

STORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE

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Environmental Justice as 'Praxis': Action Research

Environmental justice activist and scholar Eurig Scandrett argues that “environmental justice should be seen as a provisional and contested discourse embedded within a social movement” (2007 p. 4). It is a movement that constantly evolves in response to grassroots activism, cultural values, community organizations, local planning and development and the implementation and enforcement of environmental law. It is a highly interdisciplinary concept that sits at the “crossroads of social movement, public policy and academic research” (Sze & London 2001 p. 1333).

Environmental Justice is largely regarded as a field of social ‘praxis’, which “draws from and integrates theory and practice in a mutually informing dialogue” (Sze & London 2001 p. 1334). In this respect, researchers of the field tend to immerse themselves in the movement, in line with the notion of Puigvert & Valls that the “only way to create relevant social theories is via engaged collaboration” (2005 p. 90). In this respect, academic inquiry into environmental justice is fairly unconventional, involving the “blurring of boundaries between research and subject, the embrace of political projects and values- driven scholarship, despite the risk of losing objectivity (Smith 1999).

Much of the discourse of environmental justice is grounded in the work of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire whose critical pedagogy calls for the generation of knowledge via a process of dialogue (Scandrett 2007). Here, researchers and educators alike are called to immerse

themselves in their vocational community with the radical understanding that learning will inevitably happen in two directions: both the researcher and the subject will be transformed by a *mutual* process of learning. Thereby, in the words of activist and intellectual Jeanette Eby: “deconstructing notions of control and condescension, and letting mutuality flourish in all directions” (Eby 2009, p. 58). This phenomenon of mutuality in experiential learning is known as transformative learning, and is called ‘action research’ in practice (Puigvert & Valls 2005). The academic study of environmental justice is based largely upon action research, as knowledge is generated largely from the dialogue within the movement and is constantly evolving in response to the changing context. Scandrett asserts that: “In this dialogue epistemology, knowledge is generated in praxis [...] validated not only against the rigors of academic criteria, but also on accountability to communities engaged in struggle and their changing collective understanding” (Scandrett 2007). It is crucial to note that the process of ‘uncovering’ an environmental injustice is largely based upon a cultural dialogue: “environmental injustices are therefore not so much discovered by research (and then responded to by policy makers) as constructed by social processes of which research is a part” (Scandrett 2007).

To read the full research paper, including the bibliography, visit:

<http://environmental-justice.com/wp-content/uploads/EJR.pdf>

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