

Environmental Justice in the U.S.: Origins, Trends, Research, Social Movement

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In the United States, “environmental justice” is both a social movement and an increasingly sophisticated field of research for social scientists. A local protest by African Americans, opposing the proposed siting of a toxic waste landfill in their community, in Warren County, North Carolina, 1982, is widely considered the founding event. In one sense, that is correct. Warren County focused researchers’ attention on the environmental dimensions of class and race/ethnic inequalities. Warren County also triggered a wave of EJ protests throughout the nation. I review important trends in EJ research and I discuss the development of the EJ movement.

There is more, though. The origins of the modern world, the whole historical transition from feudalism to capitalism, can be re-narrated as an environmental justice story: the dispossession of the European peasantry; the creation of two new, intensely hazardous human environments, the factory and the industrial city; the social and environmental transformation of societies forcibly turned into colonies. And if one extend the definition of EJ in these ways, it is possible to see that the EJ movement predates Warren County by more than a century: Workers’ fighting for the shorter working day and for safer factory conditions; decades-long struggles to clean up the early industrial city. In this light, EJ is not just a movement and not just a field of research; it can be considered a new metanarrative about some of the deepest, most characteristic features of contemporary society.