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The great fault-line of politics

The great fault-line of US politics has opened up again, exposing us (meaning everyone from citizens to people who have never visited the country and never will) to the horror and pain of a nation forged from dispossession, invasion, and slavery.

With Donald Trump's supporters coming disproportionately from suburban, rural, undereducated, white groups, the color line has been emphasized for many critics, along with these other fractures and differences. Nor can we forget social class. Race and class have over-determined one another in the language and craft of politics and daily life ever since the nation's white fathers of freedom luxuriated in the unpaid labor of their slaves.

There has been much anxiety expressed, and rightly, about the new Administration's racialized actions and plans. We want to focus here on a very special form of racism that perhaps attracts less attention than the more spectacular aspects of contemporary policies and programs. We refer here to environmental racism – the widespread practice of situating toxic chemicals and their systems of disposal such that their principal neighbors are people of color. The dangers this poses are euphemized by policy makers as Locally Unwanted Land Uses (Feng, 1997) – boasting the delightful acronym, LULU.

LULU has been subject to struggle for decades. Fifty years ago, the grape-pickers organized by César Chávez militated for protection from the pesticides beloved of their white employers, and black students in Houston protested locating a city dump nearby. Ever since, we have seen activists of color pointing out such inimical patterns of oppression and poison across the nation (Skelton & Miller, 2016).

What began in the US as a civil-rights struggle inspired similar movements around the world, becoming part of the vocabulary of human rights. Activists in the Global South have encountered not only the harm caused by such contamination, but assaults on their livelihoods and lives by corporations and governments (Martínez Alier, 2002; Nuwer, 2016).

A 2014 study of chemical plant emissions in the US found that 134 million Americans live close to the almost three and a half thousand businesses that make and store hazardous chemicals. That's appalling as a raw number; but when you break it down, it becomes especially troubling. For the 134 million disproportionately include poor Latin@s and African Americans, many of whom are routinely exposed to harm simply as part of everyday life and would be unable to escape in the event of decidedly unnatural disasters (Orum, Moore, Roberts, & Sánchez, 2014). We know that the new Administration is critical of the Environmental Protection Agency, and can only guess as to its future plans to gut environmental protections. But beyond that, its leadership has a recent and shocking history of environmental racism.

The new Vice President of the US, Mike Pence, was previously Governor of Indiana. In 2016, he leapt precipitously – and correctly – to the aid of the good

folks of Greentown, IN, to visit and clean up the town when dangerous amounts of lead appeared in its water supply. The problem was sorted out within eight weeks. *Kudos*, Gov. Mike. But when even higher levels of lead, and arsenic, were found in the water and soil of East Chicago, In., Pence refused to declare it a disaster zone.¹ Why might that be? ‘Greentown’s population of 2,400 is 97% white. In contrast, the over 28,000 residents of East Chicago, Indiana are 43% African American and 51% Hispanic or Latino’ (Halstead, 2017).

As Gandy (2017) explains, this story discloses a different, albeit related, racism from linguistic, physical, and employment forms. It is not the racism of epithets, directly interpersonal violence, or employment discrimination. Rather, it is the more subtle but equally powerful and repellent racism of neglect, where one is annihilated symbolically. Environmental racism is latent, covert – and overwhelming.

This points to the requirement for environmentalists to put racial inequality at the top of their already-overflowing agenda. In his survey of the literature as applied to the US, Gandy (2013) identifies a need to harness the language of sustainability and intergenerational responsibility (to those as yet unborn) to equality and intragenerational responsibility (to those among us).

Without that determination, and its ultimate fulfillment, we are destined to see the great fault line that birthed the US creating more and more lifelong scars on its population.

Note

1.

<http://bloximages.chicago2.vip.townnews.com/nwitimes.com/content/tncms/assets/v3/editorial/4/ad/4ad5ffab-5090-590f-a2ee-8fe69f3b71f5/587ffb31cc0f8.pdf.pdf>.

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