

Finding the Origin of Environmental Injustice in a Broad Social and Historical Context

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I have just begun my teaching career at Bemidji State University as a Ph.d candidate from the University of Missouri- Kansas City. In Kansas City, the economic department teaches heterodox economics, which is a pluralistic approach to various different schools of thought, including Marxist, Post Keynesian, Institutional and social Economics. Consequently, this approach echoes with ecological economics, which recognizes the embeddedness of our economy in the ecological sphere, and the interdisciplinary nature of environmental issues, such as injustice. Kansas City has also been a historically segregated city, where Troost Avenue racially and geographically bisects the community. Troost is the home to an Indian hunting trail, a slave plantation, the famous 18th and Vine Jazz district, and now the decaying downtown that house the impoverished, underserved, predominantly black population. The university campus is in fact, bordered by Troost Avenue. It wasn't hard to talk about injustice, because it is happening right across the campus, just east of Troost, the community is systematically targeted by harmful practices in housing, land use, industrial pollution, and infrastructure. When I began teaching in Bemidji, Minnesota, I realize that I was preaching to a drastically different audience. Most of my students are white, working class, and rural. The interest twist is that our campus is in proximity to three American Indian Reservations, and American Indian studies is one of our signatures. However, without a methodical understanding of how racism, classism and sexism manifest themselves as systems of oppression within a capitalist patriarchal power hierarchy, many responds to injustice to the indigenous people with conflict and anger. Not only their denial to an institutionalized discrimination has long formed, their working class background makes them disinterested in knowledge and skills that are not so practical as to land them a job after graduation.

Knowing my audience, I say to them "our ideas, opinions don't just fall off the sky", indeed they are grounded in different ideologies, and ultimately different methodological

paradigms. Thus, I begin the course by guiding my students through the different frameworks that are used to identify, analyze and resolve environmental issues. Readings are presented from contending arguments on these frameworks, so to leave the final call to the students. By examining mainstream environmental economics, ecofeminism, deep ecology, and Buddhist economics, students begin to see that redlining, economic disinvestment, discriminatory dumping, male dominance in today's society, and slavery, genocide in human history are all interconnected issues rooted in the same oppressive conceptual framework. The logic of dominance used to justify domination of nature is used to justify domination of humans by gender, race, class, age, ethnic, and economic status. Environmental injustices are not simple environmental issues, but complex legal, political, geological, social and economic problems. With that in mind, we then proceed to read the case studies in Bullard's edited volume *The Quest for Environmental Justice*, and through group discussion, to demonstrate the existence of an inequitable distribution of environmental risks based on race and socioeconomic status.

Finally, we explore the concept of sustainability, and what we can do to be sustainable both as an individual and as a democratic citizen. My goal is that by then, the students would know that sustainability is a complex issue that should be approached in an interdisciplinary way, and thus any advocacy must stand in solidarity with all forms of oppression, sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and heterosexism. Environmental justice movement must be a multiracial, multi-issue, multi-regional one that broadens its agenda to include social, racial and economic injustice.

To those students who could care less the injustice because they are white privileged believe that they will never be the victim of injustice, I read to them this quote by Pastor Martin Neimoeller: "They came first for the communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew... Then they came for me and by that time there was no one left to speak up".