



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

Environmental Justice

Narrator: 'We are staying here'. Last night on the road to Gorleben and protestors gave notice of how hard they will be to move.

Against them the biggest police task force of it's kind seen in Germany. More than 30,000 officers. Their orders to see a cargo of nuclear waste through to it's journey's end.

Male: As someone who grew up in the shadow of Windscale, now branded as Sellafield's Nuclear Power Station. I am much more concerned with those kinds of dumping that put my children in danger. Hazardous materials such a PCB's or nuclear waste.

Narrator: Around Gorleben and the strength of the grass roots anti nuclear movement, is plain to see. Farmers are lining up with local citizens. And hardened protest groups, saying 'No' to a nuclear storage site in their back yard.

Male: It's interesting that in many western societies the dumping of toxic materials takes place in neighbourhoods occupied by people who don't have a history of political participation. In America for example, waste is often discarded in low income neighbourhoods. And this can have a disproportionate impact on certain ethnic groups. Julian Antriman's work on environmental politics highlights this kind of injustice. On both sides of the Atlantic. Julian was once a key campaigner in the black environmental network in the UK. But now is professor of urban and environmental planning at Tufts University in Boston, and an advocate within the environmental justice movement.

Unlike Erin Brockevich, and the landmark cases of white working class protest, the group most effective by toxic dumping, is the African Americans. To understand this, we need to look at the environmental justice movement in much more detail. Julian spoke to us on the telephone from Boston.

Julian Antriman: One of the interesting things about the environmental justice movement in the United States is that there have been many streams that have contributed to the river of environmental justice. And those streams are the civil rights movement, and the anti toxics movement, academia has contributed to the environmental justice movement. Native Americans struggle for self determination. The labour movement. Especially the Farm workers unions. And also traditionally environmental movement has contributed. So, I think one of the defining things has been its ability to frame injustice, to minority and low income people. As an issue which should be taken up by the civil rights movement. So the dissenters, the people who claim environmental injustice, have tapped into a very very strong vein. So really by the 1980's, there was quite a strong movement that was starting to say 'Hey, our neighbourhood's are disproportionately dumped on. Our neighbourhoods are disproportionately visited on by what are called 'Lulu's. Locally unwanted land uses.' Bus garages. Toxic waste transfer stations. Toxic storage and disposal facilities. And that really led to the rallying cry of the environmental justice movement. Which was environmental racism. And I think it was really at that point, if you could link the two words 'environment' and racism', you then have this direct plug into the civil rights movement.

Narrator: So this movement is basically a NIMBY. A 'not in my back yard' movement'.

Julian: The EJ movement started out as an anti toxic don't dump it in my back yard movement. But it's now I think a lot broader. And why is the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, which is the transportation authority for the urban Massachusetts. Why does it

spend more on its suburban rail routes, than it does on its inner urban bus routes? Whatever issue we are dealing with, we are largely dealing with an unjust distribution of both the goods, and the bads. The bads are poor transportation issue, like toxics. And issues like sprawl. The good things are things like access to quality green space. And access to the countryside. Many definitions of environmental justice, just talk about EJ as being stopping dumping bad stuff, in minority neighbourhoods. More recent definitions, such as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts definition, which came out in 2002. Really looks at environmental justice also in the positive. I.e. it's not just about stopping doing these things to minority neighbourhoods. It's about giving minorities access to environmental quality as well. So it's both. Stopping bads, and increasing access to goods.

Narrator: In the past you've described the emergence of the environmental justice movement as a vocabulary for political mobilisation and action. What exactly do you mean by that?

Julian: Environment justice is a vocabulary for dissent about the way things are, to do with specifically the local environment and increasingly more, the global environment. So in a sense, environmental justice is a vocabulary for change. We saw that the syntax, the structure of language used around environmental justice, is a very open inclusive language.

Narrator: Is that why you attach so much importance to examples, such as the Dudley Street neighbourhood initiative?

Julian: Dudley Street was the first not for profit in the United States to get what's called 'eminent domain.' I.e. the power of development over a piece of land. They were the first community group to do this. And Mayor Flynn of Boston at the time gave them that domain. So that they could through their neighbourhood committee, have more control of that land. They've developed affordable housing. They've done sort of greening initiatives. They've cleaned up what are called Brownfield sites. These are kind of abandoned sites that seem to litter the American cityscape. They've cleaned them up, found them owners got redevelopments done. They've developed urban agriculture projects.

Narrator: Is sustainable development what we're talking about here?

Julian: Environmentalism in the Dudley Street model is just sustainability. It's about not just affordable housing. But it's about green affordable housing. The Just sustainability model, says it's not good enough just to give people affordable housing. We've got to give them energy efficient affordable housing. Because the people that are going into affordable housing, are those who can least afford the energy bills.

Narrator: And this involves active citizens getting involved in particular projects. And feeling an obligation to actually change the way in which their environment operates.

Julian: I would argue that people like the Dudley Street Neighbourhood initiative, are as involved in the process of involvements, and deliberation, and defining the objectives. Than they are in the product. They believe that the product will look after itself. If you get the process right.

Narrator: You've already said something about what environment justice involves. And your own work as an academic and formerly as a campaigner in the UK, means that you've experiences on both sides of the Atlantic, involved in this particular movement. This must have generated many questions about what environment justice can and should look like, according to each specific case.

Julian: Well certainly, when we set up the black environment network, in Britain, and that was 1987. This was around the time of the toxic waste and race report in the United States. We didn't have anything like that. However, rural access for people from black and ethnic minority groups. There were problems with bad access. We were looking at whether people felt that they had a right. Whether they had the ease or the confidence to go into rural Britain. And one of my conclusions was that we as black Britain's would never feel fully at home here,

until we could access every part of this place. And not feel that we were being stared at or being threatened, or being made fun of. So environment justice in its early phases in Britain, through the black environment network, was a very different kind of environmental injustice. To what was going on in the United States, when neighbourhoods were being dumped on. We didn't have any evidence of that. But then again, the nature of race in Britain is very differently played to the nature of race within the United States.

Narrator: Has this dissenting movement come in from the cold?

Julian: When you invoke environmental justice, at environmentalist meetings, or at urban development meetings here in the States. It's almost like evoking civil rights. Nobody will disagree with environmental justice. Because to disagree with environment justice, you're almost branding yourself as being a racist. And I still think it's the most dynamic force within environmentalism within the United States. I still think it's the biggest export that the United States has given to environmentalism in the rest of the world.