, the Treadmill of Production model posits that market economies behave like a “treadmill” that continuously creates ecological and social harm through a self-reinforcing mechanism of increasing

rates of production and consumption (Schnaiberg, 1980, 1994). The root of the problem is an insatiable need for capital investment in order to generate goods for sale on the market, income for workers, and legitimacy for nation-states. In other words, capitalism is a system that is ideologically wedded to infinite economic growth, and there are dramatic socio-ecological consequences. With regard to the ecosystem, such a market-based framework requires increasing extraction of materials and energy from natural systems.

The Treadmill relies on automation and other forms of technology that are more natural resource and chemical intensive, and that displace and disempower labor. The result, then, is greater pollution and increased social inequalities. Thus, contrary to the ecological modernization model, the Treadmill argues that social and environmental change will likely only result from major disruptions to this system, rather than from moderate reforms and adjustments (Gould; Schnaiberg; Weinberg, 1996).

### *The risk society*

A related theoretical framework is Ulrich Beck's "risk society" thesis (1992, 1995). He argues that "new hazards" associated with the risk society:

- Are unlimited in time and space
- Are socially unlimited in scope – potentially everyone is at risk
- May be minimized, but not eliminated
- Are irreversible
- Have diverse sources, so that traditional methods of assigning responsibility do not work. Beck calls this "organized nonliability"
- Are on such a scale or may be literally incalculable in ways that exceed the capacities of state or private organizations to provide insurance against them or compensation

The risk society thesis puts forward the position that modernity is a fundamentally anti-ecological endeavor that is doomed to failure. The "design fault" that Mol views as easily correctable, is, for Beck, the core of the problem and the death knell of society. The politics of a risk society thus has the potential to challenge the fundamental premises on which industrial society is constructed because it views modernity itself, and our most cherished notions of civilization, progress, and development as the root of the problem. In this regard, the risk

society thesis shares common ground with the treadmill of production model. These two theories also emphasize the role of ecological hazards in modern society, with the difference being that the treadmill emphasizes social inequality as the root of the problem much more than risk society, which sees greater “democratization” of risks as the outcome and potential reason to motivate change.

### *Life in the modern world: a toxic treadmill, a risk society*

In this section, I consider evidence that one might consult in a test of the theories of environmental progress or retreat. We have to, of course, begin with the intensely anti-environmental stance of the current White House administration, since 2001. In that time we have seen a major series of attacks on environmental regulations (or their general lack of enforcement), the refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol on global climate change, the continued refusal to ratify the Basel Convention – which regulates the international trade in hazardous wastes, the extension of special exemptions from hazardous waste regulations to the Pentagon – the leading polluter in the U.S., the weakening of federal pesticide regulations, the defunding of the Superfund program, and plans to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Thus the outlook is not positive.

But more globally, every living thing on the earth has been exposed to some level of human-made toxic substances. Lead, strontium-90, pesticides, and persistent organic pollutants (POPs) pervade our environment and reside in our bodies. This is a relatively new phenomenon, occurring largely during and after World War II, as the production and use of hazardous substances increased exponentially in warfare, agriculture, and a range of industries (transportation, housing, etc). Thus to be modern is to live in a toxic world. The numerous industries that generate hazardous wastes are not marginal, incidental, or aberrant; they are “the backbone of any industrial country, providing not only employment, but substantially contributing to the general welfare” (Hilz, 1992, p. 10). And, as other nations move into the category of “industrialized” states, “[...] hazardous waste has been an expected by-product of economic activity” (Hilz 1992, p. xiii).

All of this behavior has real consequences of course. The United Nations’ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) reported in no uncertain terms that the global environmental crisis is dire and worsening by the year. Toxic materials exposure can cause genetic defects, reproductive disorders, cancers, neurological damage, and the destruction of immune systems. In February 2004 scientists



with the USEPA estimated that one-in-six pregnant women has enough mercury in her blood to pose a risk of brain damage to her developing child. This new estimate is double that of a previous calculation, which claimed that about eight percent of U.S. women of childbearing age had elevated blood mercury levels (Environment News Service, 2004).

The evidence of risk and disease associated with industrialization abounds. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a study in January 2003, in which they tested a sample of more than 9,000 individuals across the U.S. and found pesticides in 100% of their bodies (Centers for Disease Control, 2003). Polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs) are a little known class of neurotoxic chemicals embedded in computers, televisions, cars, furniture and other common products used by global North consumers every day, and increasingly by consumers in the South. PBDEs are ubiquitous not only because they are contained in so many consumer products but also because they leak into the environment during production, use, and disposal. As a result, they are found in household dust, indoor and outdoor air, watersheds, and the body tissues of dozens of species of animals around the world, including humans. Women's breast milk in the U.S., Europe, and Canada has been found to have high levels of PBDE, and most residents in the U.S. are believed to carry levels of this chemical that are medically unsafe.

Despite the relatively more powerful environmental and labor movement community in Europe, these nations continue to pollute at an alarming volume. One in five persons employed in EU nations is exposed to carcinogenic agents on the job. Cancer, asthma, and neuropsychiatric disorders are some of the illness associated with the 100,000 chemicals and biological agents marketed in the European Union, according to the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (Environment News Service, 2003).

Given the high level of toxicity of everyday life in the global North, if one is not planning on reducing toxic inputs into production (which generally seems to be the case), then it makes sense to seek outlets for dumping some of the most hazardous of substances elsewhere; hence the problem of waste export to global south nations, which may allow us to embrace the idea of ecological modernization because the more visible dimensions of pollution are now "out of sight, out of mind," (which also incidentally occurs as a result of domestic environmental racism).

According to a United Nations sponsored study released in 2002, citizens in the U.S. and Canada may enjoy a cleaner environment "at the expense of

global natural resources and climate”. Affluence among nations is highly correlated with environmental harm (Hilz 1992, p. 3). The 24 richest and most heavily industrialized nations collectively produce 98 percent of all hazardous wastes. The U.S. and Germany in the 1990s were the world’s largest exporters, respectively, of hazardous wastes.

Back on Chicago’s Southside neighborhoods where Hazel Johnson and People for Community Recovery are based, pollution levels have not receded. During the last three decades, global waste companies like Waste Management (WMX) have continued to build power through mergers and were even able to improve their public relations image and deepen their power over communities like Chicago by offering recycling services, while at the same time facilitating the export of waste to communities of color in other states in the U.S. and to other nations (Pellow, 2002).

Thus, the evidence indicates quite strongly that the global environmental crisis is not receding, and that social and environmental inequalities persist within and between nations, lending support to the treadmill of production, risk society, and environmental racism theses. Regarding the ecological modernization thesis, if states and industries were truly incorporating environmental sustainability criteria into their decision-making at every level of policy, the state of the ecosystem and society would be much improved. Unfortunately, we have a long way to go before this idea comes to fruition.

## Discussion and conclusion

I explore two questions in this paper: 1) How well do scholarly models of racial inequality explain racism when we examine the impact of environmental harm on people of color? And 2) Are environmental conditions improving in the U.S. and globally? I have argued that the struggle for environmental justice represents two trends that are often not linked together: 1) the continued oppression of people of color in this society; and 2) the continuing if not worsening environmental crisis in the US and globally.

### *Race and the environment*

There is a good deal of discussion about the structural impacts and effects of racism on people of color in the U.S. and globally, but the literatures on

racism have yet to seriously consider the ways in which environmental and natural resource destruction are embedded in (and make possible) institutional racism. Much of the research on racism finds that the hierarchies between groups are material and structural, but scholars limit these models to the obvious built environment with no consideration of how the natural environment is implicated. But the exploitation of human beings and the natural environment are linked. Theoretically, we can then re-think our models and ideas about what racism itself is. Typically, we think of racism as “a system of oppression of...people of color by white Europeans and white Americans...[a] system of discrimination and exclusion of people of color from full participation in the rights, benefits, and privileges associated with citizenship in this society” (Feagin; Vera; Batur, 2001). This is all true. But, as W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out seven decades ago, the material sources and the structural foundation of such power and manipulation are contained in the natural world: timber, oil, land/soil, seeds/crops, minerals, metals, and water (DuBois, 1977). The Conquest of Native peoples in the Americas was, to a great degree an *environmental* “racial project” (Omi; Winant, 1994; Winant, 2001) characterized by the domination of people and natural resources (gold, sugar, spices, etc.). Slavery was a system built on the Native Conquest, characterized by African peoples working under coerced conditions on land that was stolen from aboriginal peoples. The industrial revolutions in Europe and the U.S. were likewise fueled by human exploitation (slave and free wage labor) to produce agricultural products and factory goods for consumption and export around the globe. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century economies are not fundamentally different, in that the manufacturing and service sectors are marked by extreme wage/salary differentials along race/class/gender/immigration status lines and rely on a greater volume of natural resources than ever before (Pellow; Park, 2002). Theories of racial inequality (or any form of social hierarchy) would be more robust if the ecological basis of social structures were considered because for all the talk of post-racialism or even modern racist practices, at the core they are generally crude and coercive.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on Urban Political Ecology (UPE) is one school of thought that links social inequality and natural resources much more explicitly than Environmental Justice Studies (see Keil, 2003).

### *Environmental progress or retreat*

The evidence of continued environmental harm associated with production and consumption, and corporate and state insensitivity to environmental protection is overwhelming. Indeed, despite declarations of dematerialization and weightless economies supported by digitization and computerized communication and service delivery systems, we are now more dependent upon natural resources than at any time in human history. So despite our desire to be elevated from dependence on ecosystems, because of our reliance on a market system that functions like a treadmill of production (i.e. premised on the manipulation of ecosystems for economic growth) we have been engaged in a range of wars over metals, oil, timber, and water for years, and this will most certainly continue into the future.

Environmental inequalities are a systemic response to rising concerns among publics over the ecological crisis – a response that facilitates and supports the treadmill of production while placing toxic hazards “out of sight and out of mind” of more privileged populations, which is made possible by residential segregation and transnational hazardous waste export (Bluhdorn, 2000).

In closing, I would like to consider the legacy of the late Ogoni poet and environmental justice activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, who referred to the destructive impacts of multinational oil corporations in his homeland in Nigeria as omnicide, a term he used to capture the full scope of the combination of ecocide and genocide. Omnicide is a powerful way to encapsulate what environmental racism is and it is also a dire warning to all of us to mobilize a collective challenge to the treadmill of production because we all inhabit a global “risk society” in which we are in some way or another impacted by the destructive power of the treadmill of production.

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