

Environmental Injustice
is Unsustainable
Environmentalism

Environmental Protection without Equity is Unsustainable

A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises.—*Our Common Future*

- While some governmental agencies and environmental groups are grappling with how to address environmental injustices most organizations and institutions in the field pay little attention to social equity in their policies and practices.

US Environmental Racial Disparities Abound

Air Pollution

- NO₂ pollutant exposure between people of color and whites is 38%
- Low income whites have lower exposure than high income Latinos
- NO₂ causes asthma, other respiratory ailments, and heart disease the disparity accounts for 7000 additional deaths

Lead Exposure and Poisoning

- African American children remain up to four times more likely to have elevated blood lead levels than their white counterparts

Black-white Disparities in Asthma Rates Rose from 1999 to 2011

- At the end of this period, black children were twice as likely as white children to have asthma and had increased rates of asthma attacks and death compares with their white counterparts.
- Low socioeconomic status also was associated with increased prevalence of asthma. Asthma rates were highest among the lowest income earners and high-school dropouts.
- Racial differences in asthma rates persisted, however, even after accounting for income and education.

What Causes these Environmental Inequities?

- Pervasive environmental injustices like these in America are the manifestation of past and ongoing institutional practices that favor white racial identity and upper middle class and upper-class socioeconomic status.

Environmental Injustice is Multilayered

- Planning - governmental and corporate
- Process - political, legal, financial, and economic
- Outcome - land use, environmental burden, pollution and green space distribution
- Political, Commercial, and Legal Decision makers - Diversity and Inclusion

Race, Class, and Gender are Social Phenomenon and Require Social Analysis

Historic Manifestations

- Race Based Conquest/Slavery/Segregation
- Gender Based Ownership/Education/Political rights

Social Components

- Legal
- Economic
- Political

Social Dominance Theory

Group domination is a universal trait across societies although the intensity and the bases change across societies and across time within societies.*

*See Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto

Social Dominance Theory Explained

Human societies tend to organize as group-based social hierarchies in which at least one group enjoys greater social status and power than other groups.

Universal Phenomenon

Regardless of:

Governmental form

Religion

Economic system

Social Dominance/Hierarchy Axes

Three types of dominance

- Age
- Gender
- Arbitrary Set

Male Dominance

- The gender system reflects a disproportionate distribution of political and military power as well as commercial and economic power to men over women.

White Racial Dominance

- Racial dominance reflects the disproportionate distribution of wealth, income, employment, professions, business ownership, executive offices and board membership, political power, quality housing, security, educational attainment of non Hispanic whites over other groups.

Environmental Benefits of Dominance

- Access to clean green spaces (e.g., parks & wilderness)
- Clean drinking water in homes
- Clean soils and surface water in residential communities
- Higher resilience to natural disasters
- Greater control over local land use decisions
- Control over environmental decision making

Environmental Costs of Subordination

- Higher risks and lower resilience to natural disasters
- Less access to clean drinking water
- Soil and surface water contamination
- Close proximity to waste facilities
- Increased pollution exposure in homes, schools and jobs
- Increased morbidity and disease

The Three Mechanisms of Dominance

- Social Ideologies and Beliefs
- Institutional Structures
- Individual Preferences

Hierarchy Enhancing Beliefs / Ideologies

- Societal beliefs or ideas that support existing social hierarchy(ies) based on moral or intellectual justifications
- Culture of poverty, white supremacy, just world beliefs, meritorious karma, the divine right of kings, Manifest Destiny...

Hierarchy Enhancing beliefs in the environmental context

- Only class determines environmental quality
- Real estate costs determine waste facility location
- People of color moved to polluted areas
- Environmental protection is race and class neutral
- Racial discrimination requires racial animus

Hierarchy Attenuating Beliefs and Ideologies

- Societal beliefs/ideas that undermine social hierarchy
- Human rights, civil rights, feminism, womanism, socialism, ethnic/racial pride...

Hierarchy Attenuating Beliefs in the environmental context

- Environmental racism requires systemic reform
- People are entitled to environmental justice
- Community centered decision-making is a priority
- Implicit race and gender bias requires attention
- Intersectional race and gender discrimination is the norm on corporate boards and in executive offices

Hierarchy Enhancing Institutions

- Reproduce and maintain social hierarchy through their allocation of more positive social value to dominant groups.
- Financial institutions, government agencies, criminal justice systems, and corporations represent hierarchy enhancing institutions.

Hierarchy Enhancing Environmental Institutions

- Environmental organizations that protect “everyone” without regard to existing social inequality further status quo injustices through neglect and ignorance.
- In the same way that animals will have distinct impacts upon them as a result of human development based on their location, different human communities experience the impacts of pollution differently based on their locations as well.

Hierarchy Enhancing Environmental Institutions

- Institutions and the individuals within them readily replicate dominance without thinking.
- Challenging dominance requires social participants to make waves and buck systems that usually come at some cost.
- This asymmetrical relationship grounds and cements hierarchy. Institutions committed to traditions and policies that are “hierarchy neutral” routinely maintain and perpetuate hierarchy as a direct result.

Hierarchy Enhancing Environmental Institutions

- Through presupposed neutrality and the imagined transcendence of race, class, and gender hierarchy in environmental quality and environmental decision-making companies, firms, and organizations routinely enhance race, class, and gender hierarchy.
- Environmental legal decisions reflect this reasoning and further these results.

Hierarchy Enhancing Environmental Institutions

- Big Law
- EPA
- State Environmental Agencies
- Environmental non-profit organizations
- Waste disposal corporations
- Local land use boards

No Neutral Ground

- Environmental decision-making takes place within the context of the nation's social dominance paradigm.
- Institutions making environmental decisions either challenge or conform to the existing social dominance norms of action and ideological outlook.

Hierarchy Attenuating Institutions

- These institutions provide disproportionate assistance to members of subordinate groups.
- Religious organizations aiding the poor, civil and human rights organizations, and welfare organizations are considered hierarchy attenuating institutions.

Hierarchy Attenuating Institutions

- Rather than a function of individual group-based malice, environmental inequity also results from social processes designed and operated in favor of dominant groups.
- Reproducing hierarchy is to riding with the current but minimizing hierarchy is to paddling upstream.

Hierarchy Attenuating Environmental Institutions

- Grassroots environmental justice groups
- The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice
- We Act
- Howard University School of Law Environmental Justice Center 😊

Environmental Consequences of Social Dominance

- In America, race and class hierarchy independently and jointly frame the environmental quality of the places where people live, work, and play.
- Moreover, the distribution of the benefits and burdens of pollution flow inversely along the axes of race, class, and gender hierarchy.

Environmental Consequences of Social Dominance

- The economic benefits flow upward to corporate executives, shareholders, political decision makers and their constituencies.
- The burdens of pollution run down the race and class axes concentrating exposure to harmful air pollutants, contaminated subsistence fish stocks, and proximity to hazardous and other solid wastes to people of color across economic strata and to working class people across racial groups.

Women at the Intersection Suffer the Most

- Women are overrepresented among the poor and underrepresented as wealth increases in American society so women of all races bear a disproportionate share of environmental burdens.
- While women disproportionately experience environmental injustices as political constituencies, they are underrepresented in the corporate and elective offices drafting environmental laws and setting environmental policy.

Social Dominance Solutions

- Ultimately, sustainable environmentalism replaces practices and policies that distribute environmental burdens and benefits along the gender, class, race, national origin, and citizenship lines with those that promote social equity as an indispensable ingredient in sustaining and enhancing environmental quality.