

11.386 Response 1

These readings introduce some of the basic principles of environmental justice (EJ), begin to explain origins of environmental inequity, and use case studies to examine the nuances of these inequities. Bullard uses the southern U.S. as an EJ case study because of its historic and ongoing structural disenfranchisement of African Americans. Citing low taxes, cheap labor, and lenient environmental regulations, the South lured a number of industries; but the economic benefits and the quality of life costs of those facilities are not evenly shared amongst races and classes. Bullard describes a cyclical process wherein firms chose to locate noxious facilities in low income minority areas that pose little political resistance to those facilities, which in turn leads to a depressing of property values and a further marginalized community. Moreover, throughout the 1960s and 70s, environmental concerns were not at the fore of many minorities' efforts, as they devoted their energies to other civil rights issues including housing and education. Bullard counters this by offering examples of prior rallies against environmental injustices, closing with a call for further actions by the growing movement. I found the regional context of this piece useful for understanding EJ issues beyond a site-specific scale, though I would have appreciated a more systematic analysis of the patterns of environmental inequity in the region. I was left feeling that the excerpt straddled genres of popular history, political piece, and understated social research. This can, however, be useful as an introductory text to the discipline, as the many citations to this piece might indicate.

I found the most useful portions of the Commission on Civil Rights report to be the sections towards the end in which they described specific federal programs and executive orders with real ramifications for the EJ movement. I did not find the anecdotal references to injustices in various municipalities to be very compelling or necessary, though I am not certain of the intended audience of this document. However, I would argue that many of the criticisms I have heard leveraged against EJ lie in the literature's inability to demonstrate causality of EJ effects. As such, I believe that advocacy or informational documents are less well served by tossing around various municipal examples, as they are in investigating the historic and legal frameworks that have led to environmental injustice. The description of Executive Order 12,898 as well as Brownfields and Superfund programs pointed to real need for research (on multiple risk exposure) and advocacy (on implementation of existing programs).

Primed by my prior interest in seeing more discussion of the pathways by which environmental injustice comes about, I found the Rechtschaffen and Gauna reading to be the most enlightening of the three. Rabin's notion of expulsive zoning and Collin's description of nonscientific siting practices were particularly instructive. However, they are countered by Blais, who claims that LULUs are accompanied by the benefit of lower rents, revealing rational market preferences of those who choose to live near these sites. Been bolsters this claim by noting that much of the prior EJ analysis fails to establish that communities with LULUs were not comprised of residents who "came to the nuisance" through residential dynamics. It seems that the causality issue is still up for debate. Adding political and psychological considerations to these economic and land use discussions, one sees where much of the strength of the EJ movement must lie. Political disenfranchisement of minorities is still pervasive, while the psychology of racism remains a persistent and challenging force in our "liberal" society. How these political and psychological forces play out over space should be an ongoing charge of researchers interested in EJ; addressing those forces is the charge of EJ organizers and community members nationwide.