

Introduction

Environmental Justice Activism Then and Now

In the 1980s and early 1990s, environmental justice activists made headlines across California and the nation. Tribes, low-income communities, and communities of color faced serious environmental problems: agricultural poisons, incinerators that released toxic substances such as dioxin into the air, industrial accidents at oil refineries, and direct exposure to hazardous wastes, among others. But their pleas for help were typically ignored or stonewalled by public officials.¹ Many residents therefore turned to more confrontational tactics. Corporate representatives were run out of town by angry residents at raucous public hearings; roads were blockaded to prevent access to industrial sites; schoolchildren skipped school and set up their desks inside the halls of the state capitol; and Spanish-speaking residents of Kettleman City, told to “go to the back of the room” to hear a Spanish translation about a proposed hazardous waste incinerator, instead stormed the front.²

These kinds of disruptive “outsider” tactics are less common today. Now, many California environmental justice activists use “insider” tactics: they work *with* the government rather than disrupt routine government activities through protest. Many activists who now adopt insider political tactics had in the past been excluded from these institutional channels, and at least some of them had once seen these forms of activism as complicit rather than pragmatic. Nonetheless, environmental justice activists now sit on government advisory boards at the local, regional, state, and national levels. They are on staff in the governor’s

office, the Public Utilities Commission, and the California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA). Paid environmental justice professionals engage in politicking in the state capitol and train residents to lobby Congress. They write opinion editorials and host gala events that honor state regulators and local developers alongside the residents impacted by pollution and other environmental harms. Multiple groups endorse candidates seeking political office. People from the state governor to the largest waste management company in North America profess their commitment to environmental justice.

The shift from disruptive, demanding, and confrontational tactics to absorption into institutional structures was well underway by the 2000s. Many community groups had formalized into nonprofit organizations; later, their staff began to trickle into government. Increasingly, environmental justice nonprofits have professionalized, creating formal organizational and legal structures, focusing on fundraising, and hiring full-time paid staff to manage administrative work and community organizing. These days, when environmental justice street protests do occur, they are hardly disruptive at all; activists gain permits to hold marches and follow a predefined travel route, after which life quickly goes back to normal. This book documents this shift and examines how and why it took place. This history of the environmental justice movement in California analyzes how its members use “insider” tactics, “outsider” tactics, and the grey space in between—a project that is particularly important now, as California increasingly serves as a model of not just environmentalism but also environmental justice policy for the rest of the country.

DEBATING HOW TO MAKE CHANGE

The question of how to best bring about change is an old one, going back to even before the antislavery movement of the nineteenth century. Change-oriented groups seem to have always been internally divided over whether to push for improvements under existing forms of governance or to push for more radical, or even revolutionary changes intended to address the root causes of the problems. Noted abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass grappled with these tensions in his own life, first pressing loudly the case for the Civil War and later trying to make improvements from within government. And like activists today, Douglass was critiqued by others for both modes of change.³ Since then, the labor movement, the civil rights movement, Black Power, and many other movements have grappled with this central question.⁴ In the

environmental movement, this tactical split has played out in a messy, public fashion. Some environmentalists tried to directly disrupt business as usual, chasing down whaling boats at sea to block their harpoons, sinking illegal whaling vessels, or chaining themselves to trees and conducting long-term “tree-sits” high above the ground to protect redwood forests from being cut down.⁵ Others worked to reduce harm through regulatory change, lawsuits, public education, and collaboration with industry or government.

These two poles are sometimes loosely, if imprecisely, referred to as “revolution” and “reform.” Reformists tend to focus on improving existing forms of governance in incremental ways through insider tactics: ways of working within the current system, such as electoral politics and policy advocacy.⁶ This approach to social change has remained fairly constant across time. Revolutionaries, on the other hand, have seen peaks and troughs in their numbers and popularity throughout US history. Their efforts encompass activities ranging from (infrequent) efforts to actually overthrow the state to cultural revolution to rhetoric. Today, revolutionary rhetoric has largely been replaced by calls for deep structural change in existing forms of governance. Although these calls often do not specify how such transformative changes are to be achieved, they are associated with more disruptive, outsider political tactics, engaged in by those shut out of or averse to participating in government.

However, the boundaries between “insider” and “outsider” tactics are not always clear. Some groups use outsider tactics in support of incremental policy change; some of those working for change in political insider spaces find themselves still treated as outsiders; others pursue “inside-outside” strategies by attempting to use multiple sets of tactics at different times and places; and still others continue to use the time-honored outsider practices of protests and marches, although (as I show in chapters 2 and 3) many of these once-outsider tactics have become so routinized that they have lost some of their disruptive punch.

Very few environmental justice activists today embrace the explicitly revolutionary language or ideology that was said to be “in the air” in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, but which had waned by the time people began to organize under the banner of environmental justice activism in the 1980s. In the 1980s and early 1990s, environmental justice activists frequently used disruptive practices, but this was as often because they were shut out of traditional formal government processes as because their political perspectives were particularly radical. The early environmental justice movement was made up of people

with a wide array of political ideologies, and as a movement it was never explicitly revolutionary. Some activists simply wanted particular polluting industries not to be located where they lived, others brought with them personal experiences with more radical movements, and still others were politicized to varying degrees through their experiences with environmental justice activism.⁷ This internal diversity of political perspectives was somewhat occluded by the unifying force of being “against something” (often the construction of new polluting facilities) and being shut out of government decision-making about the thing the activists were against. As more opportunities to work in or with the state have emerged over time, much environmental justice activism has moved to institutional spaces and tactics. However, there is still much continuity between the early environmental justice movement and its contemporary form.⁸

To make matters more complicated, the labeling of activist groups as revolutionary or reformist, insiders or outsiders, institutionalized or grassroots is value laden, and sometimes such labeling is used rhetorically in attempts to discredit activists. For example, one activist pointed out that she was called “radical” by local opponents as a way to paint her as “over the top,” or unreasonable. What were her radical demands? Nontoxic, potable water in residents’ homes. This is hardly radical, for the provision of potable water is widely considered to be a basic obligation of government in the United States. Perhaps the most controversial value attribution within activist work is labeling a particular person, organization, or movement as having been co-opted: induced to change its actions through provision of funds or status, or otherwise incorporated into an existing structure or process in ways that minimize the impact of activism.⁹ These allegations are particularly divisive when levied from within movements.¹⁰

Although few scholars have directly focused on internal tactical debates among environmental justice activists, much scholarship implicitly engages these debates.¹¹ Much early environmental justice scholarship celebrated the disruptive actions and potential of the environmental justice movement, although scholars did not necessarily focus on analyzing these tactics. Another thread of scholarship analyzes reformist approaches, with particular attention to environmental justice policy implementation.¹² Today, the latter thread of scholarship predominates in research on efforts to solve environmental injustices—unsurprising, since reformism currently makes up the dominant wing of environmental justice activism.¹³



FIGURE 1. Tap water samples from San Joaquin Valley towns, labeled with their contaminants, November 10, 2007. Photo by author, previously published in Perkins and Sze, “Images from the Central Valley”; and London, Huang, and Zagofsky, “Land of Risk/Land of Opportunity.”

A handful of scholars attending to the movement’s changing politics have begun to criticize its shift to insider tactics and reformist goals; these scholars argue that the environmental problems facing residents in poor communities and communities of color cannot be addressed by “tinkering with policies.”¹⁴ Indeed, Laura Pulido and Juan De Lara write that the emphasis on “rights-based strategies that seek recognition and redress from the liberal state only validate the underlying injustice of racial capitalism and colonialism.”¹⁵ Such scholars perhaps carry on the firebrand legacy of portions of the early environmental justice movement; their calls for deep transformation that fundamentally alters the balance of power in society echo the 1960s- and 1970s-era appeals for revolution.

The environmental justice movement responds to the fact that the burden of modern environmental harms—toxins, polluted air and water, pesticides—is disproportionately borne by people in poor communities and communities of color. As some environmental justice activists and scholars see it, in order to do away with environmental racism and other forms of environmental inequality, we must fundamentally remake society and the state. And yet how is such a transformation

to be achieved? Many contemporary scholars and activists do not see a path to achieving such deep changes, and they turn to reformism to try to make what improvements they can.

This is the first book-length treatment to examine the changing politics and tactics of environmental justice activism along these lines over time, as well as the intramovement tensions that these changes have produced. While I am not dismissive of reformist policy work, I take critiques of it seriously. Ultimately, I focus less on what I think environmental justice activists *ought* to do and instead on what they *have been* doing, why they have been doing it, and how well it is working. I also examine how environmental justice activists struggle to balance *ought* with *is*, ideals and pragmatism; I attend to both radical scholars' critiques of state-centered policy reform efforts and the changes that such efforts have achieved so far. In other words, this book embraces the messy middle ground where many activists spend their time, trying to make change as best they can within the powerful structural constraints that limit their efforts, facing a state that is both a cause of their problems and, at times, at least a partial solution to them—a source of countervailing pressure that could be made to rein in the worst excesses of capitalism.

The constraints on activism, which affect what forms it takes, are often underanalyzed. Environmental justice activists are not completely free actors making decisions independent of the larger world in which they are enmeshed. Therefore, this book locates activists within the complexity of the society that shapes their tactics, following the tradition of social movement scholarship that analyzes political constraints and opportunities.¹⁶ For example, scholars in the political process school of the study of social movements show how political opportunities appear when governments reduce repression, elect a new leader, or see existing leadership destabilized. Political opportunities can also be influenced by formal and informal mobilizing structures into which people are already organized, such as the Black churches and colleges that helped mobilize people into the American civil rights movement.¹⁷ I do not examine in detail how these existing social institutions funnel people into activism; instead, I focus on the interlocking matrix of racial politics, economic neoliberalism, and social constraints in the United States. These form the context in which activists must work.

This does not mean I believe activists have no agency. I draw on individual interviews to share activists' perceptions of their political options, their successes and failures, and the rationale that informs the tactics

they use. I also show how arguments about tactics are based on value judgments regarding what constitutes victory and failure. Some activists see in the history of environmental justice activism a string of successes, with many polluting facilities having been closed or prevented from opening. These groups tend to value the movement's disruptive roots and see them as valuable tactics to be retained. Other activists look at the same history and see failure, for low-income communities and communities of color continue to experience disproportionately high levels of pollution. Some of these activists have moved away from early disruptive tactics and focused on institutional approaches to change instead.

WHAT IS THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT?

The environmental justice movement is a form of environmental activism that seeks specifically to redress the disproportionate effects of environmental harms on people in poor communities and communities of color, which are often the sites of industrial facilities, landfills, pesticide drift, and more, and the acute and chronic exposures to toxins that result. It also addresses the lack of environmental amenities such as parks in the same places. These are daunting tasks; the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits seems almost unavoidable, for industries and the state have actively fostered and maintained the long histories of racism, classism, and violence that underpin capitalism. Over fifty years after the legal high-water marks of the civil rights movement, white supremacy continues to be a structuring principle of the US political and economic system, as evidenced by police violence, the outsized incarceration of people of color, the underfunding of public education systems, voter disenfranchisement, and the unequal distribution of pollution that undermines life in communities of color.¹⁸ At the same time, income inequality is skyrocketing, with parts of the former middle class getting pushed into the working class and the poor. These persistent, entrenched inequalities are not accidental and certainly are not produced by any cultural, intellectual, or personal failings of the poor or of people of color. Rather, these inequalities are the result of long-standing efforts by many whites and the wealthy to gain or preserve their access to profits, resources, and psychological benefits at the expense of people of color and the poor. Such practices are entangled with the broader economic system of capitalism, which both helps create and extracts profits from social systems that devalue some people's



FIGURE 2. Buttonwillow Park, January 30, 2009. Photo by author, previously published in Perkins and Sze, "Images from the Central Valley"; and Wells, *Environmental Justice in Postwar America*.



FIGURE 3. Teresa De Anda standing across from her home, into which pesticides regularly drifted from agricultural fields, Earlimart, March 7, 2008. Photo by author, previously published in Perkins and Sze, "Images from the Central Valley"; Harrison, *Pesticide Drift and the Pursuit of Environmental Justice*; and London, Huang, and Zagofsky, "Land of Risk/Land of Opportunity."

lives (i.e., people of color, women, and the poor) in favor of others (i.e., whites, men, and the wealthy).

Patterns of social inequality align with contemporary patterns of environmental inequality. For example, the disproportionate exposure to air pollution experienced by people of color has a great deal to do with histories of legal and extralegal housing segregation, urban redevelopment that regularly built freeways through communities of color, and city planning that zoned these neighborhoods for industrial land uses.¹⁹ Contemporary disasters such as the lead poisoning of residents in Flint, Michigan (through contaminated drinking water) come from this same long history of housing segregation, combined with deindustrialization, lack of maintenance of public infrastructure, and a privileging of profits over the well-being of the predominantly Black and poor residents of the city.²⁰ Concepts such as the racial state, racial liberalism, racial neoliberalism, racial capitalism, and a racialized “treadmill of production” highlight how the racialized political economic processes of capitalism create and sustain environmental inequality through both racism and classism.²¹ Environmental inequality is deeply rooted in the structures of modern society—perhaps even a cornerstone of modernity itself.²²

Historical accounts of US environmentalism have long perpetuated racism and classism, ignoring the contributions of people of color and the poor to the environmental movement.²³ Even as late as 2018, David Vogel’s *California Greenin’: How the Golden State Became an Environmental Leader* ignored the contributions of Latinx, Black, and Indigenous people and Asian Pacific Americans. Their contributions to environmentalism first received widespread attention during the early 1990s, when journalists began to attend to environmental activism in communities of color that were living with more than their “fair share” of pollution. These activists, and low-income whites, adopted a new label, environmental *justice* activism, to distinguish themselves from the broader environmental movement, which was populated largely by white, middle- and upper-class Americans who sought broad protections for air, water, animals and wild places. In contrast, environmental justice activists typically lived in the polluted, low-income communities and communities of color that they sought to protect, and their work often proceeded site by site as they sought to prevent the construction of polluting facilities near their homes and to clean up those already in existence.²⁴

It is difficult to write about environmental justice, because the term is applied very broadly. *Environmental justice* might refer to (1) activism



FIGURE 4. Los Angeles skyline, November 20, 2013. Photo by author, previously published in Perkins, “Research Trip to Los Angeles.”

or a social movement; (2) a goal, ideal, or form of justice; (3) “environmental justice communities,” or the disproportionately polluted places that environmental justice activists seek to protect; (4) environmental justice activists, or people who work in the environmental justice movement; and/or (5) an analytic lens. Scholars, politicians, and activists all use the term environmental justice for their own purposes, expanding the term’s meaning in multiple and sometimes contradictory ways.²⁵ Some of these uses undercut the intentions of the activists who coined the term. For example, to some regulatory actors, environmental justice simply means including residents in environmental decision-making via advisory boards or public hearings, whether or not the decisions made follow the residents’ recommendations.²⁶

When I write about environmental justice activism in this book, I am referencing a historically, geographically specific social movement. The intersection of social inequality and the environment has a long history, which in the United States goes back all the way to colonization, as does engagement with the environment by Latinx, Black, and Indigenous people, Asian Pacific Americans, and the poor.²⁷ However, I define the environmental justice *movement* more narrowly, as the US social movement whose participants began to self-identify as environmental justice

activists in the 1980s. Their origins overlap with the antitoxics movement and multiple anti-racist movements. (California's environmental justice activists draw on a rich array of social movement traditions, including civil rights, Black Power, the farmworkers' movement, the Chicano movement, Red Power and the American Indian movement, and multiple Asian Pacific American organizing traditions.)²⁸ However, even within this bounded category, the term environmental justice is used in different ways by different people. Some activists wholeheartedly embrace the term to describe their work, while others use environmental justice framing in some political contexts but not in others.²⁹ The term is used to cover an increasingly diverse array of activism, including efforts that focus not just on redressing environmental problems, such as pollution and toxicity, but also on adding environmental benefits, such as parks and community gardens. This, too, is part of the story of the ongoing political evolution of environmental justice activism.

The environmental justice activists of the 1980s and early 1990s sought to clearly distinguish themselves from the broader environmental movement represented by organizations such as the Sierra Club and the World Wildlife Foundation. (Such organizations are part of what is often called the "mainstream" environmental movement, a convention I follow here to distinguish it from the environmental justice movement, though such borders are messy.) But the separation between the environmental justice movement and the grassroots antitoxics movement was much less clear. The antitoxics movement was a low-income, multi-racial movement that had, since the late 1970s, been working to fight toxic spills, hazardous chemicals, water poisoned by industrial runoff, and so on. This movement specifically focused on stopping the release of toxins into the environment and cleaning up existing hazards. The antitoxics movement's understanding of where pollution was located, and thus who needed to be helped, was largely class- rather than race-based: they worked for and with poor and working-class people of all racial backgrounds.

The overlap between the antitoxics movement and what would later become the environmental justice movement is visible in the late 1970s Love Canal campaign, which some see as an early campaign of the antitoxics movement and others see as an origin point for the environmental justice movement. In the Love Canal campaign, white woman Lois Gibbs became the highly visible spokesperson for a working-class community in Love Canal, New York. Love Canal was built on top of liquid hazardous waste that oozed up into residents' basements and backyards,

causing severe health problems. Eventually, more than eight hundred Love Canal residents were relocated, and the federal Superfund system for cleaning up highly toxic sites was created.

My own research confirms that the antitoxics and environmental justice movements had significant overlap and, in some cases, no clear-cut boundaries. The environmental justice movement did not “begin” with Love Canal. Rather, Love Canal is part of the origin story of the low-income, multiracial, but often white-dominated antitoxics movement. As racial tensions grew within antitoxics activism, and as it became increasingly evident that not only class but also race and indigeneity shapes where pollution ends up, the environmental justice movement gradually emerged from the antitoxics movement and activism taking place around the country that drew on other regional, racialized social movements.³⁰

Contrary to some scholars’ assertions that the antitoxics movement was predominantly white, my research shows that people of all racial backgrounds participated in antitoxics activism before the creation of the environmental justice frame, though some of the most visible antitoxics groups with national reach were predominantly white. Over time, some groups that began as predominantly white antitoxics groups became more oriented around activism by and for people of color. Other antitoxics groups whose members were already predominantly people of color switched to an explicit environmental justice framing of their work. Still other predominantly white antitoxics groups collapsed. With these changes, low-income whites became less and less a focus of activists’ efforts.

Where some see the environmental justice movement originating with the Love Canal protests, others say it began in the Warren County protests of 1982, in which protesters lay down on the road to block trucks from transporting soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).³¹ The PCBs had been illegally dumped along North Carolina roadsides to evade new federal laws governing the disposal of hazardous waste. The toxic soil removed from the roadsides was slated to be placed in a landfill located near the predominantly Black town of Afton in Warren County, North Carolina. Local activists came together with regional and national civil rights leaders to stage twenty-five days of protest over seven weeks, during which 523 people were arrested.³² Despite the protests, the contaminated soil was eventually located in Afton, but the evocative photo of Black residents lying down in the road to block the trucks became an iconic image of early environmental justice activism. While it is overly simplistic to say that the environmental