

“Nigger” and “Nature”: Expanding the Concept of Environmental Racism

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“Environmental racism” is a concept it's hard to imagine environmentalism ever having done without. It names a reality that can't be tackled "before" or "after" environmental campaigning, but has to be confronted every day in building movements against the ways oppressive societies organize nature.

Blowing a hole in the attitude, widespread among middle-class environmentalists, that "I'm not a racist, so don't talk to me about racism," the concept highlights the ways that nice guys without racist theories participate in racism, too – not only when they disregard the extent to which pollution flows toward black and brown people and away from whites, but also when they obey the rules of polite society that tend to forbid even raising such uncomfortable issues.

Cities and Forests

The idea of environmental racism grew up in the US in the 1980s among minority groups who were being forced to incorporate into their bodies huge quantities of poisons from chemical or nuclear waste dumps, municipal landfills, polluting power plants, incinerators, pesticide-laden air or lead-laden water.

What US groups were describing, of course, was going on all over the world. In 1984, both the Union Carbide chemical factory in Bhopal, India and the PEMEX liquid propane gas plant in Mexico City blew up, blighting a million lives. Not long after, the enormously toxic work of dismantling obsolete computers began to fall mostly on cheap Asian and African labour.

Environmental racism of this kind had also long been obvious in forests. Between 1964 and 1992, Texaco subjected tens of thousands of indigenous and peasant (largely mestizo) Ecuadorians to an intensity of pollution from its Lago Agrio oil fields that would never have been tolerated in the wealthy white suburbs of New York City. In the 1990s, indigenous communities worldwide began to be "assigned" the job of using their forests and paramos to help absorb the carbon-dioxide pollution flowing from industries whose profits disproportionately benefit other ethnic groups.

From the US to the Democratic Republic of Congo

In fact, for every example of environmental racism in cities, another example can probably be found in forests.

US environmental justice movements have long pointed out the racism inherent in the way some big Washington, DC-based environmental organizations fall all over themselves to give superficial green makeovers to industries whose profits remain based in part on the unequal distribution of pollution within the country.

But isn't it racist in precisely the same way for, say, the UK government's development finance arm, the CDC Group, to invest public money in the Feronia oil palm company in the Democratic Republic of Congo? Feronia's precarious business could not be sustained if it did not occupy forest lands that were stolen from communities along the Congo River under Belgian colonial occupation between 1908 and 1960. Given the persistent legacy of malnutrition and dependence on poverty wages that continues to affect local people, isn't it racist for CDC to claim that it is only trying to "improve a situation" that it has "inherited", has no responsibility for, and can do nothing about?

Another Dimension

But environmental racism isn't just about the racialized distribution of pre-existing pollution or pre-existing nature. It's also about the ways people, ethnic groups, nature and pollution are co-defined in the first place. And this aspect of environmental racism is perhaps even more visible in the forests than elsewhere.

For example, REDD is racist not just because it grabs indigenous people's land to clean up non-indigenous carbon dioxide emissions. It's also racist because it discriminates against indigenous ideas of land. Indigenous understandings of forests are not even dismissed, because they are not even recognized as existing. A similar racism is inherent in what Argentine sociologist Maristella Svampa calls "zones of sacrifice", where indigenous valuations of land are ignored as obstacles to the commodity export economy.

Or take the "nature" that is preserved in countless protected areas worldwide. From the time of the establishment of the US's Yellowstone National Park onwards, this is a nature that depends on the exclusion of indigenous peoples. Innumerable relationships among humans, animals and plants are banned and replaced with new relationships involving wildlife managers, academic researchers, forest rangers, tourists and broadcasters.

In essence, such transformations are nothing new. In medieval England, the words "park" and "forest" signified places where there were deer set aside for royal elites to hunt, not necessarily places where there were trees. But post-Yellowstone practice added new twists. Elites pretended to erase themselves from the scene by claiming to be representatives of nonhuman "nature". All the same, the word "protected" in "protected areas" still meant little more than "protected from the uneducated and dark-skinned".

Of course, under progressive regimes, some "natives" were allowed back inside such "natures". But in the process they usually had to agree to convert themselves into either picturesque "noble savages" or agents of Western ecological management. For example, they might have to dichotomize their land into permanent agricultural fields and agriculture-free forests, leaving no room for other forms such as forest fallows. Such natures remained inescapably racist. Fighting the human/nature binary that defined them became a part of fighting racism more generally.

Stereotyped Natures

And hasn't racism always gone hand in hand with prejudicial ideas of nature as lying somehow outside and beneath the human?

Isn't it more than a coincidence, for example, that the derogatory connotations of many words for "forest" resonate with the racist tone of terms often applied to marginalized minority groups?

In Thailand, where racist conservationism has often advocated programmes to resettle highland minorities away from watershed forests, *thuen* (jungle) is just another word for "outlaw", and *paa* (forest) is that which is not *siwilai* (civilized). How many racist epithets from around the world – *indios de mierda*, *khon thuen*, *nyika*, *spruce monkey*, *kariang*, *jangli*, *jungle bunny* – do not implicitly locate their referents in precisely such stereotyped zones of forest primitivity?

To know how to live in and with such purportedly "savage" environments – to have the skills to vary, extend, enrich or interact with them without simply reducing them to resources for infinite growth – has frequently been assumed to diminish your humanity. Among European colonialist thinkers like John Locke, Native Americans were not felt to be capable of adding any human ingredients to land at all. In colonial India, "waste" lands were seen to be occupied by "criminal" people. Today, the Asian Development Bank is on record claiming that it is only by removing people from forested mountain areas that they can be brought to "normal life".

Science and Responsibility

This leads straight to a perhaps even more uncomfortable question. If certain natures are racist, then can the sciences that study them be innocent?

The reality of science is that it can't call everything into question at the same time. It has to stand on certain assumptions which for the time being are not challenged, in order to test other things. As of 2016, a racist human/nature dichotomy is often one of those assumptions.

For example, an environmental science whose problems are shaped by a fixed agenda of "reducing the impact of humans on nature" or "determining carrying capacity" is going to be racially biased regardless of the intentions of the scientists who practice it.

Yet sciences that study things like "Yellowstone nature" can't remain free forever from the responsibility to question "scientifically" the very construction of what they investigate. Today it is widely recognized that an anthropology that treats the peoples it studies as static museum pieces to be "protected" from change is racist. But isn't restoration ecology racist in precisely the same way? And what about climate models seeking ways of "stabilizing" global temperatures at economically optimal levels?

Of course, few scientists brave enough to challenge racist axioms inside their own discipline are seen by their colleagues as acting out of the scientific spirit to which they have dedicated their lives. Instead they are interpreted as engaging in personal attacks and sowing divisiveness. Racism, they are told, is never anything more than some individual bad guys behaving immorally or unprofessionally, whereas science itself, being about "nature", is "race-blind".

This reaction is widespread partly because it has been so effective in defending the prestige of the scientific class and those whose power science legitimates. But at bottom it's merely one more restatement of the same human/nature division. It's as much an obstacle to rational discussion as racial epithets themselves.

Discomfort or Movement-Building?

Are forest activists ready to entertain the idea that certain concepts of *nature* and *forest* that help define the work not only of many scientists, but also of organizations like the World Bank, the FAO, the UNFCCC, UNESCO and CIFOR, are in some ways on a par with *nigger*? Are activists willing to challenge the way they themselves sometimes use these terms?

Stretching the concept of environmental racism in this way is bound to stir widespread resistance, if not hysteria. Among professional classes, as the US legal scholar Patricia J. Williams noted years ago, "matters of race are resented and repressed in much the same way as matters of sex and scandal: the subject is considered a rude and transgressive one in mixed company."

But perhaps those discomfited by the topic will just have to get over themselves. For centuries, indigenous and forest peoples and peasants have had to withstand the racism of having human/nature binaries imposed wholesale on them and their forests. For middle-class environmentalists and others to have to work through a little temporary discomfort is nothing by comparison.

Particularly when the potential gains are so disproportionate. When, at the recent UN Paris climate summit, some young African-American activists working against environmental racism in the US encountered representatives of the "No REDD in Africa" coalition, the rapport was immediate and electric. Part of this may have been due simply to different aspects of a shared global environmental history suddenly falling into place. But perhaps it also owed something to a sense that older concepts of racial oppression and liberation were

being extended, and that surprising new things might be on the verge of happening. Here was the kind of moment from which transformation flows. Movement-building is concept-building.

More reading:

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Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters and Social Imagination*, University of British Columbia Press, 2005.

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Stephen Corry, "The Colonial Origins of Conservation: The Disturbing History Behind US National Parks",
<http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/32487-the-colonial-origins-of-conservation-the-disturbing-history-behind-us-national-parks>

Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Colour-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Virago, 1997.

Maristella Svampa, "The 'Commodities Consensus' and Valuation Languages in Latin America",
Alternautas, July 2015, <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/4/22/the-commodities-consensus-and-valuation-languages-in-latin-america-1>