A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE METHODOLOGY OF ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM RESEARCH*

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The discovery of "environmental racism"[1] and the rise of the environmental justice movement offer new perspectives on the intersection of racism, social justice, political economy and its methodological and political implications. Environmental racism/justice, as a broad set of concerns, has focused on the relationship between marginalized groups and environmental issues, including the elitism of mainstream environmentalism (Jordan and Snow, 1992; Peña, 1992), the biased nature of environmental policy (Pulido, 1993), the limited participation of nonwhites in environmental affairs (Taylor, 1992), and, perhaps the most salient issue and the focus of this paper, the disproportionate exposure of nonwhites to pollution. Bullard (1994a) describes geographic inequity as the socio-spatial patterns in which low-income and nonwhite communities are excessively burdened by various forms of pollution and hazards. Despite the fact that "environmental racism" has provided a meaningful framework to consolidate the activism of large numbers of people, there has been a great deal of wrangling among academics, industry analysts, and policy-makers as to whether environmental racism actually exists, what it is, and if discriminatory patterns are simply a function of other (i.e., nonracist) forces and structures.

Although social scientists have pursued this topic with the stated goal of contributing to more informed policy making, unspoken political projects lurk beneath the surface of scientific inquiry. Not only is it assumed

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that solid scholarship might contribute to more effective policy, but it has also been intimated that should environmental racism be proven invalid, then perhaps activists would recognize their error and abandon efforts to challenge potentially hazardous land uses:

> With charges of racism, discrimination, and social negligence being bantered about, discussions of the environmental justice issue are often passionate and, occasionally, inflammatory. Behind the emotion, however, two critical questions arise: Does the existing evidence justify such a high-level commitment of resources to addressing environmental justice claims? and What reasonable steps should society take to ensure that environmental policies are fairly enacted and implemented? . . . Before approving additional regulations on facility siting and permitting, policymakers would be well-advised to candidly assess both the quality of the existing environmental racism research as well as the likely costs and benefits of proposed solutions to this problem (Boerner and Lambert, 1994:1–2).

This emphasis on rationality, particularly reductive positivist rationality, while justifiable in light of policy and legal interventions, is problematic from a radical political and theoretical viewpoint.[2] Implicit within this rationale are several tacit assumptions regarding researchers' views of what racism is and how it is experienced. For one, the subtext of much environmental racism research is that racism and its effects can be isolated, and scholars should be able to "catch it in the act" as it were. This, in turn, is predicated on the "fact" that we all know and agree what racism is, and that there exists a single form of racism responsible for environmental discrimination.

That few have sought to reveal the normative and political underpinnings of these unspoken assumptions is unsettling and requires interrogation itself. One way to understand the dominant methodological framework and terrain upon which various positions have been staked out is through Winant's idea of "racial projects" (1994). Opposing racial projects refer to the existence of multiple racial discourses struggling for dominance in the larger public arena; these projects can be left, right, or anywhere else on an ideological spectrum. "A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to organize and distribute resources along particular racial lines" (Winant, 1994:24). By examining the methodology and arguments surrounding environmental racism, we can begin to appreciate the multiplicities of racisms at work, the various racist ideologies presupposing these arguments, and the development of particular positions as indicators of competing racial projects.

This paper will first briefly introduce the idea of environmental racism/justice and then discuss two research questions that have garnered significant attention but have troublesome implications for building an antiracist, counter-hegemonic movement. The first centers on whether "race" or "class" is responsible for discriminatory pollution and the second asks which came first, the nonwhite people or the environmental hazard? An examination of these research questions will make apparent the methodological assumptions of this larger research agenda. Second, I identify three conceptual problems embedded in the dominant usage of racism by researchers in this field. These issues, which include reducing racism to overt actions, denying racism as ideology, and insisting on a fixed, unitary racism, are problematic for trying to build antiracist left politics. Finally, I will conclude by attempting to explain the current research paradigm by way of competing racial projects. Only by deconstructing the discourse surrounding *racism* can we move to a more meaningful and nuanced understanding of what environmental racism is, how it is produced, and how an anti-racist and left movement can develop.

Environmental Racism's Methodological Framework

Racializing Environmental Hazards

Although discriminatory pollution patterns have long existed (Hurley, 1995), researchers did not begin investigating such patterns until the 1970s (McCaull, 1976; Berry, et al., 1977). While marginalized communities may have resisted such forms of oppression, it was not done so under the rubric of environmental racism. Indeed, not until the 1980s did a number of events coalesce to spark, first, the anti-toxics movement and, then, the movement against environmental racism. One catalyst for the rise of the environmental justice movement was the growing visibility of hazardous waste (Szasz, 1994), due in large part to such highly publicized events as the Love Canal tragedy in New York state. Besides heightened public consciousness surrounding hazardous pollution, the civil rights activism of the 1960s and the 1970s had subsided and most antiracist activity had adopted a far more conciliatory tone (see Cruse, 1987). Thus, there existed a set of social justice activists eager to call renewed attention to the persistence of overt racism, moving the antiracist discourse away from such liberal agendas as multiculturalism.[3] Hence, when there was an attempt to place polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB)-laced soil in a largely Black community in Warren County, North Carolina in 1982, residents turned to civil rights leaders for assistance, who in turn, characterized the situation as one of "environmental racism" (Lee, 1992). Congressman

William Fauntroy (D-DC) then inquired whether there was a systematic pattern of environmental discrimination, specifically, African Americans living close to hazardous waste sites. This initial study, centered on the southeastern United States, found that indeed there was a correlation between hazardous waste sites and blacks (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1983), and soon led to other studies at both the national and regional level (United Church of Christ, 1987; Bullard, 1990), investigating air pollution (Gelobter, 1992; Wernette and Nieves, 1992; Burke, 1993), toxic releases (Citizens for a Better Environment, 1989; Bowen et al., 1993), occupational exposure (Friedman-Jimenez, 1989; Ong and Blumenberg, 1993), siting issues (Been, 1993; Hurley, 1995) and unequal enforcement (Lavelle and Coyle, 1992). The proliferation of this evidence, combined with charges of elitism and racism levied against mainstream environmental groups (Shabecoff, 1990), all contributed to growing activism and outrage at the grassroots.

It is important to note that the grassroots movement for environmental justice began as an anti-toxics movement (Cable and Benson, 1993; Capek, 1993; Szasz, 1994), and emanated from both white and nonwhite activists, with the initial emphasis being on working class, and poor communities threatened by both polluters and the state. Nevertheless, it is the plight of nonwhites that is currently receiving most attention, largely through the development and deployment of the "environmental racism" frame.[4] "It's definitely racial discrimination. I'm not saying whites are not exposed. I'm saying the disproportionate exposure to minorities has been the result of systematic policy-making" (Chavis quoted in Kerr and Lee, 1993:18). In short, the creation of "environmental racism" as an organizing strategy shifted attention to nonwhites, specifically, disproportionate exposure to various forms of pollution, their historical exclusion from environmentalism, and the often regressive nature of environmental policy (Alston, 1990; SWOP, 1990; Austin and Schill, 1991; Bryant and Mohai, 1991). It is still unclear why racism has been so much more forceful than, say, an emphasis on equity, which would include whites. Certainly one factor is the authority and organizational capacity of the civil rights establishment. But perhaps more important is the degree to which "race" looms large in the public consciousness and it is no longer acceptable to engage in what the dominant society deems racist behavior (i.e., deliberate targeting). In contrast, income disparities and political weakness emanating from class relations are rarely, if ever, critically discussed. By articulating the situation in "racial" terms, and making unprecedented claims upon both the state and private polluting firms, activists drew attention to their plight, and reinterpreted the problem of toxics as a racist one, thereby eclipsing the needs and concerns of white communities. Chavis (1993:3), previously of the United Church of Christ, defined environmental racism,

... as racial discrimination in environmental policymaking ...
in the enforcement of regulations and laws ... in the deliberate
targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and
the siting of polluting industries ... in the official sanctioning
of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in
communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the
history of excluding people of color from the mainstream en-
vironmental groups, decisionmaking boards, commissions,
and regulatory bodies.

Key Research Questions: "Race or Class" and "Chicken-or-Egg"?

Sensing the potentially threatening implications of the environmental
justice movement to the traditional exercise of power, white political
hegemony and capital accumulation, a number of academics, commenta-
tors and organizations have begun challenging both the idea and exist-
ence of environmental racism (Rees, 1992; Anderton et al., 1994; Boerner
and Lambert, 1994; Lester, Allen and Milburn-Lauer, 1994). As a result,
the waters have been muddied considerably. Two questions, in particular,
have become stumbling blocks to claims of environmental racism. The
first research question is whether "race" or class is responsible for dis-
criminatory patterns. In this discussion a Weberian conception of class is
typically used, with income, property value, and educational attainment
serving as the key variables.[5] The significance of this question is attested
to by the sheer number of investigations that have addressed it (for a
complete review, see Goldman, 1994; Mohai and Bryant, 1992). It is hotly
contested because of what the answer implies about whether or not the
United States is (still) a racist society:

> A question that is often raised is whether the racial bias in the
> distribution of environmental hazards is simply a function of
> poverty. That is, rather than race per se, is it not poverty that
> affects the distribution of environmental hazards? And are not
> minorities disproportionately impacted simply because they
> are disproportionately poor? . . . Because of limited income
> and wealth, poor people do not have the financial means to
> buy out of polluted neighborhoods and into environmentally
> more desirable ones . . . However, housing discrimination fur-
> ther restricts the mobility of minorities . . . Minority commu-
> nities are at a disadvantage not only in terms of availability of
> resources but also because of under-representation on govern-
> ing bodies when location decisions are made . . .
>   Taken together, these factors suggest that race has an addi-

tional impact on the distribution of environmental hazards, independent of income (Mohai and Bryant, 1992:164).

Indeed, the evidence suggests that, of the two, racism is the more powerful indicator of disproportionate pollution, although class is significant, too. In Goldman's review of 64 studies he found overwhelming evidence that both nonwhite and low-income communities were disproportionately impacted by environmental problems. Nonetheless, "When race and income were compared to see if either factor was independently or more significantly related to the environmental disparity, race proved more important in nearly three-quarters of the tests (22 out of 33)" (Goldman, 1994:8).

The question of "race or class" is approached methodologically by running statistical tests with income and racial indicators to determine which variable is a stronger predictor of these patterns. According to this approach, racism exists if a statistically significant relationship emerges (following established conventions), and racism does not exist if the statistical test does not warrant such conclusions.[6] Despite the fact that most research simply establishes correlations, not causality, it is clear these nuances get lost in the larger public discourse. Accordingly, should "race" prove to be the more influential variable, then the discriminatory evidence fuels the racial project of those who would call renewed attention to the problem of racism. Conversely, those insisting that income is a more significant variable deny the racist nature of U.S. society and attribute inequities to the prevailing class structure (which presumably is not as inflammatory). For example, the chair of an Environmental Protection Agency workgroup on environmental racism recently concluded, "Is there systematic racism out there? I don't think so. It's more economic class" (Wolcott quoted in Kerr and Lee, 1993:18).

The second critical research issue takes up the question of the historical evolution of local land-use patterns, and asks what came first, the nonwhite people or the hazard (Been, 1993; Hurley, 1995)? Cutter (1995:117) outlines the issues here:

> The issue posing the greatest difficulty in environmental justice research is which came first? Were the LULUs [locally undesirable land uses] or sources of environmental threats sited in communities because they were poor, contained people of color, and/or politically weak? Or, were the LULUs originally placed in communities with little reference to race or economic status, and over time, the racial composition of the area changed as a result of white flight, depressed housing prices, and a host of other social ills? In other words, did the residents

come to the nuisance or was the nuisance imposed on them (voluntarily or involuntarily)?

Although sociologist/activist Bullard has consistently stressed that the "chicken-or-egg" debate is irrelevant (1994b) since the end result is a discriminatory pattern, this overlooks the political context in which these claims are being made. While I concur with Bullard from an activist perspective that the question is moot, it is important for what it reveals in terms of conceptualizations of racism and political projects. For one, such an analysis suggests a conceptualization of racism as a specific, conscious act of discrimination, which much of the literature presumes. According to this reasoning, only conscious targeting constitutes racism. Taking this a step further, if residents came "to the nuisance" voluntarily, does this mean that a racist act did not occur? Does it mean that no corrective action need be taken?

While acknowledging that operationalized definitions of racism may be necessary for the courtroom and policy arena, they are less helpful in terms of movement building, advocating left politics, and sharpening our political analyses. This is not meant to imply that there is no room for a legal strategy within an oppositional movement. The task is locating legal proceedings and lawyers as part of a larger *grassroots* struggle – not as an end in themselves (Cole, 1992). Unfortunately, the majority of environmental racism scholarship seeks to intervene in the legal and policy arena, ignoring the larger issue of movement building. One of the problems inherent in these methodologies, which both proponents and opponents of the environmental racism argument have contributed to is fetishizing "race" and siting to the point where they are no longer politically meaningful. Instead, the power to claim the existence of such forces has been appropriated by academics, who by the process of operationalization and adherence to methodological rigor have transformed an inherently complex and contradictory ideology and set of practices (racism) into an either/or situation. In particular, there are three specific shortcomings with the aforementioned conceptualization of racism: viewing racism as a clearly demarcated set of actions, not recognizing racism as an ideology, and a denial of the existence of multiple forms of racism. Taken together, these contribute to a monolithic understanding of racism. On the one hand, this is understandable given the brutal consequences of racism, on the other, it is problematic in that a narrow focus on racism obscures a nuanced understanding of how racism interacts with various economic forces, including, relations of production and regimes of accumulation, to create highly oppressive circumstances. This, is turn, militates against the development of more radical politics, as we are left with antiracist politics devoid of an economic critique (Cruse, 1987; West, 1993).

The Racist Subtext of Environmental Racism Research

Racism Contained

The first "racial pitfall" in most empirical work on environmental racism is the assumption that racism is a specific thing whose effects can be neatly isolated. This assumption exists across disciplines and has left the strongest imprint on urban poverty debates (Wilson, 1980; Chavez, 1991). Within environmental racism research this belief is evidenced, for example, by regression analysis, which seeks to determine which variable ("race" or income) is most strongly correlated with particular outcomes. For instance, one group of scholars has written, "There is also an economic dimension to the 'environmental racism' thesis; that is, because of 'economic vulnerability' minority communities have been targeted for environmentally hazardous facilities" (Lester, Allen and Milburn-Lauer, 1994:3–4). While it may be possible statistically to separate and analyze "racial" and income groups, such a procedure does not necessarily help us understand the racialized nature of our economy, including the process of class formation, the division of labor, and poverty. Gilroy has forcefully challenged this entrenched attitude toward racism. Referring to antiracist activity in Britain, he writes: "The antiracism I am criticizing trivializes the struggle against racism and isolates it from other political antagonisms – from the contradictions between capital and labour, from the battle between men and women. It suggests that racism can be eliminated on its own because it is readily extricable from everything else" (1992:50).

In fact, the exact opposite is true – racism can scarcely be extricated from our collective social life and structures, an understanding hardly reflected in the environmental racism literature. Boerner and Lambert demonstrate this approach to racism in their critique of Bullard's findings of discriminatory landfill sitings in Houston. "Clearly discriminatory siting is not the primary culprit behind these cases of 'environmental racism'. Instead, Houston's disproportionate distribution of landfills can probably be attributed to the dynamics of the housing market" (1994a:16–17). But isn't the housing market skewed by racial discrimination, as dozens of studies have shown (Bullard and Feagin, 1991; Massey, Gross and Shibuya, 1994)? Is it not racist that African Americans and Chicanos/Latinos are disproportionately represented in the ranks of the poor and therefore are all the more vulnerable to pollution through depressed land values, their role as low-wage workers, and limited political power? The real challenge is to understand how racism operates in conjunction with a particular political economic system (see, for example, Montejano, 1987; Wilson, 1992). By continuously emphasizing siting decisions, and treating racial and income groups as two separate entities

(without considering their complex interactions), we pave the way for policy measures of limited efficacy – actions advocated by bureaucrats and industry, but less supported by the grassroots, who often support far more radical solutions.

Racism: Discrimination and Ideology

The second conceptual problem of environmental racism research is the tendency to focus on discrimination to the detriment of ideology. For those who challenge the validity of environmental racism, racism is understood to be a *deliberate* action against a nonwhite group by individuals, private firms or the state. Regardless of the actor, the emphasis is on purposeful action inspired by prejudice. While discrimination certainly is a key component of racism and evidence of blatant discrimination (such as in a siting decision) provides powerful fodder for antiracist activists (and may also be required for legal challenges), overt acts of discrimination are not the only forms of racism (see, for example, Young's [1990] discussion of social difference). By limiting the phenomenon to measurable discriminatory acts, we contribute to a partial understanding of racism and how it works.

Bowen, et al. (1993:26) identify a range of explanations which seek to account for discriminatory pollution patterns, none of which is supposedly racist (defined as measurable, discriminatory acts):

> Spatial association between noxious facilities and particular demographic groups may arise, for example, because there is a need for industry to find sites with lower land values upon which to locate landfills and hazardous waste sites. These industries, requiring a lot of land, go where the price is right. Consequently, they look for economically depressed areas where there are marginal businesses, empty or abandoned buildings, and vacant lots. These areas "just happen" to be areas with a high percentage of minorities or poor. According to this approach there is no intent to discriminate on the basis of race on behalf of the decision-makers.

While the prevailing standards of social science research (and conservative hegemonic understandings of racism) may dictate such narrow articulations, from a left perspective it is impossible *not* to interpret minorities' concentration in low-income areas as racist. Instead, a useful alternative might be Jackson's definition of racism, ". . . a set of interrelated ideologies and practices that have grave material effects, severely affecting black people's life chances and threatening their present and future well-being" (1987:3).

Building on this broader definition, Donald and Rattansi (1992) have pointed out that while discrimination can be seen as specific acts, racism is also an ideology distinct from discrete actions. As ideology works to create meaning itself, racism infuses society, including culture, politics, and economic structures, and helps, in turn, to shape these forces. Seen in this way, quantitative analyses of racism (in this case, environmental racism), can only provide a partial picture, and must be coupled with qualitative, historical and critical research in order to discover the full import of racism. Donald and Rattansi (1992:3) intimate where a focus on meaning and power might lead us politically:

> . . . antiracist intellectuals and activists did not ignore the problematic relationship between the production of racialized meanings and the exercise of power . . . they tackled it – often very productively – in terms of *ideology*. This concept has the advantage of stressing that people's perceptions and beliefs are not just the inheritance of a shared ethnic descent, but are rooted in broader economic structures and material interests.

In this context, ideological critique can assist us in at least beginning to acknowledge the degree and manner in which racism informs the class structure of our society, by highlighting, for example, how "social differ-ence" (Young, 1990) and "cultural racism" (Giroux, 1993; Omi, 1992) work to the detriment of nonwhites, as well as how discrimination works in terms of capital investment or production patterns. In the case of envi-ronmental racism, the narrow nature of the racist ideology invoked by scholars disadvantages nonwhites, as it recognizes racism as only a lim-ited sphere of actions and thought.

Monolithic Racism

The final problematic in environmental racism research is in the construc-tion of a unitary and fixed racism. It is perhaps not surprising that given an emphasis on discrimination and intent, as well as the belief that racism can be isolated, a single conceptualization of racism and racists has emerged. This further enables racism to be seen as an either/or situation: one either is, or is not, a racist. Even those who recognize that racist ideologies and formations change over space and time (Blaut, 1992), may not acknowledge that at any given moment different types of racism are in effect – even as practiced by a single actor. In his illuminating study on racism, Cohen (1992) identifies in one text several different racist interpretations, including racism as irrational prejudice, white power, class rule, and racism as rational self-interest. That all of these readings and analyses can simultaneously co-exist should force us to consider the

infinite variations of racist thought and action that may occur among individuals, social groups, and institutions. At the same time, racists must no longer be caricatured in a unitary fashion. Contrary to popular opinion, racists are an incredibly diverse lot, and even a racist individual may exhibit contradictory actions and beliefs, as Cohen has pointed out. Given these many possibilities, it is also plausible that the racism experienced by different segments of the population may vary considerably, depending not only on one's gender, "race" and class, but also the different meanings associated with these identities at any given moment (DuBois and Ruiz, 1990; Almaguer, 1994).

My intent in discussing these ideas is not to advocate a gradation of racist actions and beliefs, or a competition for the most oppressed status, but rather to urge a more textured understanding by encouraging geographers to move beyond a dichotomous research framework. Within environmental racism research there is sparse acknowledgement of the fragmented and multifaceted nature of racism. Yet, there *is* a difference in the racism experienced by, say, Asian women in corporate America and that experienced by undocumented Mexican immigrants. While both are clearly rendered as the "other," professional Asian women are constituted differently from Mexican immigrants, and therefore the racism they experience is different (Brah, 1992; Pulido forthcoming b). Thus, it is entirely plausible that the racism at work in the placement of an incinerator in a black, rural community is different from the racism which causes Latinos to face severe occupational hazards.[7] While it may be temporarily strategic to categorize all forms of disproportionate exposure as "environmental racism," it is uncertain how effective an antiracist frame can be in uniting diverse constituencies (Pulido forthcoming a).

These are crucial political issues which social scientists, and geographers in particular, are not addressing. Yet in many ways, they are the important ones. Despite the fact that social scientists identify with and seek to impact those in Washington, D.C. and other centers of power, the *real* action surrounding environmental racism is happening at the grassroots level. Consider for a moment the many communities which have successfully resisted incinerators, built innovative coalitions, and demanded that social justice be incorporated into local environmental and economic policy-making. If we do not clarify the ways in which different racial/ethnic groups are constituted, however, the conversation necessary to move towards a multiethnic movement – one not torn asunder by competition, ethnic tension and prejudice – may never take place.

Environmental Racism Research as Competing Racial Projects

Thus far I have identified three conceptual and political problems in the research methods that dominate environmental racism scholarship. The

next task is to uncover the racial projects aligned with these various positions, while examining why some scholars are vested in particular research frameworks. For brevity's sake, I will only consider two groups. The first group consists of both those who are intent on refuting the existence of environmental racism and those who simply "seek the truth." The second group is made up of those who insist on both the existence of environmental racism and the primacy of racism as an explanatory variable. The three conceptual problems outlined in the previous section apply to both groups, but they are used for different purposes and illustrate competing racial projects.

The racial project underlying the first group, those suspicious of environmental racism, is one that views racism as an abnormality, an unfortunate occurrence which still occasionally happens and must be countered. According to this racial project, racism is not the norm and therefore is not a structural or inherent feature of U.S. life. Implicit in this approach is the belief that racism can be defined as discrete, overt actions. Consequently, this racial project ultimately seeks to restrict any further claims on either the state or civil society by nonwhites. Greenberg, in his examination of equity and siting has made plain why from his perspective there is a need for such a neatly-defined approach to racism, one which requires a high-degree of evidence and intent. "[T]he stigma of being branded a racist organization is so odious that the accusation demands proof" (1993:236). It should be pointed out that while some researchers consider themselves to be impartial observers, others have more vested interests. For example, the study by Anderton, et al. (1994), while conducted at the University of Massachusetts, was funded by Waste Management Incorporated. Regardless of motive, however, the end result of this strategy is to limit the definition of racist activity by subjecting any charges of racism to a litmus test of intent and statistical evidence. In effect, this racial project seeks to protect white racial and cultural hegemony by ignoring the discriminatory impacts of social difference, or the fact that the racial subtext of U.S. history and institutions is white.

As suggested, some in this group have a far more conscious and directed racial project than others. To a certain degree, they recognize how ideas of race are discursively constructed and are attempting to make the United States a "color blind" society. One critic noted with dismay the recent lawsuit filed on behalf of the Latino residents of Kettleman City which charged Kings County, California, with environmental racism, "It's unfortunate their argument did not rest solely on the theory that, as poor people, they should not be burdened with an extra share of the toxic waste. But, then, that doesn't raise the temperature like a good dose of race-baiting" (Rees, 1992:16). Here, the critic appreciates "race" as a social artifact and is attempting to delegitimize it as a social concern.

This first racial project is in sharp opposition to that of the second group of scholars, those who seek to affirm the existence of environmental

racism. By "proving" the existence of environmental racism, researchers are able to illustrate yet another way in which the United States is a racist society, thereby allowing more resources, consideration and authority to flow to nonwhites. Many researchers have participated in the "race or class" statistical exercise and have forcefully argued that income has only a limited bearing on discriminatory pollution patterns (Bullard, 1990; Mohai and Bryant, 1992; Goldman, 1994). Bullard (1993:21), for example, stresses that it is *all* nonwhites who suffer, regardless of social and economic status:

> People of color . . . face elevated toxic exposure levels even when social class variables (income, education, and occupational status) are held constant . . . Race has been found to be an independent factor, not reducible to class, in predicting the distribution of air pollution . . . contaminated fish consumption . . . the location of municipal landfills and incinerators . . . the locations of abandoned toxic waste dumps . . . and lead poisoning in children . . .

There is a well-defined racial project underlying this position, one which requires not only that "race" and racism be emphasized but also that a monolithic "nonwhite community" be constructed. The need for a homogeneous community requires that this population not be significantly fractured by class, or gender (albeit to a lesser extent). Instead, the racial project of this group is to articulate a broad but shallow conceptualization of racism, one lacking a serious economic critique. As such, it strives to downplay class divisions and their significance among nonwhite groups, and to unite them (including the professional middle class) in their status as victims of racism. The objective of the racial project is to argue for not only the salience of racism, but the primacy of racism in shaping nonwhites' lives and environments.

Asserting that racism is more powerful than income in determining discriminatory outcomes allows racial policies to be adopted.[8] This allows a "race-based" agenda to dominate the public discourse and facilitates the flow of resources to nonwhite persons and groups (greater policy consideration, jobs, grants, status, etc.) On the surface, there is nothing wrong with such a racial project if you are committed to antiracism. It is, in fact, high time that resources were funneled to these historically marginalized groups. Problems only arise when such racial projects, through their dominant nature, block the consideration of equally liberating racial projects and discourses. By insisting on a unitary racial project, there is little space for antiracist leftists (among others) to explore various other forms of marginality and to challenge the prevailing idea of racism. Thus,

for example, the racial project espoused by Cornel West is not widely-heard among environmental justice activists and scholars. He notes,

> There is a profound crisis in Black leadership, both in terms of quality and vision . . . the civil rights leaders themselves are not talking about class, gender, and empire. They don't want to give a critique of multi-national corporations, partly because these corporations are helping undergird their own organizations. So they deal with issues of race exclusively, still very important, but also limiting (West in hooks and West, 1991:48).

West's project is an effort to deal at a much more fundamental level with not only racism, but other forms of oppression as well. For whatever reasons – perhaps the vested interests of the nonwhite bourgeoisie or the tenuous nature of the coalition – the dominant racial project of environmental justice scholars/activists has not lent itself to a counter-hegemonic movement, and, as I have argued, the dominant approach to racism contributes to this outcome. Thus, limited understandings of racism reinforce "race-based" politics which, because of limited political space, make it difficult to challenge liberal anti-racist politics without being labeled a racist.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how racism has been conceptualized and operationalized in environmental racism research and politics. By presenting two central theoretical questions around which the core of environmental racism research has been fashioned, and by identifying three conceptual problems embedded in the common usages of racism, we can see how such research has served to advocate a narrow and politically limiting concept of racism – one which may be useful at the policy level, but is of less value in terms of popular movements. The three specific assumptions regarding racism are: racism can be isolated from other forces and forms of difference, racism consists of discriminatory acts rather than ideology, and racism is monolithic. Moreover, I have argued that the prevailing research models and positions can best be explained as competing racial projects. The racial project of those on the right, as well as those advocating nonideological research, is to contain the definition of racism in order to limit the claims made by nonwhites. On the other hand, the racial project of those insisting on the racist nature of environmental patterns is to direct greater resources to historically marginalized communities. This latter racial project, however, is predicated on the creation of an unitary

nonwhite population and discourse of racism which can simultaneously serve to silence other visions, interpretations and experiences.

In no way do I wish to advocate the elimination of quantitative research into this important matter. Instead, I would hope that geographers would not only be more forthcoming in terms of their ideological purposes, but also include other methods besides statistical analyses. In these trying times it is a difficult task to be committed to antiracism without necessarily embracing liberal antiracism. Understanding racism is a first step.

Notes

1. This does not mean that exclusionary and discriminatory environmental practices are new, but only that they were not labeled as such until fairly recently. For examples of early forms of environmental activism and disproportionate exposure, see Hurley, 1995, Pulido, 1996.
2. Besides the reductionist tendencies inherent in dominant forms of rationality, the act of privileging it also serves to deny other ways of knowing (Shiva, 1989).
3. For example, a multiracial group of left activists in Los Angeles saw the environment as an area of growing significance in need of a radical analysis (Labor/Community Strategy Center, 1989).
4. For this reason, in this paper the term "environmental justice movement" will refer to the struggle against environmental racism (i.e., a largely nonwhite struggle), unless otherwise stated. This does not, however, imply that white and nonwhite groups do not work together – far from it. Nonwhites often assist whites, and vice-versa. Moreover, there are numerous multiracial/ethnic organizations, such as the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, and Albuquerque's Southwest Organizing Project. Nevertheless, environmental justice is often considered a nonwhite, or anti-racist struggle.
5. Although this paper focuses only on racism as methodologically conceptualized, there is a glaring need for a critical analysis of how "race" and "class" are operationalized within the context of environmental racism/justice research.
6. As research on the topic advances, more methodological issues are being raised, such as questions of scale, spatial unit, the nature of the environmental hazard, and various ethnicities. For complete discussions of methodological problems, see: Bowen et al. (1993); Boerner and Lambert (1994); Lester, et al. (1994); Cutter (1995).
7. Several scholars have documented the effects of differential racism within labor-markets (Kirschenman and Neckermen, 1991), but, except for Hurley (1995), few have focused on the *spatiality* of those processes and how they affect environmental degradation.
8. See Executive Order No. 12892 signed by the Clinton Administration in 1994. Although the "Environmental Justice Order," as it is known includes low-income communities in its mandate, it has been racialized to mean "nonwhite."

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