

Reframing Local Environmental Conflict: Body, Place and Protest

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Catastrophe often challenges entrenched assumptions. At one level, last month's tragedy testified to the obvious, to a central fact of life. Whether in rural areas or in cities, people like other species, must breathe the air, drink the water, and consume food fed by the soil. The graphics of the scale of destruction, like plans for rebuilding, also exposed the intricate links between our built and physical environment. The rush of unexpected phenomena, the stench reaching residents in Brooklyn and the upper West Side, trucks and barges taking one million tons of pulverized debris to the reopened Fresh Kills dump, wastes seeping into the groundwater and soil, above all death and fear, brought home the complex interplay of natural systems and their relation to human choice and urban public policy.

The interdependence of social and natural processes so apparent since September 11 is and has been the basis for environmental protest across the globe. What I want to do this afternoon is to talk about this fundamental premise of interdependency as a source of protest since the very diverse population of colonial New York demanded regulation of toxic facilities, contaminated drinking water, and housing hazards, even then labeled as environmental threats to the general welfare. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries neither European

colonists nor native Americans doubted that their survival depended on people's relationships to their surroundings. No one questioned the interdependence of natural, built, economic, and social systems. Certainly no European colonizing agencies with designs in the "new world" doubted that the city's connections to the region, nation, and the world was a necessary precondition for preeminence.

Today's all too prevalent view of cities as places where people are independent of regional and global phenomena, just as they are away from nature, misrepresents the urban experience. Moreover, in the twentieth century these assumptions became a barrier that closed off inquiry about the experiences of ordinary people who knew otherwise. We are only beginning to study how different urban groups invented and reinvented ideas of nature in competing visions of the public good and how these ideas entered into popular struggles.

In April 2000 I co-edited the *Journal of Environmental History's* special issue on environmental justice in our cities to address this long neglected area of research. Although both urban and environmental history grew out of contemporary demands for increased civic and political protection, historians like most social scientists, natural scientists, and cultural critics, continued to regard cities as paved over places where people lived, worked and played on asphalt streets called Maple Lane and Orchid Drive, where neighborhood parks, the local florist, or a trip to the country offered restricted opportunities to experience nature.

Dualistic premises about the division of people and nature, rural and urban, natural and built environments, like contrasts between primitivism and

progress, savagery and civilization, reinforced simplifications of social processes, just as reliance on monolithic assumptions about group behavior omitted the ways race, gender, class and ethnicity shaped differences in environmental values and action. Perhaps even more damaging for urban residents, as people in any inner city neighborhood will tell you, insistence on dichotomies produced single source perspectives for separately regulating water, air, and soil that distorted assessments of interrelated toxic risks.

The idea of nature, as Raymond Williams noted, contains “...an extraordinary amount of human history.” In the U.S., nature traditionally served as an inherited metaphor of opportunity said to be found on expanding frontiers of resource exploitation. Despite the realities, the promise of free virgin soil on new frontiers of conquered territory became incorporated in ideals of opportunity, democracy, and progress. The advice to “go west young man,” was meant to drain off class conflict—the so-called safety valve for urban discontent—when in fact the frontier as myth obscured evidence of failed expectations and the social costs of unrestrained resource exploitation.

Exclusive determinist constructs, whether of man’s superiority to nature or the unalloyed benefits of progress, development, and modernization represent a departure from much more inclusive flexible perceptions. For much of the city’s history discussions of people and the environment appeared in relational terms. Inherited Judeo Christian beliefs that man should conquer nature coexisted with acknowledgement of the tangled imperatives of nature’s limits and how the interplay of climate, crops, disease and economic activity all affected welfare. The

Dutch West India Co selected New Amsterdam for its physical advantages; for the deepwater harbor and for the water systems vital to potential regional and international trade. But within a generation, prospects of abundance, hopes that the northwest wind would drive “all damps and superfluous moisture from the land” to ensure a healthy climate and a prosperous body politic, gave way to the reality of noxious odors from fetid water, rotting carrion, and garbage responsible for the “epidemic atmosphere.” Instead of the air’s sweet smell that made the new world different from the old, colonial officials feared air quality breeding illness would adversely affect migration. Just as the Dutch faced depletion of beaver pelts for their world trade, in the new nation New York city officials had to deal with silting of oyster beds, a staple of poor people’s diet and of the export trade.

The uses limiting resources and threatening health and the general welfare shaped what Carl Bridenbaugh called an “Awakening of Civic Consciousness.” In the name of the common good, the city council could intervene in the private sphere to protect the public interest from environmental dangers—whether they arose from fire, water supplies, garbage, or manure. When rain and drought caused crop damage and shortages of food Dutch officials enforced strict codes to prevent bakers from adulterating flour to produce more loaves of bread—in ecological terms they were protecting a basic fuel, the energy supplies for production in an economy dependent on but short of manpower.

Environmental protection for the common good accounted for English zoning ordinances to separate residential areas from the “noxious trades” tanneries and slaughterhouses, establishments making dye, starch and

construction materials. As population increased so did protests about filth in the streets, awful smells, overflowing privies and animal manure. By the mid eighteenth century transatlantic “scientific” speculation supported belief in the reciprocity between environmental systems, productive processes, and illness. Of the many miasma theories some posited that foul smelling gases came from the putrefaction of different substances in the water supply producing contamination of the soil and air with different fevers.

There are other examples, but the rumor of revolt in May 1741 put race at the center of the interplay of social and natural systems. In the same era that government committed itself—at least in principle—to protecting citizens from the ill effects of pollution, New Yorkers identified African Americans as a social toxin contaminating the body politic. In a city suffering an economic slump, racial stereotypes endemic to a culture of slavery North and South, fanned hysteria about a spreading uprising. The harsh winter of 1741 created hardships for almost everyone. The rivers freeze stopped commerce and depressed merchant profits, as well as the demand for labor, increasing job competition in a city where slaves constituted one in four of all males aged 16 to 60. In May when fires destroyed the site of government within Fort George and broke out in other areas over the next three weeks, New Yorkers accused blacks of arson and conspiracy. By the end of the summer, 31 blacks and 4 whites were executed.

If language is one clue, even more powerful than metaphors to understanding inherited beliefs, white voices continued to resonate with the labeling of African Americans as sources of social disorder into our own era,

blamed for disease and deteriorating built environments, and profiled even today as toxic threats to community values and safety.

Since the 1970s popular environmental demands placed this form of protection on the global and national agenda. In the U.S. whatever the supposed norms for public responsibility, environmental issues involved conflicts over protection which was differently defined by different groups. Increasingly over the nineteenth century shifting definitions of public and private responsibilities discounted municipal obligations to insure the poor and people of color their natural political and civic rights health and safety. In the cholera years from the 1830's to the 1860s the disease was primarily blamed on private behavior conditioned by moral, racial, religious, and class identity. In the Civil War and Reconstruction eras large numbers of New Yorkers opposed any protection for the political rights of blacks. Social Darwinists of the late-nineteenth century spoke of the superiority of people to nature in a laissez-faire case to deny increasing numbers of the poor a right to public safety nets.

But what of social reformers? What of their assumptions about people and the environment as a component of inherent rights. Frederick Law Olmsted, for example, built parks specifically to introduce nature into the urban landscape. He designed reproductions as a refuge, as an escape from the city's tensions. Many crusaders of tenement house like the urban planners of the late nineteenth century, focused on the built environment and neglected people's interdependence with natural systems. Robert Gottlieb identified urban settlement house reformers as environmentalist as surely as conservationists who were concerned with public

lands, but most scholars agree that this people centered reform ended in the Progressive Era when decision-making elites turned to professionals with expertise in science, technology and rational management to solve social problems.

As I have argued elsewhere, we have paid too little attention to an alternative model for well being rooted in inherited traditions and to the advocacy of black and white reformers like William E. B. Du Bois, Florence Kelley, William Lewis Bulkley, W. H. Brooks, Ida Wells Barnett, Henry Moskowitz, Lillian Wald, Mary Ovington. and Oswald Villard. Their studies documented what was happening to people living in the inadequately serviced inner-city neighborhoods of New York since the 1880s. They too used new social science techniques to correlate race and class with chronically low paying jobs, inadequate housing, wretched sanitary conditions and horrifying health reports. They collected information, amassed facts and statistics to document reasons for protest and they mobilized communities at risk. In the new century an array of reform organizations housed in New York City, even allowing for their different strategies , redefined human rights to include environmental criteria in the home, the workplace and the community as grounds for protection Groups like the Committee for Improving the Industrial Condition of the Negro, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National League on Urban Conditions, The Committee on Urban Conditions, the National League for the Protection of Colored Women created precedents on the streets and in the

courts for bypassing institutionalized norms that denied fused inequities of place, governance and protection.

Modern social justice movements whether under capitalist, communist, socialist or fascist regimes typically opposed inequitable distribution of wealth and power, not the related ecological threats of unlimited growth and modernization. But by 1948 everyday knowledge of place in international advocacy produced the UN Declaration of Human Rights, a remarkable document in many ways, that inscribed both a safe environment and environmental protection as a political right regardless of the political system. Over the past half century a world wide network of grassroots activists shaped a reform agenda to remedy environmental dangers and their inequitable distributions.

I want to conclude by pointing to the relevance of this international frame as we explore another kind of interdependence, the feedback between different jurisdictions in shaping grassroots protest and political rights. Whether the example I use is representative will remain open until we know much more about our past, however the coalition of hostile ethnic groups in a prolonged fight over garbage disposal in north Brooklyn exposes a number of social and environmental misconceptions. In Spanish El Puente means bridge. In the 1960s it was impossible to bridge the distrust in adjoining Greenpoint and Williamsburg, equally poor but communities hostile enclaves divided by racial and religious passions. The shared fear of environmental jeopardy and anger at the inequity of further burdens united the populations as no other issue could. The first phase of protest began immediately after the city selected the Brooklyn navy yard in 1977

as the site for a 2.5 billion dollar garbage to energy incinerator network. Residents resisted the presumption that environmental laws or burdens apply equally, They resisted the assumption of environmental legislation requiring separate assessment of clean air , water and land use when they knew it denied *cumulative interrelated impacts and the differential consequences for people of different ages, genders and health. Faced with potential dioxin emissions from burning mixed garbage, residents reached out to environmental advocacy groups concentrating on ecological damage to urban populations. And permit delays and law suits, tactics used a half century earlier in environmental cases by the NAACP, held off construction for 8 years. Then in the wake of the Reagan Administrations weakening of the EPA and environmental legislation, in May of 1985, the Planning commission initiated the approval process.

Community protest now entered phase two. Intensifying international and national debate over environmental assessments partly mitigated the frustration of fighting city hall. At the same time growing scientific support of the interconnected multiple sources of risk reinforced anxieties. The decision of Hasidic and Latino groups for coalition and cooperation represented a remarkable precedent for groups usually divided by police barriers. It also represented a strategy adopted by grass roots groups across the country to gain wider support. In October 1991 as the UN finalized plans for the 1992 Earth summit and with an election coming up more than 650 delegates met on Capital Hill for the First National People of Color Environmental leadership Summit. The stated purpose of the interracial gathering was to build an effective multiracial environmental

movement with the capacity to transform the political landscape of the nation. (You will remember George Bush had laid claim to being the environmental president.) The strategy and tactics articulated at the summit modeled the reform agenda in North Brooklyn when activists called a Town meeting in May 1992 the earliest most distinctive example of local democratic decision making. By consensus the racially and ethnically diverse group created CAFÉ—the Community Alliance for the Environment—a loose network of twenty neighborhood organizations in North Brooklyn to informally work with local activists across the county. In a radical departure from the exclusionary passions fomenting since the 1960s they endorsed “Principles of Unity” that I want to quote: “We pledge to respect our earth, save our children from the threat of all environmental and social poisons and, most especially build bridges of unity through the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, races and religions of North Brooklyn.”

Although the statement speaks to future expectations, it speaks to the need to understand past struggles to cross barriers of prejudice, power and poverty . The final result—total defeat of the Brooklyn Navy yard complex because the federal, state, and local government acknowledged its multiple dangers is a story like others that need to be reclaimed for the city’s history.