Environmental Justice, the Green Economy, and the Politics of Diversity

In her New York Times article “In Environmental Push, Looking to Add Diversity” (3/9/09), Mireya Navarro interviewed members of white mainstream environmental groups, researchers/academics, activists, consultants, and members of the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement. The article addressed issues of diversity (aka racism) and the challenges and initiatives made by the mainstream environmental groups since being challenged in 1990 by leaders of the EJ movement in open letters to the 10 biggest mainstream environmental/conservation groups. The letters accused them of “racist” hiring practices. At that time there was, among all their collective staffs, only one person of color: an African American who did not hold a position of power. All those interviewed agreed that, in general, while some changes had taken place, deep substantial change had not occurred in the mainstream environmental organizations, their campaigns, ideology, or culture.

The article concluded with a statement by a green jobs leader that the EJ movement focused on “equal protection from bad stuff,” whereas the green jobs movement groups want “equal access to good stuff.” This particular characterization of the EJ movement’s focus struck me. Is environmental racism not an issue in green jobs? Is environmental racism a thing of the past? Is justice not an issue when we talk of the green economy? Don’t those of us who struggle for social, environmental, and economic justice struggle specifically because we want “equal access to the good stuff”? As a woman of color from a poor, working-class background, I struggle against race, class, and gender realities almost every day of my life. I struggle precisely because I want “access to the good stuff” for our communities and myself. Yes, our communities would rather “just get along,” but that is not the reality for the majority of poor and people of color. Many of our people still do not have high school educations. They are unemployed or underemployed, imprisoned or otherwise caught up in the legal system. Communities continue to struggle for their wastes. Communities continue to fight against the uranium corporations, their practices, and the politicians who guarantee their profit margin. These activists and organizers struggle in the hope of reducing suffering from the bad stuff, and creating access to the good stuff.

With respect to diversity, today, there are more people of color in mainstream environmental groups. With few exceptions, many of these people of color are politicians, business people, consultants, or academics, whose acceptance offers cultural capital to the boards of these organizations. Those hired into these positions could well accept offers cultural capital to the boards of these corporations, their practices, and the politicians who guarantee their profit margin. These activists and organizers struggle in the hope of reducing suffering from the bad stuff, and creating access to the good stuff.

The reality is that inequity, like racism, is alive and well — these social constructions simply mutate over time under a system of unbridled capitalism, now known as globalization. This is the real challenge to humanity, even more so than climate change. Climate change, like racism, classism, and sexism, is the product of capitalism.

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With respect to diversity, today, there are more people of color in mainstream environmental groups. With few exceptions, many of these people of color are politicians, business people, consultants, or academics, whose acceptance offers cultural capital to the boards of these organizations. Those hired into these positions could well be what Edward Bonilla calls the “honorary whites,” affluent people of color from third world countries, descendants of the patrons, and aspiring and ambitious technocrats who have an interest in the environment. In either case, these people rarely come from the EJ movement, are familiar with its history, or are connected to a community to which they might be accountable.

These folks are not bad people; they are good technocrats with credentials who are seeking opportunities for their own development. They are not necessarily committed to the Environmental Justice movement, nor accountable to the communities they represent. Often times these people have nothing in common with the movement that created their place at the table, and have no sense of accountability or responsibility to a constituency. They are not usually change agents.

In my community in northern New Mexico, we continue to oppose a private landfill owner’s effort to bring Special Waste (toxic wastes, including carcinogens) into our community. Those of us fighting this battle would prefer not to struggle “against the bad stuff,” but we have no choice in the matter. We must struggle; and in our efforts we create community, solidarity, resiliency, and support for each other in fulfilling our goals and dreams. The landfill owner wants money, but we want a healthy, clean environment, livable wages, and to minimize threats to our health — we want the “good stuff.”

In the last several years I have spent time in the uranium belt of New Mexico. The groups I have worked with organize around a variety of issues resulting from the uranium legacy of New Mexico. All have confronted environmental and economic racism, which has paralyzed our governments (state, federal, and native) from protecting their communities, holding polluters accountable to clean up these sites, and conducting research on health, water, air, and soil contamination.

Few native people have had access to the “good stuff” — safe water, health services, uncontaminated soil, and healthy air. They have fought and endured the bad stuff for decades. Having borne more than 50 years of contamination from the mining and processing of uranium, communities continue to fight against the uranium corporations, which have accumulated and dumped their wastes in their communities.

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Funding of course is an issue here also, as some foun-
dations would rather give their money to white organiza-
tions that work with communities of color, rather than give
small organizations from those communities. Mainstream
conservation groups create their own “diversity” programs,
They would rather have technocrats advise them on sup-
port, how they internalize the information
that they hire and consult, how they internalize the information
stuff, in the end, they impact the direction of our organiza-
tions, our politics, and our struggles for sovereignty.

Foundations shape movements by choosing with whom
they want to be served up a green job that’s little dif-
ficult to do and are sustainable and build community. Our communities
lived experiences. Our histories show that these practices
continue farming, tending, and harvesting animals and plants
and environmental degradation. It is these land-based
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