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Neoliberal environmental justice: mainstream ideas of justice in political conflict over agricultural pesticides in the United States

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Introducing environmental justices

American environmentalism is complex in institutional form, focus, strategy, tactics, and discourse, and scholars have widely debated the consequences of these variations (see Schlosberg and Bomberg [2008](#) and other articles in that special issue of *Environmental Politics*). California's agri-environmental politics

new toxic chemicals have been registered for use, and pesticide contamination incidents and illnesses regularly occur in California's agricultural communities. With only 2–3% of US farmland but 25% of the nation's agricultural pesticide use, pesticide problems that occur throughout the world are particularly pronounced in California (USDA 2002, US EPA 2004, tables 3.5 and 4.2, CDPR 2006). The state's regulatory officials claim that pesticides pose only a minor threat to public health. However, toxicological, epidemiological, sociological, and other data indicate that agricultural pesticides contaminate air and water and contribute to a wide range of chronic physical, developmental, and mental health

Schlosberg describes the EJ movement's vision of justice as a pluralistic one that integrates four non-exclusive ideas of justice. First, in line with the distributive-egalitarian arguments pioneered by John Rawls, the EJ movement calls for redistribution to redress undeserved inequalities that prevent all individuals from having an equal opportunity to determine their own fate. EJ activists call for a more equal distribution of environmental resources and hazards, prioritisation of clean-up in the least-advantaged communities, and taking into account the needs of future generations as equally as current society. Second, as Iris Young and Nancy Fraser have observed of other '

Methods

To understand political conflict over the socio-environmental impacts of agricultural pesticides, I draw on a variety of primary and secondary data that I collected from 2002 to 2010. I conducted ethnographic observation at regulatory and activist events; more than 100 in-depth, qualitative interviews with pesticide regulators, EJ and mainstream agri-environmental activists, scientists, and industry representatives; and countless shorter, informal interviews with those same actors. These qualitative methods enabled me to understand the cultural politics at work within regulatory agencies and activist organisations, and the material constraints within which their members operate. I also reviewed documents from pesticide regulatory agencies, agri-environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other research institutions. All unreferenced quotes are excerpts from my own interviews and observations.

To identify the ideas of justice at work in this political conflict, I analysed patterns in individuals' articulations of the appropriate role for the state in agri-environmental problem solving, patterns in institutional practices and priorities, and how these discursive and material patterns reflect ideas of justice. I use conceptions of justice from political philosophy to theorise actors' claims.

publicly announced that their work was actively constrained by the political interests of top agency officials in ways that directly led to shoddy risk assessments and inadequate pesticide regulation (Harris and Pear 2007, Welch et al. 2006).

Regulatory agencies increasingly rely on market-based measures and voluntary agreements with industry. The US EPA and CDPR fast-track the evaluation and registration of new 'greener' pesticides – providing more choices to pesticide users but not translating into a decreased use of the most toxic and unruly pesticides (Harrison 2011a). Agencies promote voluntary programs, such as California'

The neoliberal turn in mainstream agri-environmental activism aligns with a libertarian

is safe. There's a unique kind of assurance that comes from looking a farmer in the eye at farmers' market or driving by the fields where your food comes from' (Grubinger 2010). An activist organisation in Vermont claims on its website that locally grown and produced food

These EJ activists focus on the ways that California'

reform as a way to protect all residents from pesticide exposure, not only those

'community' that calls out group-based oppression and the fact that racially marginalised and other groups experience environmental hazards differently than do middle-class whites. The EJ movement's slogan, 'we speak for ourselves', is an explicit critique of relations of oppression along lines of race, class, indigeneity, and gender that have historically silenced some groups in the realm of environmental decision making and created environmental inequalities. Local-food advocates' brand of communitarianism ignores that history of oppression and implicitly dismisses the critique and struggle as unnecessary.

EJ pesticide activists' proffered solutions reflect a vision of justice that includes combatting group-based oppression. For example, they insist that regulatory hearings be structured in ways that enable all residents to participate – held in evenings or weekends in locations accessible by public transit, advertised widely in ways that reach community residents, and with translation provided. They also insist on the validity of non-scientific, lay knowledge and the importance of normative discussion. Two EJ activists highlighted this set of convictions in their letter to the editor of a local paper in 2007: 'The question of what [pesticides are] safe enough for children and others is a question of both science and policy. It is rightfully answered by society as a whole, and in particular by those at risk of exposure' (Dansereau and Kegley 2007).

These solutions designed to combat group-based oppression also reflect the third idea of justice that Schlosberg and others have observed in the broader EJ movement: justice as participatory parity. EJ pesticide activists demand the ability to participate in the regulatory process and actually influence material outcomes. They participate in formal opportunities to provide input (e.g. providing testimony at regulatory hearings, submitting written comments, and serving on agencies' citizen advisory groups), and also publicly criticise regulatory agencies' public participation efforts that do not enable participants to actually have an impact. EJ pesticide activists also pursue participatory parity in the processes of collecting and interpreting scientific data, as evidenced in the Drift Catcher lay air-monitoring program (Harrison 2011b).

Fourth, EJ activism against pesticides reflects the broader EJ movement's concern with capabilities. In their reports and statements, EJ activists highlight the lack of capabilities that directly exacerbate the consequences of pesticide exposure in many agricultural communities, such as emergency responders' lack of pesticide incident response protocol, insufficient Spanish-language staff in regulatory agencies, and inadequate pesticide exposure knowledge among health clinic staff. Accordingly, they advocate improving these institutions. Certainly, some important capabilities that many residents do not possess (e.g. legal status) exacerbate pesticide exposures in farm-working communities but extend well beyond the realm of pesticide regulation. Therefore, many EJ activists are also politically engaged in addressing such problems (e.g. through immigration reform advocacy).

These EJ activists thus differ from mainstream agri-environmental activists in terms of their conceptions of justice, which in turn reveal divergent relationships

to the neoliberal project and distinct ideas of community. Additionally, EJ activists fighting pesticide pollution in California, like the broader EJ movement, explicitly name justice as their central concern and thereby frame the issue as a normative one deserving public debate. In contrast, mainstream agri-environmental activists do not frame their decisions as moral ones, instead explaining their priorities and practices in terms of scientific efficacy, as difficult decisions that have been forced upon them by other actors such as the legislature, or as the only option. Doing so positions the conversation outside the realm of democratic, subjective debate and allows mainstream actors to shirk responsibility for the vision of environmental justice their practices embody.

Conclusions

As positions on rightness and fairness, dominant ideas of justice carry particular ideological weight. They serve as the basis for judging past actions and for justifying recommendations for change. I have identified the ideas of justice displayed by two groups of activists concerned with the human health threats posed by agricultural pesticides in California. Although both groups of activists are critically responding to and frustrated with a neoliberalised pesticide regulatory context, they evince divergent ideas of what justice looks like – differences with significant consequences.

Mainstream agri-environmental activists' discourses and practices reflect libertarian and communitarian ideas of justice. Their libertarian tendencies lend credence to market-based and voluntary ways of addressing environmental problems and shift environmental responsibility to individuals, while their communitarian claims assert that a universally welcoming 'community' will fill the void left by the neoliberal evisceration of the environmental regulatory state. Together, these claims to justice normalise neoliberal problem solving, constitut-

inequalities, emphasising that poverty and racism exclude many people – including those most burdened by pesticide pollution – from ‘voting with their dollars’ or otherwise standing on equal footing in social life. Despite the popular imaginary of markets as spaces in which individuals trade property to their mutual advantage, EJ activism and its attention to environmental inequalities underscores the way that property itself is an accumulation of racist exclusion and privilege (Harris 1993). At the same time, EJ pesticide activists’ concern for the ways that group-based oppression contributes to pesticide pollution, exposure, and illness casts doubt on the potential for mainstream agri-environmental activists’ idealised ideas of ‘community’ to effectively address these environmental problems. By calling out mainstream agri-environmental activists’ ideological positions in this way and comparing them to EJ pesticide activists’ explicit claims to justice, I seek to make mainstream actors accountable for the justice ideals they implicitly support – and for dismissing, in Jenny Reardon’s terms, ‘the other possible worlds ... that might still be enacted’ (Reardon 2013, p. 192).

It should be noted that some mainstream agri-environmental actors comply with dominant ideas of justice only partially, potentially signalling a partial shift in mainstream agri-environmental politics towards the EJ movement’s ideas of environmental justice. For example, regulatory agencies’ efforts to institutionalise EJ display some promising attention to participatory justice. The success of such efforts will depend on the extent to which agencies can meaningfully accept and apply the critical observations coming from EJ activists and scholars and ensure that public participation can actually reduce environmental harms rather than reinforcing neoliberalisation (Holifield 2004, London et al. 2008, Sze et al. 2009, Lievanos 2012, Ottinger 2013). Increasing the participation of historically marginalised groups in regulatory decision-making processes has some downsides, as it reduces activists’ time for family and other obligations, often corrals them into reformist engagement, and pulls them away from confrontational and radical practice. Given that EJ activists argue for the precautionary principle, honouring lay knowledge, prioritising pollution prevention, and other principles that fundamentally challenge extant regulatory and scientific norms, they are met with strong pushback from industry and regulatory officials alike. Thus, doing justice to EJ activists’ participation in regulatory decision-making processes will require strong leadership to implement and defend such changes, education to change regulatory culture away from industry protection, and funding for EJ activists to be able to guide regulatory change over the long term.

Some threads of activism similarly display partial support for the EJ movement’s conceptions of justice. The burgeoning local-food movement may bolster basic capabilities (Schlosberg 2013, p. 49) – if activist efforts focus on the communities most in need, follow the guidance of community residents rather than imposing their own ideas of the good life, and otherwise engage in a ‘reflexive’ form of localism (DuPuis and Goodman 2005, Guthman 2008b, DuPuis et al. 2011). Community food security organisations and others evince

an egalitarian vision of justice when pressing for reform of food entitlement programs for the poor (Poppendieck 1998, 2010, Gottlieb and Joshi 2010). Additionally, farm labour and immigrant advocates press for egalitarian policy reforms that would bolster the rights of immigrant farm workers and redress material inequalities. It remains to be seen whether these efforts can gain

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