

11.368 2004
Reaction Paper #5

A Critical Review of the Methodology of Environmental Racism Research (1996)

Laura Pulido (1996)

Antipode

Pulido's commentary is not so much a technical description of environmental justice research methodology in practice as it is a prescription for a broadly antiracist ideological perspective in approaching issues of environmental (in)justice. At first I found the paper obtuse and unclear but eventually came to realize that it articulates many of my own difficulties with a race-based notion of justice as well as unsatisfying efforts at 'scientifically rigorous' and 'statistical' studies of injustice. Pulido argues that there are three fundamental flaws inherent to currently prevalent thinking on racism;

1. racism can be discretely characterized and quantified
2. racism not approached as an ideology
3. causes and effects of racism are universal

Pulido shows intuitively that issues of environmental justice in general, and racism in particular, cannot be simply described and quantified in a set of compact conclusions or statistics. In a way, by trying to objectively qualify and normalize individual situations and instances of environmental injustice (especially in terms of race/ethnicity), a researcher may actually be undermining the larger antiracist battle over justice and equity. It is insinuated that a researcher need not be afraid of having political interest in the results and reception of his research. In fact, he should be as careful in selecting an ideological approach as in gathering and interpreting data.

This paper brought back some important questions in my mind about the basic premise of environmental (in)justice research:

If there can't be an objective test for racism, then why don't we attempt instead to construct a framework of absolute human rights and justice to calibrate against in the future? How can race and class or socioeconomic background be separated as distinct factors in discrimination? If race-based politics are bad, how is an economic perspective better? Why can't there be a universal metric of human rights (fair v. unfair, just v. unjust)?

Toward Environmental Justice; Research, Education, and Health Policy Needs

Institute of Medicine (1999)

National Academy Press

This report outlines a set of recommendations for rigorous epidemiological study focused on issues of environmental justice. It stresses the importance of community involvement and mutual trust/respect between researcher and subject populations, and constructs a notion of community health based on the health of individual inhabitants. Emphasis is placed on copious and standardized data collection. Biomarkers are presented as important tools to monitor exposure level and internal health effects due to environmental hazards. Unfortunately, even within a certain racially-profiled group, there is a wide range of individual toxic susceptibilities and manifestations of illness. In many ways it reminds me of phrenology. Some groups or

individuals might bear more ill health effects because of their genetic or environmental predisposition, but I see this as further amplifying the need for universal standards for hazards exposure. Why should the poorly-understood and variable health effects (or biomarker behavior) of a hazard be legislated rather than the absolute amount of it allowed in the ambient environment? If a person is resistant to benzene poisoning, is it just to allow a company to continue pumping benzene into his yard at high levels until he gets sick? What makes biomarker monitoring better than monitoring of ambient environmental quality? (One answer is that it could be a way to compile synergistic effects or long term accumulation)