

# Race, Class and the Global Politics of Environmental Inequality

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It would be highly surprising if the world of global environmental politics existed above, or somehow transgressed, the global politics of exclusion and inequality which characterize all other global social relations. It is my contention indeed that they do not, despite the lack of attention within the study of *global* environmental politics to these fundamental issues. The challenge, however, is to suggest ways in which environmental inequality reinforces and, at the same time reflects, other forms of hierarchy and exploitation along lines of class, race and gender. In the context of this paper, my aim is to suggest connections between these worlds, borne out by diverse literatures including those on environmental racism, social ecology, historical materialism and feminist political ecology that are relevant to the global politics of the environment. Given the scale of this ambitious task, my analysis at this point cannot move much beyond identifying and suggesting connections in such a way as to facilitate further applied and theoretically informed modes of enquiry.

It is increasingly unhelpful to view global environmental politics, either in terms of the ecological change processes which it seeks to manage (issue-based analysis) or the institutions that are constructed (regime analysis) in terms of generic categories of North and South, as Marian Miller's work made clear. When the focus moves from reading politics from geography in this way to focus on intra and transnational social and economic divisions, looking for example at "Souths in the North" and "Norths in the South,"<sup>1</sup> we have an entry point for assessing the importance of race and class to inequality in global environmental politics. This shift obliges us to relate inequalities within societies to economic injustices between them. From an historical materialist perspective, as Wood argues, the class polarizations of capitalism that have been associated with the North-South divide increasingly also produce "the impoverishment of so-called 'under-classes' within advanced capitalist countries."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, working class communities are regarded as convenient depositories of the social and environmental hazards of industrial activity because those communities, as

1. Gaventa 1999.
2. Wood 2002, 25.

Bullard and Wright suggest, have a “third world view of development—that is, any development is better than no development at all.”<sup>3</sup>

Given these patterns, it becomes more helpful to look at those social groups that generate most and benefit most from wasteful and destructive patterns of resource exploitation as well as those groups that suffer the worst consequences of global environmental change and the social injustices that it serves to compound. This provides us with a clearer sense of who resists progressive policy change and why, and who suffers most and is in need of the greatest protection. Analysis of this sort can provide a useful point of departure for constructing counter-hegemonic coalitions around social movement or policy-based interventions that are better placed to protect the rights of poorer and more vulnerable groups.

I advance essentially three key claims in the course of the paper. First, that we can understand important aspects of global structures in global environmental politics through their localized effects which render them visible. From here, it is easier to discern the coalitions of power that produce and benefit from prevailing distributions of risk and profit. Such an approach helps us to comprehend more fully the connections between macro decision-making and local level consequences. Second, race and class are key mediating structures in global environmental politics. They are relevant to understanding causation (the distribution of benefit from environmental destruction), process (which social groups make these key decisions and through what decision-making structures) and distribution (of hazard and harm). Third, a key implication of such an approach is that we have to take a more critical look at the role of the state and, relatedly, the role of law in global environmental politics, in the production and reproduction of environmental injustice.

In order to develop an analysis of this sort, I draw on elements of the following literatures. Firstly, a diverse set of literatures, albeit ones which go by other names, looking at issues of environmental conflict<sup>4</sup> as well as struggles around corporate accountability to poorer communities.<sup>5</sup> This work takes as given the limits of traditional remedies provided by states and international institutions on environmental and social issues, acknowledging the complicity of states in acts of environmental degradation which impact most severely on the poor and the marginalized. The explicit aim of these works is to explore what afflicted communities can do to defend themselves, through resistance and “weapons of the weak,” as well as more engaged strategies of litigation and global alliance-building. While attention is drawn to the sorts of state-capital alliance that are responsible for environmental inequalities, either through blindness to the concerns of poorer groups or active exclusion of their voices within decision-making processes that privilege the interests of organized capital, sys-

3. Bullard and Wright 1990, 390.

4. Collinson 1994.

5. Madeley 1999; and Garvey and Newell 2004.

tematic attention to racial and class dimensions is often lacking. Activist oriented work, which draws attention to the plight of indigenous peoples and the discrimination they suffer in hosting mining and oil projects for example, posits these connections more directly<sup>6</sup>.

Second, I draw on emerging literatures within development studies that relate global decision-making processes to their local consequences. These emphasize elite control of the framings of problems, lack of access for poorer groups, and the ways in which policy interventions often serve broader commercial imperatives.<sup>7</sup> Not only does such work reveal the role of transnational capitalist elites in managing environmental agendas in ways which facilitate further capital accumulation, it also demonstrates how policy choices that may benefit poorer groups are often constrained through these means; a kind of policy lock-in that we have come to associate with other areas of policy in a context of neo-liberalism.<sup>8</sup> In relation to biotechnology, I have argued in earlier work that in a context of global pressure to accommodate trade concerns, there is a real danger that countries will lose the right to determine for themselves whether, and in what ways, biotechnology may assist their development.<sup>9</sup> Work from social movement traditions applied to the issue of conservation also shows how global elite framings of problems often translate into unworkable and socially unjust outcomes at the local level, particularly for marginalized groups.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of constructing global connections between patterns of organized inequality, these studies provide a more global perspective on environmental inequality and its world-wide manifestations than the literature on environmental racism for example. The limitation of using the environmental racism literature as a basis for scaling up to a global framework of analysis is that, as Szasz and Meuser note, the horizons of the environmental inequality literature are largely contemporary and American.<sup>11</sup> Even work from outside this region, from South Africa for example, suggests the importance of studying the interface between race and environment in context specific settings.<sup>12</sup> While acknowledging this, work which draws from the social ecology tradition suggests the possibility and importance of locating processes of environmental degradation within broader social structures of power, hierarchy and exploitation in ways that go beyond mapping the local consequences of global institutional activity.<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, given their regional diversity, these literatures serve to show that as Szasz and Meuser put it: "environmental inequality is a global phe-

6. Evans et al. 2002; and Collinsen 1994.

7. Keeley and Scoones 2003; and Newell 2003a.

8. Gill 1995.

9. Newell 2003b.

10. Flitner 1998.

11. Szasz and Meuser 1997, 111.

12. Ruiters 2002.

13. Athanasiou 1996; Bellamy-Foster 2002; Bookchin 1991; and Saurin 1996.

nomenon routinely generated by the normal workings of international political economy."<sup>14</sup> They suggest that transformations of nature produce human and social impacts that "will fall unevenly, along existing divisions of wealth/poverty, power/powerlessness; the transformations of nature will tend to occur in a way that reproduces and exacerbates existing social inequalities. In effect, environmental inequality is one facet or moment of social inequality."<sup>15</sup> These authors advocate globalizing their approach by drawing on the extensive work on under-development within the global economy in order to assemble a framework in which work on environmental injustice could be situated. The overall result would be to "depict environmental inequalities as a necessary and inevitable facet of social inequalities, embedded in the very fabric of modern societies."<sup>16</sup>

A third set of literature includes some work within global environmental politics that has begun to forge these global connections, though not systematically across each of the dimensions I refer to here. For example, there has been some work on the global toxic waste trade, which seeks to connect global negotiations around the waste trade with local consequences and broader questions of social justice.<sup>17</sup> As Ford notes "The struggle against toxic waste is not a discrete issue, but one that is fundamentally embedded in the global political economy and one that emphasizes unequal social relations of power throwing up questions of race, class and gender."<sup>18</sup> This type of analysis usefully suggests ways in which patterns of pollution distribution that have been observed within countries, often mirroring and permitted by social inequalities therein, are also present globally. It suggests that such patterns are not accidental but derive from conscious choices and state strategies. Though there is much confusion regarding evidence of pollution havens in the global economy, Pellow and Park suggest in the case of the electronics industry: "the more laissez-faire the controls on hazardous substances, the more attractive the nation as a site for manufacturing."<sup>19</sup> A look within the sector suggests that those that bear the social and environmental costs of such a competition strategy are immigrant and female workers providing the "nimble fingers" for rapid, often home-based, construction of circuits and in an environment where exposure to highly toxic chemicals is unregulated. Pellow and Park quote an employer saying "There's just three things I look for in entry-level hiring. Small, foreign and female."<sup>20</sup>

If not in intent, then in consequence, the new international division of pollution feeds on entrenched patterns of social inequality etched along racial, class and gender lines, as well as constructing new patterns of environmental in-

14. Szasz and Meuser 1997, 111–112.

15. Szasz and Mesuer 1997, 111–112.

16. Szasz and Meuser 1997, 113.

17. Clapp 1994; and Ford 2005.

18. Ford 2005, 314.

19. Pellow and Park 2002, 177.

20. Pellow and Park 2002, 88.

equality in its wake. Despite the claims of the former World Bank Chief Economist Lawrence Summers that parts of the world, notably Africa, are “under-polluted,” it is misleading to understand the global allocation of environmental hazard in geographical terms. The key issue raised by Summer’s comment is the value of life and whose rights are privileged in discussions about societal allocations of risk and benefit from industrial activity. Rather like their counterparts in the North, Third World elites tend not to live near toxic waste sites, nuclear facilities or industrial belts producing hazardous chemicals. Social and racial hierarchies that exist within, but extend beyond the state provide an analytically more satisfying point of departure for understanding the politics of allocating the risks and benefits of environmental degradation. The following sections of the paper develop these ideas through a focus firstly on race and secondly on class, drawing connections between the two and other social structures such as gender.

## Race

Whereas racism is rarely invoked in the explicit sense it was in colonial times, as a mechanism for justifying extraction, violence and segregation, there is contemporary evidence of continued racism in the consequences of environmental action and inaction, intervention and neglect. These are structural outcomes in so far as access, entitlements and life expectancy continue to be strongly shaped by people’s racial identities. Most pertinently, the racial dimension of environmental inequality surfaces around the question of who has rights to environmental protection and who bears the burden of waste and pollution.

The French government received global condemnation for its program of nuclear testing in the Pacific (Mururoa atoll) in 1995,<sup>21</sup> but arguably the neo-colonial arrogance it manifested runs deeper than many would care to admit. The recent controversy surrounding genetically modified (GM) food aid brought many of these issues to the surface once more.<sup>22</sup> The US government accused countries such as Zambia of committing crimes against humanity by refusing to accept GM food aid when its people were starving. The assumption seemed to be that the hungry lose their rights to exercise choice and, in this context, that starving people should be willing to trial a controversial, some would say under-tested, technology. Food aid maize from the US containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) was reportedly sent to Bolivia in 2002, disregarding the fact the country had a moratorium in place on the import of GM crops. The GMOs found in the Bolivian aid contained StarLink corn that was not approved in the US for human consumption, though it was approved for animal feed. What was revealing was the fact that when traces of StarLink were

21. Haynes 1999.

22. Clapp 2004.

found in the US food supply, it was immediately removed from the US market, yet no such effort was made to remove maize sent to Bolivia as food aid.<sup>23</sup> The export of GM food aid to Africa, where many governments were similarly opposed to accepting GM crops, led *The Ecologist* to summarize the situation on its front cover in the following stark terms: “Eat shit or die? America gives Africa a choice.”<sup>24</sup>

The social organization of environmental hazard and the political distribution of risk also manifest strong racial dimensions. The environmental racism literature provides convincing evidence of disproportionate exposure of poorer communities of color to the most hazardous forms of environmental pollution. It was in the aftermath of the Warren County protests that the concept of “environmental racism” was first advanced by the civil rights activist, Dr. Benjamin Chavis. According to Chavis, environmental racism refers to:

Racial discrimination in environmental policy making and the unequal enforcement of the environmental laws and regulations. It is the deliberate targeting of people-of-color communities for toxic waste facilities and the official sanctioning of a life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in people-of-color communities.<sup>25</sup>

This literature looks at the links between choices that are made about the location of hazardous production processes and the racial and social profile of communities where those processes are to be based.<sup>26</sup> It suggests that minority and/or low income communities are disproportionately overburdened with hazardous waste sites, incinerators, petrochemical plants, lead contamination, dirty air and contaminated drinking water. Figure 1 provides a sample of the many studies that have reached such conclusions.

Underscoring the importance of conscious intent rather than random process, work on environmental racism also shows that communities of color are often targeted by firms processing potentially hazardous materials because they anticipate a more compliant workforce that can be paid lower wages and where they expect political resistance to be less forthcoming.<sup>27</sup> A 1984 report for the California Waste Management Board suggested that residents least likely to oppose waste developments would be “rural communities, poor communities, communities whose residents have low educational levels . . . and whose residents were employed in resource-extractive jobs.”<sup>28</sup> The Cerrell report, a strategy manual for industries needing to set up polluting facilities such as incinerators, whose aim was to “assist in selecting a site that offers the least potential of generating public opposition” reached similar conclusions. Its recommendations

23. Clapp 2004.

24. *The Ecologist* 2003.

25. Quoted in Sandweiss 1998, 36.

26. Cole and Foster 2001; Pellow and Park 2002; and Allen 2003.

27. Cole and Foster 2001; and Pellow and Park 2002.

28. Cole and Foster 2001, 3.

**Figure 1**  
Key Reports on Environmental Racism

- A 1983 General Accounting Office study revealed that three out of four off site, commercial hazardous waste landfills in the southeast US are located within predominantly African American communities, even though African Americans make up just one fifth of the region's population.<sup>a</sup>
- A 1987 study by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice—the first national study to correlate waste facilities and demographic characteristics—found that race was the most significant factor in determining where waste facilities are located. Among other findings, the study revealed that three out of five African Americans and Hispanic Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites, and that 15 million African Americans live in communities with at least one site.<sup>b</sup>
- A 1992 study by the National Law Journal uncovered significant disparities in the way the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) enforces its laws: "There is a racial divide in the way the US government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters. White communities see faster action, better results and stiffer penalties than communities where Blacks, Hispanics and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs whether the community is wealthy or poor."<sup>c</sup>
- In a review of studies of environmental hazards over almost thirty years, White reports that "racial disparities were found in 87 per cent of studies and income disparities were found in 74 per cent. Disparities were found to exist in a variety of areas (i.e. exposure to toxins and solid waste, siting of hazardous facilities, and occupational health), in all regions of the country, and in both urban and rural communities."<sup>d</sup>

- a. United States General Accounting Office 1983.  
 b. Commission for Racial Justice 1987.  
 c. National Law Journal (NLJ) 1992, 1.  
 d. White 1998, 63.

were: 1) avoid middle and higher income neighborhoods 2) target communities that are less well educated 3) target conservative or traditional communities preferably with fewer than 25,000 residents 4) target rural or elderly communities 5) target areas whose residents are employed in resource extractive jobs like mining, timber or agriculture. Even if the developments are unwelcome, impoverished communities generally lack the financial and technical resources necessary to resist environmentally hazardous facilities. They also have less access to traditional remedies to ameliorate those burdens under environmental and civil rights laws than do their wealthier neighbors.<sup>29</sup> The consequence of these practices is much higher levels of exposure to toxics and subsequently higher levels of illnesses among minority communities, as illustrated by the cases outlined in

29. Babcock 1995, 9.



Figure 1. The effect of course is to magnify existing patterns of poverty and deprivation.

The fact that poverty and race, as opposed to broader North-South dynamics, are more helpful in explaining the siting of hazardous industry is further borne out by the literature on Native Americans and environmental justice.<sup>30</sup> Angel argues, "Hoping to take advantage of the devastating chronic unemployment, pervasive poverty and sovereign status of Indian Nations, the waste disposal industry and the US government have embarked on an all out effort to site incinerators, landfills, nuclear waste storage facilities and similar polluting industries on Tribal land."<sup>31</sup> The pattern observed in North America resonates with the experience of indigenous peoples in parts of the developing world. Such groups often inhabit the frontline of areas opened up for global investment in activities such as mining and are often in conflict with the state over land rights and the distribution of revenues derived from resources on their lands.<sup>32</sup>

In many ways, the patterns of exploitation we find within countries mirror the forms assumed by global relations of the colonial era. In parts of Latin America a form of "colonialism within" is practiced when elites of white European or *mestizo* decent either forcibly remove indigenous Indians from their lands or extract resources coercively for global export. Invoking rationales employed by former colonizers, such controversial practices continue to be validated through reference to the need to modernize backward peoples and their "unproductive" livelihoods.<sup>33</sup> The incentives given to large livestock-raising and timber companies in the Amazon Brazil, for instance, reflect the view that rubber extraction and nut harvesting by traditional populations are "backward" economic activities that fail to utilize the area sufficiently.<sup>34</sup> In India, colonial legislation continues to be invoked by the state to justify controversial developments. The Land Acquisition Act, which allows the state to claim land in the name of projects in the (ill-defined) national interest, has been repeatedly used to remove people from their land to make way for industrial development. The impact has been particularly grave on tribal communities inhabiting remote but resource-rich areas of interest to mining and other heavy industrial interests.<sup>35</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising then that at the level of popular protest it is peasants, the rural poor, tribal and indigenous peoples that are at the forefront of campaigns to contest controversial developments which threaten to undermine the resource base upon which they depend.

Beyond these more localized manifestations of the centrality of race to resource conflicts and politics, and the bilateral actions of powerful governments

30. Cole 1992; and Colquette and Robertson 1991.

31. Angel 1991, 1.

32. Evans et al. 2002; and Madeley 1999.

33. Diegues 1998.

34. Diegues 1998, 58.

35. PRIA 2004.



towards weaker states, is there evidence of racialized environmental politics within what we traditionally assume to be the realm of global environmental politics?

It would be relatively straightforward to argue that the high barriers to meaningful participation in global environmental negotiations, in terms of required legal and scientific expertise and the costs of attending frequent rounds of negotiations, serve to screen poorer groups out of global debates. Though efforts have been made to involve indigenous peoples' groups in the biodiversity negotiations for example, the environmental justice movement, that has been the most vocal advocate of coherent positions on the racial and class dimensions of environmental politics, has not, on the whole, engaged with global processes. These are perceived to be far removed from the realities of local conflicts over planning decisions and to reflect the priorities of powerful governments, better resourced NGOs and a globally organized scientific community. Where this has happened, around the climate change issue for example, representation has been confined to NGO side events rather than principal decision-making arenas.<sup>36</sup> Though working class *movements* are absent from these formal arenas, trade unions have been present on occasion, though often forming alliances with industry groups opposing environmental action on a platform of protecting job losses in sectors such as coal mining and the car industry, threatened by action on climate change, for example. In general, however, it is unsurprising that negotiations constructed around specific issues are unlikely or unable to capture, let alone address, cross-cutting questions of justice and distribution deriving from environmental degradation even if, on occasion, as with the toxic waste negotiations, activists attempt to highlight these concerns.

Is there a sense, however, in which there is a race dimension to the ways in which decisions about the environment in global fora are made? Many decision-making processes on the environment are rationalized and underpinned by cost-benefit analysis, reflecting the privileged role of economists in deliberations about the costs of environmental action. In the context of the global negotiations on climate change, this prompted controversy over the value of life assumed by conventional modeling techniques. The debate centered on the assumption, built into IPCC WG3 models on the economic costs associated with different courses of action on climate change, that because of their lack of willingness to pay, people in the global South valued action on climate change less than their counterparts in the North. The confusion between *willingness* and *ability* to pay as a determinant of whether action should take place allowed dubious conclusions to be reached about the lack of demand for action. Critics, such as the Global Commons Institute, suggested that the resulting assumption was that the lives of people in developing countries are valued at 1/15 of those of people in the North. They thus dubbed such findings "the economics of genocide" by accepting that some parts of the world (and some people by impli-

36. CorpWatch 2005.

ation) would be lost because the case for acting to save them was economically "irrational."<sup>37</sup> Within conventional economics such assumptions make perfect sense, hence Lawrence Summer's controversial suggestion that Africa was "under-polluted" and, by implication, that it was logical to transfer toxic wastes to that region given the lower value attached to life on the continent. If we follow the logic of civil rights law that racism becomes visible through outcomes as well as intentions, then it may not be too extreme to suggest that withholding environmental protection from the poor on the grounds that they lack the willingness to pay for it, amounts, in many cases, to racialized triage.

Though I have noted the lack of participation of working class and race-based movements in global environmental negotiations, environmental NGOs have played key roles in such processes. The environmental movement is often held up as a democratizing force in global environmental politics, helping to promote tougher action than would otherwise be agreed and providing a voice for those not at the negotiating table.<sup>38</sup> Yet elements of the environmental movement have had a controversial courtship with racist thinking which raises questions about its ability to perform democratizing and representative functions on behalf of a broad spectrum of racial groups and classes. Controversial stances on issues of immigration and a support base drawn from wealthier social groups, as well as the receipt of substantial donations from business, serve to magnify concerns about the commitment of conservative environmental groups to a broader social justice agenda. On occasion, conservationist imperatives have also been allowed to trump considerations of human welfare. The policy of shoot to kill, applied to poachers in Kenya, was encouraged by conservative conservation groups such as WWF and Conservation International who took the position that "increasing population was a major threat to the survival of elephants and other wildlife."<sup>39</sup> The adoption by more radical elements of the environmental movement of the "lifeboat ethics" promoted by Garrett Hardin, with its apparent acceptance of global triage, as well as over-emphasis on the importance of population control by thinkers such as Ehrlich, which helped to rationalize forced sterilizations across the developing world, has done nothing to alleviate suspicions about the excessive prioritization of ecology over justice and human welfare.<sup>40</sup>

Again, in so far as the consequences of decisions, programs and campaign priorities impact disproportionately on poorer people of color, as clearly in these cases they do, there is evidence of racialised environmental politics at work. Conversely, there is also evidence in some quarters of the environmental movement of a kind of essentialism around race. Just as eco-feminists are criticized for positing reductionist connections about women's intrinsic connections to nature which are said to make them more effective as caring nurturers,

37. Newell 2000.

38. Wapner 1996; and Lipschutz 1996.

39. Peluso 1993, 57.

40. Ehrlich 1972.

so too the romanticization of the indigenous, particularly the reification of communities allegedly untouched by “civilization” and more in tune with nature than their modern counterparts, often characterizes contemporary environmental campaigning. The unfortunate and unintended effect may be to reinforce racial stereotypes that, in the gender case at least, have led to women being burdened with stewardship of the environment and, through increased attention and visibility, the subject of unwelcome donor and government policy interventions.<sup>41</sup>

At the level of access to resources, the processes by which decisions are made about managing environmental change and the distributional consequences of these processes, we can see then the way in which questions of race penetrate environmental politics and vice versa. Though for the purposes of identifying literatures and for setting out the issues analytically, I have separated race and class, Pulido alerts us to the need to get beyond viewing race/class as competing issues.<sup>42</sup> They are not discrete things that can be easily compartmentalized. Szasz and Meuser argue that race and class are “rather, social relations that interact in complex ways. Environmental justice research reifies these categories. It reduces them to their operationalizations. It sets them as airtight things that can be isolated, both conceptually and methodologically, typically with multivariate statistics. It then tries to determine, in an either/or fashion, which is the more important or powerful variable.”<sup>43</sup> The problem, as Pulido<sup>44</sup> sees it, is that such approaches are forced to assume that racism is an abnormality, an unfortunate occurrence and not a structural or inherent feature of many societies, which much of the work I cite above suggests it is. Ruiters highlights another danger of focusing solely on race; it can imply homogeneous communities not fractured by class, where fetishizing skin color prevents us from a broader and deeper understanding of how inequality is produced. In many settings, it is poverty that links race and class.<sup>45</sup> I explore this idea further in the next section on class and global environmental politics.

## Class

How are we to understand class in this context? Burnham reminds us that exploitation, not consciousness or common awareness, is the hallmark of class.<sup>46</sup> He cites De Ste. Croix’s claim that “class (essentially a relationship) is the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation, the way in which exploitation is embodied in a social structure.”<sup>47</sup> The difference then is between class and class

41. Bretherton 1998.

42. Pulido 1996.

43. Szasz and Meuser 1997, 108.

44. Pulido 1996.

45. Ruiters 2002.

46. Burnham 2002, 117.

47. De Ste. Croix 1981, 43 [cited in Burnham 2002, 117].

struggle, where the former can be identified in relation to the degree of ownership or control over the means of production, and the latter to the process of domination and resistance that results from the exploitation of labor. In environmental politics, if we take as given that the contemporary nature and possible future forms of global environmental governance are heavily shaped and circumscribed by the organization of the global economy, and in its current phase, globalization, then production (and who controls it) has to assume a central role in our analysis. This then is the entry point for understanding how class becomes relevant to the study of global environmental politics. In so far as class is apparent in both the causes and consequences of processes associated with globalization, how does it render itself visible in the world of environmental politics?

As a mechanism for capturing the dynamics at work in *global* environmental politics, some of the insights from neo-Gramscian versions of historical materialism become useful. As Murphy suggests, “the social forces that have continued to back the neoliberal agenda are truly transnational, which implies that to understand contemporary global governance we need to develop a class analysis that transcends national boundaries.”<sup>48</sup> At the same time he notes, “Global governance is not simply a superstructure responding to the needs of an already differentiated global ruling class. It is more a site, one of many sites, in which struggles over wealth, power and knowledge are taking place. It may be more accurate to argue that contemporary global governance remains a predictable institutional response not to the interests of a fully-formed class, but to the overall logic of industrial capitalism.”<sup>49</sup> For Robinson, it is the state as a class relation that is being transnationalized. Its composition, he notes, “comprises those institutions and practices in global society that maintain, defend and advance the emergent hegemony of a global bourgeoisie and its project of constructing a new global capitalist historical bloc.”<sup>50</sup> Class analysis then presupposes a theory of the state.

In environmental terms, an understanding of the operations of the ruling class reveals the ways in which decisions get made that systematically distribute risk and hazard to the poor while at the same time preserving the privilege and property of the bourgeoisie. The economic incentives for the ruling class to behave in this way are clear. Haynes notes “Political elites are very likely to be major wealth holders with interests in a variety of activities, some of them environmentally damaging, including commercial logging, mineral and oil exploitation, plantation cropping and large-scale irrigated farming.”<sup>51</sup> This relates to Marx’s contention that the capitalist state is “based on the contradiction between public and private life, on the contradiction between general interests and private interests.”<sup>52</sup> Its role is to maintain market discipline and mediate be-

48. Murphy 2002, xiv.

49. Murphy 2002, xiv.

50. Robinson 2002, 215.

51. Haynes 1999, 224.

52. Marx 1975, 46.

tween the contradictions of general and particular interests even within capital, such that as Newell and Paterson show, competing fractions of capital seek to present their interests as consistent with those of capital-in-general in environmental as in other issue areas.<sup>53</sup> The state then is not seen as a separate sphere with its own logic, not “suspended in mid-air” as Marx noted, but giving form to economic institutions and production relations.<sup>54</sup> An analysis of class allows us to locate the state within those larger relations that are implied in the production of environmental degradation. The lack of state theory employed in analysis of environmental politics is problematic in this sense.

Considerable attention is given instead in the study of global environmental politics to international law, uninformed by these insights.<sup>55</sup> As a result, there is a tendency to valorize law as the *a priori* response to global environmental crisis and to ignore the social relations within which law is cast and which it serves to entrench. Cutler argues, “The possibility for the law to exhibit bias or to serve unrepresentative interests or undemocratic ends is ruled out by presumptions of the law as natural, neutral and consensual order.”<sup>56</sup> Even accepting that state laws to some extent do not intend to generate inequalities, Cole and Foster note “State permitting laws remain neutral or blind toward these inequalities; they therefore perpetuate, and indeed exacerbate, distributional inequalities.”<sup>57</sup>

Others argue that legal systems are not neutral towards the inequalities they produce, but rather exist in order to preserve such injustices. In this reading, legal relations cannot be divorced from the material conditions in which they are produced and seek to preserve. Rupert and Smith argue that “Legal rules are a crucial constituent of property relations and privatized class power, and also form the ‘legal culture’ of a transnational bloc advancing a globalizing neoliberal agenda under the guise of naturalized representations of property, market and capital.”<sup>58</sup> Environmental politics then are played out on this broader canvas of material and institutional power. Levy and Newell<sup>59</sup> have shown how global shifts in the relationship between state and capital impact on the world of environmental politics, in particular protecting the agents of environmental degradation, such as multinational companies, from interference in their activities, through regulation.

Invoking ideas about the “marketization” of environmental policy, I have shown elsewhere how the possibilities of effective environmental policy are narrowed by the hegemony of market practice in global environmental politics; a hegemony sustained through a combination of material, organizational and discursive power.<sup>60</sup> One increasingly prominent and controversial aspect of the

53. Newell and Paterson 1998.

54. Robinson 2002.

55. Sands 1992.

56. Cutler 2002, 233.

57. Cole and Foster 2001, 71.

58. Rupert and Smith 2002, 10.

59. Levy and Newell 2002.

60. Newell forthcoming.

marketization of environmental policy is the importance attached to property rights as a mechanism for incentivizing environmental action. "Privatized nature," as one book puts it, is made possible through property rights that determine patterns of access, exclusion and wealth extraction.<sup>61</sup> Rupert, for example, illustrates the way in which "property is assigned to the private sphere as a primordial individual right and hence is exempted from ongoing political dialogue in the public sphere."<sup>62</sup> This relates to Gill's argument about how law, in form of the new constitutionalism, serves to expand the private sphere of capital accumulation while constraining potentially democratizing influences.<sup>63</sup> This is unsurprising in so far as Cutler suggests "The law globalises rules that facilitate transnational patterns of capital accumulation, attenuating certain regulatory practices while advancing others. Thus the ability of states to regulate production, trade and finance for national policy purposes is subordinated to the need for states to act as market participants or 'competition states' in the search for expanding market opportunities."<sup>64</sup> In this way, in Gramscian terms, globalized law "advances the interests of a transnational class whose members function as the 'organic intellectuals' for the globalization of capitalism."<sup>65</sup>

Just as many neo-Gramscian accounts explain the ways in which elites seek to preserve their power over the collective management of the global economy through strategies devised by a transnational historic bloc, an environmental account would posit the ways in which fundamental economic interests and privileges are protected through strategies that reify those structures of property and decision-making from which the transnational managerial class benefits. Alliances with conservative elements within the environmental movement have been key to this strategy of accommodation, producing as Sklair shows, "a global environmental elite which has been more or less incorporated into the transnational capitalist class."<sup>66</sup> The function of this sustainable development historic bloc is to distance global capitalism from the sources of environmental problems.<sup>67</sup> As Sklair points out, "The transnational capitalist class even accommodates some mild criticism of consumerism and globalization, but the fatal connection between the capitalist mode of production and the holistic ecological crisis is almost entirely suppressed."<sup>68</sup> Global ecology literatures that emerged in the wake of the UNCED conference suggested that they have been very successful in the task of obscuring their own role in the processes they are ostensibly regulating.<sup>69</sup>

The different notions of class employed here reflect the emphasis by neo-

61. Goldman 1998.

62. Rupert 1995, 24.

63. Gill 1995.

64. Cutler 2002, 231.

65. Cutler 2002, 231.

66. Sklair 2002, 276.

67. Sklair 2001.

68. Sklair 2002, 57.

69. Chatterjee and Finger 1994; and Hildyard 1993.

Gramscians on understanding the specific historical structures of capitalism, as opposed to other work within historical materialism which takes the mode of production as the central point of departure.<sup>70</sup> While some argue that class should still be understood in fairly national terms, on the basis that “we are still a very long way from a truly global capitalist class,”<sup>71</sup> broader understandings of class are helpful in understanding the dynamics of coalition-building and the maintenance of hegemony in environmental arenas where direct connections to structures of production form just one, albeit very important, part of the picture.

As with analysis of race above, class analysis also has the potential to generate insights into the environmental movement itself. Sklair’s<sup>72</sup> description of the sustainable development historic bloc implies a division between reformers and radicals within the environmental movement that hold opposing views of the compatibility of neo-liberal capitalism with sustainable development. An analysis more narrowly focused on classical notions of class (as opposed to class as managerial coalition) would also point to differences in strategy reflecting those classes groups represent and therefore the extent to which they are able to question the structures that produce environmental harm. The middle-class membership base of many conservation-oriented organizations perhaps helps to explain their reluctance to adopt campaigns which challenge property relations or questions of access to land. The political interests of the class they represent make it unlikely that anything other than a weak sustainability reformist agenda can be pursued given the extent to which they benefit, directly and indirectly, from the status quo.

This would be in contrast to working class environmental movements, urban or rural-based, that are able to challenge more fundamental relations of property and organized inequality which keep them in poverty. Though much has been written about the movement of the landless in Brazil (MST) and other *campesino* movements, less populist and smaller-scale versions exist in the global North. “The Land is Ours” group in UK would be an example. In both cases, at issue is land ownership and its redistribution, currently concentrated in the hands of cattle ranchers and plantation owners in the former case and the British aristocracy in the second. In many parts of the developing world in particular, conscious and deliberate links are forged with the left around a platform of opposition to neo-liberalism and its concrete manifestations in attempts to privatize water supplies, for example. There is also evidence of connections increasingly being forged in the North between environmental groups and organizations that are traditionally assumed to represent the working class, such as trade unions, in the context of broader campaigns for fair trade or anti-globalization protests.<sup>73</sup> O’Brien describes what brings these groups together:

70. Lacher 2002; and Burnham 2002.

71. Wood 2002, 27.

72. Sklair 2001.

73. Obach 2004.



it has always been the case that much environmental damage, whether it is radiation leakage from nuclear power stations, asbestos poisoning or polluted water, has a disproportional affect on those people working in the industries themselves and their communities. So there has always been a case for unity. What is significant about today's protests and campaigns are the overt links being made between workers and other campaigners about the environmental effects of the rampant expansion of the market.<sup>74</sup>

Acknowledging these connections, new coalitions have been formed such as the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment, formed around the time of the Seattle WTO summit and involving environmental groups such as Earth Island Institute alongside the United Steel Workers of America. This is in addition to more momentary unities during the Seattle protests where labor and environmental activists came together under banners such as "Teamsters and turtles, together at last."<sup>75</sup> At national level, in the South African context, Khan notes how "Trade unions began to accept that industrial health and occupational health and safety were legitimate environmental issues and therefore of concern to them in their commitment to creating working areas that were safe both for workers and for the surrounding communities."<sup>76</sup> Such alliance-building was significant in the campaign for justice for the rural community living close to the Thor chemicals plant in KwaZulu-Natal whose water was poisoned with mercury waste. Earthlife formed an alliance with the Chemical Workers Industrial Union, the Environmental Justice Networking Forum, as well as with Greenpeace International, who conducted tests on soil and water samples taken from the ground around the plant.<sup>77</sup> In many other cases, however, relationships between trade unions and environmental groups remain uneasy and fragile.<sup>78</sup>

In terms of the class politics of the environmental movement, there may be a difference between second wave environmentalism, which is said to be overwhelmingly white and middle class in its staff, membership and perspective, and the third wave of grassroots environmentalists, largely, though not entirely, working class people, many of whom are people of color.<sup>79</sup> The latter bring different histories and experiences to the table because of their backgrounds and often have less faith in the law and more experience with non-legal strategies than mainstream environmentalists having uncovered through their own experiences "the hidden power dynamics of pollution and environmental laws."<sup>80</sup> Integrating class and gender dimensions, Ford notes how in relation to struggles around toxic waste, "the politicization of working-class women

74. O'Brien 2001, 73.

75. Moody 2001, 293.

76. Khan 2002, 29.

77. Lukey 2002, 278.

78. Bullard and Wright 1990, 305.

79. Cole 1992.

80. Cole 1992, 643.

through the issue of toxic waste has instilled a suspicion of mainstream environmental organizations that fail to analyze the underlying issues of inequality in access to power and influence."<sup>81</sup>

The point here is not to reduce all interpretations of environmental movements to class. To do so would be to overlook the many rich insights from feminist political ecology,<sup>82</sup> and of course work on environmental racism that I draw on here, about the politics of movement identity, exclusion and effectiveness. The point is that attention to class dynamics reveals much about the composition, strategies and agendas of elements within the environmental movement. More broadly, as with the discussion on race, we have seen how issues of access and control of resources, decision-making processes and the distribution of gains and hazards can each be usefully understood through a focus on class. The challenge remains to integrate them in an analytically meaningful way.

### **From Race and Class to Environmental Inequality and Exploitation**

In so far as some historical materialist accounts are guilty of a particular type of economism which posits that capitalism constitutes a form of domination more fundamental than race and gender,<sup>83</sup> there are issues of how readily we can combine insights from historical materialism about class with insights on race and gender in the sphere of environmental politics. Lekhi suggests class analysis imposes an unreasonable coherence on the world when even Marx acknowledged how social entities constituted by a multiplicity of relations and structures cannot, in and of themselves, be reduced to class.<sup>84</sup> The challenge for Marxism that Colás identifies is to consider "how capital grafts its own logic of exploitation upon pre-existing institutions and social structures such as sovereign political communities, households, ethnic, religious or caste hierarchies and, most notably, sexual differentiation."<sup>85</sup> He concludes that "In as much as the processes of globalisation are a reflection of the class antagonisms arising out of such social hierarchies [such as sex and race], they often reinforce, rather than undermine, these divisions."<sup>86</sup> Suggesting that capitalism, racism and patriarchy fuse at certain junctures is not to suggest that they are synonymous, however; interconnections have to be understood as historical articulations of particular sets of social relations.<sup>87</sup> Given this, Scott and Rupert suggest, "a political movement must be built through the recognition that those exploited and dominated by globalizing capitalism share a potential unity in view of their common structural relation to capital, but that this commonality is embedded

81. Ford 2005, 317.

82. Rochelau et al. 1995; Brown and Ferguson 1995; and Krauss 1993.

83. Laffey and Dean 2002.

84. Lekhi 1995.

85. Colás 2002, 205.

86. Colás 2002, 206.

87. Lekhi 2000.

in and mediated by manifold social relations which mark them off as meaningfully different."<sup>88</sup>

Environmental inequality often then goes hand in hand with other forms of exploitation and discrimination. The fact that poorer communities of color are disproportionately exposed to high levels of environmental pollution and that environmental protection measures are often poorly enforced or neglected altogether in the areas where they live suggests a form of "double-discrimination." If you are working class you are more likely to be exposed to environmental pollution. If you are a person of color and working class you are even more likely to be exposed to hazards. If you are a woman of color and working class, the forms of discrimination, including environmental, that you are likely to endure in your day to day life, will almost certainly be even more pronounced. Trying, however, to posit a hierarchy among these forms of discrimination when it comes to access to natural resources and exposure to hazard becomes almost meaningless when they are so interrelated and reproduce one another so intimately. Separating race and class for analytical purposes in the way I have above, has not meant to imply a uni-dimensional analytical approach; merely to identify, in turn, the interaction of issues of race and class with the multiple arenas of global environmental politics and to highlight insights from distinct literatures associated with each.

I have emphasized the global dimensions of these patterns in order to make a case for addressing the issues they raise more systematically within the study of global environmental politics. However, though processes of globalization are often cited as the catalyst for awareness about the social consequences of environmental injustice, the condition is hardly a new one. As Keeva notes, "The poor have always lived downwind and downstream from what the privileged could afford to avoid. What is new is the extent to which the problem is being documented."<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, patterns of exploitation that exist within countries along the lines of class, caste, race and gender are often exacerbated by global economic pressures. While others have noted the social consequences of adjusting economies to the requirements of global capital,<sup>90</sup> Miller was alert to the environmental consequences of this process. Referring to export processing zones, she noted "The corporations enjoy special privileges such as tax breaks, the use of valuable land, influence in local government decision-making and priority access to local water supplies and power generation; in addition, local taxpayers pay for the infrastructure these enterprises need. Sometimes these businesses add to the cost by contaminating local land and water supplies with their toxic wastes. All of these costs seem disproportionate to the benefits received, especially when the primary benefit is low-wage jobs."<sup>91</sup>

88. Scott and Rupert 2002, 298.

89. Keeva 1994, 88.

90. Lazarus 1998–1999.

91. Miller 1995, 145.

However, injustices enabled through processes of globalization are rendered invisible through distance, as Marian Miller was acutely aware. She noted:

When there is a separation of producer from consumer, employee from employer, and investor from investment, the decision making process is freer to ignore the externalities that might otherwise be factored in. This kind of decision-making process justifies the hazardous waste trade and the establishment of hazardous waste landfills and incinerators in poor communities.<sup>92</sup>

Increasingly, as a result, attempts to contest the race and class-based allocations of risk and benefit that this observation implies have had to take on transnational dimensions. Pellow and Park claim, for example, that “progressive changes in high tech have been realized only when social movements, workers and communities are organizing and demand them. And this must increasingly happen on a transnational scale as high tech and other industries go global.”<sup>93</sup> An example would be the “International Campaign for Responsible Technology” established in 1991 to increase grassroots participation in transnational high tech policy development, comprising more than eighty representatives from over twelve nations.

Often what start as campaigns about particular siting decisions become struggles over decision-making processes which allocate risks in these ways. In this sense, Cole argues that “many in the grassroots environmental movement conceive of their struggle as not simply a battle against chemicals, but a kind of politics that demands popular control of corporate decision-making on behalf of workers and communities.”<sup>94</sup> Cole and Foster note how anti-toxics activists, through the process of local struggles against polluting facilities, came to understand discrete toxic assaults as part of an economic structure in which, “as part of the ‘natural’ functioning of the economy, certain communities would be polluted.”<sup>95</sup> This, in turn, raises many strategic questions. Ruiters suggests merely calling for environmental equity reproduces a naïve faith in procedural justice in social conflict settings and the ability of distributional notions of fairness to tackle the structural and institutional sources of injustice.<sup>96</sup> He argues: “The emphasis (wrongly) falls on the distribution of environmental hazards; the struggle for improved regulations; stricter enforcement; and better access to information about industries, their products and workplace conditions. A deeper approach to environmental justice, however, requires a focus on the production and prevention of injustices.”<sup>97</sup>

There is more learning and exchange in all directions that needs to take place between local community-based forms of activism contesting the conse-

92. Miller 1995, 144.

93. Pellow and Park 2002, 185.

94. Cole 1992, 633.

95. Cole and Foster 2001, 23.

96. Ruiters 2002, 118.

97. Ruiters 2002, 112.

quences of environmental injustice and the social inequities it reinforces and creates, and more “professional” forms of activism within the environmental movement which aim to produce change in the practices of governments and corporations generating these injustices through negotiation and dialogue. The two have neglected one another for too long. Such exchanges provide one possible vehicle for highlighting the chains of injustice that link what we traditionally understand to be global environmental politics, that which takes place within formal institutional arenas at the global level, with micro level consequences of environmental change and its management.

## Conclusion

Drawing on a diverse set of literatures, I have sought in this paper to take forward the challenge Marian Miller engaged with in her work; understanding environmental politics through an understanding of their links to the global political economy. I have used the lenses of race and class to understand patterns of causation, process and distribution that emerge from the relationship between environmental change and the contemporary organization of the global political economy. I am conscious that in seeking to profile the importance of race and class I have paid less explicit attention to gender dimensions. It has been clear, though, in the use of work from the feminist political ecology tradition and the examples used, that gender is central to an adequate and comprehensive understanding of practices of social exclusion and can rarely be divorced meaningfully from considerations of race and class.

Though the contours of the approach I have begun to articulate here challenge the orientation of existing theoretical approaches to the global politics of the environment, they have nonetheless important implications for the continued pursuit of more conventional types of enquiry. With regard the preoccupation with explaining and promoting international cooperation, Miller noted “it is difficult to obtain the required cooperation when, on the one hand, significant destitution is found in the society and, on the other, a small class is ready to exploit the available natural and human resources.”<sup>98</sup> Tackling some of the obvious manifestations and visible elements of environmental injustice might be seen as a prerequisite to the achievement of even narrowly defined functional environmental goals. Miller notes “It is difficult to envisage the achievement of sustainable development in an environment of severe inequity . . . Inequities at the global, national and local levels . . . present obstacles to the support of the regimes and constitute a real threat to adequate implementation and enforcement of international environmental institutions.”<sup>99</sup>

More broadly, however, attention to race and class in global environmental politics does require us to address a broader set of questions than the role of

98. Miller 1995, 143.

99. Miller 1995, 152.

institutions in global society and the interactions of state and nonstate actors on the global stage. If we accept that broader social and economic structures transcend distinctions between global/international and national/local, state/nonstate and public/private, producing inequality and environmental destruction in their wake, how long can we afford to understand environmental politics as a world in which race, class and patriarchy do not exist? They may be relevant to explaining and changing even narrowly-defined *global* practices of environmental politics, but a focus on race and class may require different analytical categories. Ford's use of the distinction between global as a spatial category, that which IR scholars often use to define the legitimate and distinct terrain of their research, and global as a causal category, which is more relevant to capturing the dynamics that have been featured centrally in this paper, is helpful in this regard.<sup>100</sup>

Many of the worst environmental impacts that working class people and communities of color live with on a daily basis do not derive directly from decision-making processes that we have traditionally labeled global. Nevertheless, the articulations of power, concentrated around state-capitalist elites and their allies are not divorced from, and often indeed reflect, what we can observe locally because of their implication in the structures of production that create environmental harm. They form part of wider structures of power which transgress, but also serve to maintain, the visible institutional configurations of global governance. While the more visible and noticeable dimensions of the interface between environmental politics and race and class are observable locally, similar patterns are to be found globally when we turn to questions of access, process and the distribution of environmental benefits and harms. It is this that makes them increasingly applicable to understandings of global environmental politics.

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100. Ford 2005.

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