

Globalization of Environmental Justice

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ABSTRACT

In the history of human existence, we have continuously undermined the voices and opinions of people of low-socioeconomic status. By examining events where poverty stricken marginalized groups, both at home and away, are neglected by their leaders, there becomes a growth of understanding the greater events that lead to environmental injustices and how officials address them. Although the United States and other nations of the Global North have more recently seen a spike in social movements in support of environmental justice in our own nations, we still see major inequalities in places where these organizations overlook the continuous injustices being carried out. Similarly, declining efforts to support and positively influence the growing nations of the Global South in adopting sustainable practices perpetuates the continuation of neglecting suffering people as well as the increasing pollutants and emissions that we have been warned about for decades.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of ideas and technology through globalization has supported the growth of some of the wealthiest nations in the world. Nations in the Global North have established well known industries that dominate the world. However, in expanding industries to larger markets with the goal to produce for everyone, the people left behind and interfered with by these industries are significantly disadvantaged by their lasting impacts. Both at home and overseas we can see the negative effects of industry on the environment and the people forced to deal with the repercussions. At home, governments on all levels have turned their backs on the people of color and people of low-socioeconomic status left behind in previously booming industrial cities. Similarly, overseas, the health and well-being of people in developing countries is jeopardized by the transformation of the standard quality of life, which is coincidentally influenced by the standards for quality of life in the Global North. Yet, the increasing dependence on fossil fuels by nations around the globe has both directly and indirectly led to the deaths and displacement of millions each year.

Aiming to give a voice to those disadvantaged by environmental conditions, the environmental justice movement is one that supports equal access to a healthy, safe, and sustainable environment, and aims to provide equal protection from environmental harm. However, as the US begins to acknowledge the disadvantage their citizens face, are they neglecting the disadvantaged peoples overseas or should those nations have to deal with the issues on their own? Is the US a model nation, setting an example for developing countries to follow or are their efforts far from making change on a global scale? To better address these questions, we will look at multiple sources that discuss the need or lack of need to globalize environmental justice ideologies.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Since colonial times, and more noticeably since World War II, nations in the Global North—consistently encompassing western European nations, the United States, as well as more recently acknowledged Global North nations of South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia—have been significantly more wealthy and more powerful than those in the Global South. Nations within the Global South have been what Michael Parenti refers to as “mal-developed” by those of the Global North. In his book, *The Face of Imperialism*, he immediately addresses the history of exploitation of Africa, Asia, and Latin America by the Global North in the first chapter, saying these imperial powers of the north saw the south as, “A source of raw materials and slaves” (Parenti 2). Colonizing already inhabited areas in Latin America and Africa, these nations used their egregious wealth and power to take over civilizations located in the most resource heavy regions of the world, to not only remove as much valued materials as possible, but to also use indigenous inhabitants as their slave labor. Previously colonized African nations of South Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Namibia, and Tanzania to name a few, were used as

resource extraction sites for precious mining based raw goods like gold, salt, diamonds, copper, oil, etc., as well as plant and animal based raw resources like rubber, ivory, and woods. When colonial settlements established mines to provide goods (and money) for the colonizing country—as per the definition of a colony’s purpose—they integrated the industry into the way of life for people living in these areas. So, when these imperialist nations granted independence to the colonies they controlled, these resource extraction practices (mostly mining) were depended on to continue generating wealth for the newly independent nations. In turn, without a continued dependence on the colonizing nation, these independent nations would have no access to the market in which their resources are accepted. This is what I believe Parenti is referring to when he talks about the mal-development of these nations—not that they are “helpless” on their own, but that European nations inhibited their economic growth and development through interference. This continued economic dominance over these mal-developed nations is what Parenti also refers to as “capitalist imperialism” (2-3). This process or idea is one that Parenti says, “Systematically accumulates capital through the organized exploitation of labor and the penetration of overseas markets” and “Invests in other countries, dominating their economies, cultures, and political life, and integrating their productive structures in an international system of capital accumulation” (Parenti 3). Parenti argues that the fundamental issues with the capitalist goals of expansion are what perpetuates this continued disruption as he highlights the destruction of rain forests in Borneo by large companies harvesting wood for “quick profits” (3). This example, like many, shows the destructive efforts taken by large companies of wealthy nations to acquire cheap resources (raw materials, labor, etc.) to produce more goods at a cheaper price to increase their profit margins.

Similarly, Naomi Klein, in her essay “The Change Within,” claims that through this capitalist imperialism or what she calls “Late Capitalism,” large corporations have propagated the consumer culture that infests the minds of the global society. Klein claims that as corporations grow, they push more products onto the people, condoning the behavior of shopping to, “Form our identities, find community and express ourselves” (Klein 323). This consumerist culture is one that effects people of lower-socioeconomic status all over the globe. Both in the US, where corporate regulations, although present since the establishment of industrial reforms in the early 20th century, have continuously neglected the rights of minority racial and ethnic demographics, as well as overseas, where the combination of increasing expansion, development, and lack of regulations have led to the displacement and destruction of millions of people, and innumerable ecosystems relied on by all organisms including humans.

The reforms and regulations put on US industries have allowed for the increased value of the worker and in turn overall better standards for the quality of life amongst the working class. In the early 20th century, Progressive Era reforms called for what we now see as standard, such as an 8-hour workday, no child labor, non-deadly work conditions, sanitary urban spaces, and better housing conditions. Issues that sparked such reform stemmed from the increasingly poor conditions in urban areas—both in the workplace and outside of it. Reformers like Jacob Riis and Upton Sinclair exposed the squalor in which the working class lived and worked and gave a platform for these peoples’ stories to be shared in their respective pieces *How the Other Half Lives* and *The Jungle*. Since then, continued reforms have uplifted the working-class people of European descent, allowing for the development of a middle-class with skilled workers.

However, as skilled workers accumulated more wealth and gained the opportunity to leave densely populated urban areas for more community centered suburban landscapes, redlining and discrimination by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation in the 1930s prevented the same opportunities for people of color. As highlighted in the Milwaukee PBS television series “The Making of Milwaukee,” in 1839, the first German immigrants settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Soon after, immigrants from eastern and southern Europe arrived throughout the rest of the 1800s and early 1900s for the city’s increasing industrial expansion, residing in sections of Milwaukee that already inhabited their ethnic relatives. However, with immigration restrictions put in place with the Immigration Act of 1924, increasing jobs from the booming industrial sector gave rise to the Great Migration of 1910-1930 across America.

The Great Migration is characterized by the mass movement of African American people from the south to urban industrial centers. According “The Making of Milwaukee,” during this time the African American population in Milwaukee soared from about 1,000 to almost 8,000 people. Yet, although African Americans had the ability to move to the city, only certain areas were available to them. News anchor Anthony Dabruzzi addresses this issue in “The History of Redlining Perpetuates Racial Inequality in Milwaukee,” a news segment from Spectrum 1 News Milwaukee. On the location of African American communities, Dabruzzi highlights that the majority of areas redlined in Milwaukee were recently annexed by the city and deemed undesirable by developers. Reggie Jackson, a Black community leader, member and an educator for Nurturing Diversity Partners, says in his interview with Dabruzzi, that “Redlining didn’t create segregation. It already existed...The maps showed you, ‘these are the communities that these people belong to.’” Therefore, when the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation drew up maps designating which neighborhoods were eligible for loan assistance, they marked the annexed neighborhoods that

African Americans began to inhabit, as “high risk,” along with other neighborhoods that inhabited ethnic groups that the corporation deemed as high risk. In turn, loans were only given to people of these racial and ethnic groups for homes within their designated sections, solidifying the segregated boundaries of their neighborhoods.

For the rest of the 1900s, the factory jobs that motivated the Great Migration were still available and provided an income for these people even though they still faced heavy discrimination in politics, the economy and society. However, when factories closed, and industries moved overseas, the people of color who relied on those jobs did not have the same opportunities as white people to move out of the city. In fact, most still inhabit the same city spaces that they did a century ago. Cities like Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh are a few of the 200+ cities chosen to be mapped out by the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation in the 1930s. These are also some of the most well-known cities for their previously booming industrial economies, and were major cities involved in the Great Migration. Now we can draw connections between the historic treatment of people of color in industrial cities, and how it has affected the way issues within these areas are addressed by the media, and local, state, and federal governments at the present time. Although these issues can be categorized under a multitude of different broader socioeconomic concerns we see today, I will be analyzing the following situations/events under the scope of environmental justice. To recap, environmental justice is a movement that supports the equal access to a healthy, safe, and sustainable environment, and aims to provide equal protection from environmental harm.

As described in the Encyclopedia Britannica’s entry, “Flint water crisis,” in 2016, Michigan governor Rick Snyder declared a state of emergency for Genesee County after months of neglecting the terrifying crisis in his state, making this situation a prime example of environmental injustice. Flint was once home to the largest General Motors automotive plants in the nation, at its height employing over 80,000 Flint residents. Now, after GM downsized in the 80s and 90s, this company city and its residents were left to figure out how to cope with the loss of their main source of jobs, and tax base. Due to this floundering economy, many citizens left the city, but the ones who stayed behind have faced a hard road with little help since.

In the spring of 2014, the Governor appointed emergency managers decided to switch Flint’s water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Flint River to save \$2 million annually. Yet, the Flint River was the dumping site for local auto plants for decades and had the decision to switch been brought to the attention of Flint residents instead of the Michigan state treasury department, warnings may have been heard, denying its alleged safety. However, the new water supply directly caused the Flint water crisis, where the corrosive and untreated water deteriorated lead pipes and introduced deadly bacteria to its consumers.

Four months after the switch, on August 14th, 2014, the city came out with its first water boiling advisory, encouraging residents to not drink the city tap water without first boiling it after fecal coliform bacteria was found. Later, 12 people would die from an outbreak of Legionnaires’ disease and after county health officials inquired the cause being contaminated water, Michael Ray, author of the Encyclopedia Britannica’s entry, “Flint water crisis,” says that “Attempts to investigate the matter were met with resistance on city and state levels” (Ray 6). Unfortunately, this trend continued as in January 2015, the city announced increased levels of carcinogenic trihalomethanes in the water but continued to claim it was safe to drink. And in the spring of 2015, when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) investigated the results of multiple water tests and recorded communications related to water quality concerns with Flint residents, the Flint Water Department (FWD) and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). Their final report, sent to Flint and Michigan health officials, revealed that tests of kitchen tap water taken by the FWD in one Flint home over three consecutive months in the spring found lead levels seven, 27, and 47 times higher than the EPA’s actionable level of 0.015 mg/L (Hyde 3)—the recommended amount is zero. Yet, it was not until January 2016 that Governor Snyder would declare a state of emergency for Genesee county, finally addressing this disastrous situation.

But when were the first indications of water quality issues brought up and addressed? Ryan Felton, senior reporter from the car and automotive news website *Jalopnik* claims that the local GM factories had known the whole time. In his article, “What General Motors did to Flint,” Felton says that there were early signs of corrosive properties being exhibited, and that GM had their concerns addressed first and foremost. Felton writes, “For GM, the water at its engine factory had become so problematic by October 2014 that it successfully persuaded officials to allow it to switch back to the previous source” (Felton 3). Email correspondence between the Flint public works director Howard Croft and GM officials show that as early as August 2014 Croft contacted GM multiple times to discuss their issues with the water. Felton describes this as second nature for Flint city officials, eager to come to the aid of GM just as they did half a century ago when the city subsidized GM’s expansion to the suburbs to support the vital job source. However, this did not prove to be a big help in redeveloping their dwindling economy. At the expense of their residents’ health and safety, both city and state officials carried out extreme neglect and misconduct as thousands of their residents were exposed to toxic lead concentrations for months along with very dangerous bacteria.

In response to the aftermath of the Flint water crisis, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) released a 138-page report on the history of racism in Flint, and how century old systems contributed to the neglect residents were faced with by their elected officials. In the MCRC report, *The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint*, they ask the question, “Would things have been different if this had happened in a place like East Grand Rapids, Birmingham or Ann Arbor?” (MCRC 12). According to the 2010 decennial census from the US Census Bureau, the population in Flint was 56% African American, compared to the statewide population with only 14% being African American. The question raises the concern if this neglect was done in malice, or if officials simply did not see the public sentiment as important to address. It can be concluded that there was severe disinterest in the Flint residents’ concerns, as a city with over 33% of the population in poverty, 55% unemployed and, according to the *Wall Street Journal* in “Michigan Sizes Up Taking Over Flint” by Matthew Dolan, a \$25 million deficit that forced the state of Michigan to take over their finances in 2011 (2) was left for years with no access to clean drinking water. However, these conditions do not justify the lack of concern about the Flint residents’ safety. If anything, it should have influenced a timelier approach. Instead, now facing over \$1.5 billion in repairs to the city’s water system, and a CDC estimate of over 100,000 lead exposed residents, Flint mayor Karen Weaver announced the city would permanently remain on the DWSD.

In avoiding taking immediate action to investigate the claims of Flint residents of smelly and foul brown water, the people of Flint were faced with extreme environmental injustices. Elected officials are paid to serve the **people** not their greater economic interests. However, not only did 12 people die from unsafe, bacteria filled water, but tens of thousands of adults and children were exposed to extremely harmful levels of lead caused by the untreated, corrosive water. The MCRC does an excellent job in addressing the injustices on Flint, saying in their report, “The people of Flint did not enjoy the equal protection of environmental or public health laws, nor did they have a meaningful voice in the decisions leading up to the Flint Water Crisis” (3). With public concern falling on deaf ears, and the improper treatment and testing of water, violating federal laws, there was no equal protection for the people of Flint.

However, the city is now trying to make things right, as CNN reporter Jessica Schneider announced in the channel’s coverage of the city’s \$600 million settlement to compensate city residents. Although, justice is being served, with dozens of officials indicted for their neglect and misuse of power, was the Flint Water Crisis an eye-opening experience for the nation? What are the other approaches used to address public health concerns in low socioeconomic areas, if any?

In Chester, Pennsylvania, they are wondering the same thing. As Klein says in her essay, “Much of our economy relies on the assumption that there is always an “away” into which we can throw our waste” (Klein 324). But the people from Chester know better than anyone that, as Klein quotes ecological theorist Timothy Morton, “There is no “away.”

In 2018, after China banned the import of 4 classes of solid waste, it started piling up. Specifically, in the US, where plastic use and production is at an all-time high, failed efforts to divert the export low-grade plastics and contaminated paper waste to other nations has led to an extreme back up in waste generation. In local municipalities around the nation, they have stopped accepting recyclables and tell residents to put it all in one bin. The price to sell recyclables has become too high for cities, an article by Alana Semuels from *The Atlantic* says some used to be able to sell theirs for \$6 a ton, now running upwards of \$125 a ton since the ban. Semuels speaks on how Blaine county, Idaho was forced to send 35 bales of mixed paper to the landfill that was intended to be recycled. She says, “Without a market...the stuff piled up” (2). And in Chester, Pennsylvania, the Covanta incinerator, one of the largest of its kind, was already taking in and burning 3,500 tons of trash each day before surrounding states decided the economic burden of recyclables was too much. Now, according to Oliver Milman in his article, “‘Moment of reckoning’: US cities burn recyclables after China bans imports,” almost 200 tons of recycled materials are burned in the incinerator each day, on top of their regular trash incineration.

Chester, Pennsylvania, like Flint, also used to be a booming industrial city. Once the home of Ford and General Motors plants, and now an economically challenged city with an environmental crisis that has been brewing since the 90s. Milman says, “Since the war, Chester has been hollowed out, with an exodus of jobs ushering in an era where a third of people live in poverty” (5). Again, like Flint, Chester is home to a large population of people of color with the 2010 census recording 80% of the population as African American.

Residents, however, have taken these matters into account, voicing their opinions on the incinerator for decades now. Since the opening of the Westinghouse trash-to-steam facility in 1991 (purchased by Covanta in 2005), hundreds of garbage trucks, bringing in waste from New Jersey, Ohio, Delaware, and Pennsylvania, have marched through the city every day since it opened. This endless stream of trucks is not only releasing toxic pollutants from their exhaust, but also preventing residential streets from being safe. The mayor of Chester when the facility opened

even held a meeting with EPA officials, the Westinghouse executives, and residents to discuss their concerns about the facility, but nothing changed.

After being ignored by city officials, the residents of Chester formed the advocacy group Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living in 1991, as documented by Laura Rigell in a 2013 entry in the *Global Nonviolent Action Database*. By forming protests, filing formal complaints and even a lawsuit against Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection for racial discrimination, the citizens fought back against environmental injustice. The lawsuit was filed in 1995 after a medical waste treatment plant opened, and yet the DEP continued to grant permits for waste treatment and toxic industries to open near the city. Although gaining traction as the first environmental racism lawsuit in the US, it was dropped after the industry in question (contaminated soil processing) was denied their operation permit.

However, this small city of 35,000 is facing health issues at significantly higher rates than surrounding areas, with increased rates of childhood asthma, cancer, and other respiratory diseases. Even a 1995 EPA report on Chester's environmental quality advised an extreme change in local industry pollution practices saying, "Air emissions from facilities in and around Chester provide a large component of cancer and non-cancer risk to the citizens of Chester" (EPA 3). Yet according to the PBS article, "Too Much Pollution for One Place," the Covanta incinerator in Chester is still the most unregulated of the other incinerators owned by Covanta, missing both mercury and NOx control systems. With this, many the residents believe the lack of acknowledgment by officials can be attributed to the city's racial and economic demographics.

Across the globe, similar environmental injustices are being incurred every day by large industries and governments that refuse to acknowledge the plight of the people. In developing countries, air pollution climbs as an expanding middle class desires access to electricity like that of the Global North. And it is small island nations of the Pacific, who, with no input to cause the changing environment, that are suffering the most. The contributors to these atrocities should be held accountable, not only the ones with direct cause but indirect as well. However, like we saw in the US, most of the environmental consequences seem to be riding on the backs of the people. In places like Linfen, China, these effects have been radiating for decades. As a top coal-burning energy producer of the country, Linfen has been named the worst polluted places in China by the World Bank for years. But why?

In the last 20 years, China's GDP has increased 1,200% from about \$1.2 trillion in 2000, to \$14.3 trillion in 2019. With the rise of the middle class, many people are leaving small and secluded rural areas for bustling urban cities to achieve what Helena Wang, author of the *Forbes* article, "The Biggest Story of Our Time: The Rise of China's Middle Class," calls the "Chinese Dream." In this article, she highlights the story of a man who came from a family so poor they could not afford a \$1 tuition for his education. This man, Yi Fan, left his hometown to work in a factory a thousand miles away from his village. Here, from age 18 to 25, Yi Fan continued to work up the economic ladder. Becoming a general manager of a restaurant, and eventually an entrepreneur. By age 25, Yi Fan was a millionaire after his company took off. He says, "I am glad that I was born poor, because that makes me work very hard, and I will never stop until I reach my goals" (5). This, Wang says, is the narrative for a lot of rural born Chinese people who have traveled to urban cities with the goal of achieving the Chinese Dream. With the increased availability of a disposable income across the population, there becomes a larger consumer base for companies to target with their products. And although this means great things for the economic prosperity of the companies in question, if China, the leading nation in CO₂ emissions, continues to extend middle-class quality of life standards without making changes to decrease environmental impacts, the effects will be catastrophic for the world.

The process of coal burning releases toxic chemicals like sulfur dioxide which creates smog, along with particulate matter that when inhaled at high amounts for extended time has deadly consequences. The people of Linfen know this well. An NPR segment, "Air Pollution Grows in Tandem with China's Economy" with Louisa Lim, addresses the health concerns of locals. A local doctor in the area has called it "the cancer village," with death rates ten times higher than the rest of China. However, even though the people in Linfen want to stop these pollution factories, officials say it would be too detrimental to the nation's economic growth as demand for electricity and manufactured goods increases each day with the expansion of the middle class.

Although many people believe the expanding middle class of the most populated countries in the Global South are to blame for their new life standards (using fossil fuel burning for energy generation, as well as increased meat consumption), critics say it is the fault of the role model nations. In the documentary film *Before the Flood* with Leonardo DiCaprio, he visits India to talk about this same issue. DiCaprio meets with environmental activist and Director General of Center for Science and Environment Sunita Narain, who shares her opinion on the matter. With over 800 million households in India that rely on biomass (dried animal poop) to cook their food, there are significant strides that need to be made in their electric infrastructure. Even though India has very bountiful coal reserves, this is not the way they want to go. Narain says, "We care about climate change. But the fact is we are a country where energy access is as much a challenge as climate change. We need to make sure every Indian has

access to energy.” The question later comes up as to why they are not focusing on creating renewable energy-based infrastructure, and to that, Narain says they have no basis to go off. Citing the lack of efforts made by the US to switch to renewables, along with many other nations of the Global North, she says “If the US did it, we could go to our government and hold them to those standards as well, but they haven’t, so we can’t.”

As a nation that claims to be the role model for the rest of the world, the US tends to neglect their effect on the development of rising nations, particularly when it comes to consumerism and standards for quality of life. We always tell other countries to recycle more, use renewable energy, blah blah blah. Well, isn’t that the pot calling the kettle black?

A 2019 article from BBC News, “US top of the garbage pile in global waste crisis,” puts it into perspective. With China and India making up over 36% of the global population, they only generate 27% of global waste. Whereas the US with 4% of the global population, generates a whopping 12% of total global waste. Similarly, the US has three times as much fossil fuel consumption per capita than China according to Our World in Data. Looking at the effects of the Global North in their own nations, there are clearly many changes that need to be made to prevent further devastation. However, what about the places that are making no significant contribution to any of these statistics? How are they being affected by the practices of both developed and developing countries?

It’s pretty simple: a lot!

The small island nations of the Pacific are slowly being washed away. With rising sea levels, and decreasing food availability, these people are struggling to keep their homes. Because of the continued increase in greenhouse gas emissions, glaciers at the poles are melting at an alarming rate—increasing sea levels, as well as temperatures. This is impacting coastal and island inhabitants’ food supply, as well as their general safety. Curt Storlazzi, a geologist at the Pacific Coastal and Marine Science Center, writes about the tragedy of island nations in a United States Geological Survey report overview, “Low-lying areas of tropical Pacific islands.” He says flooding of the Marshall Islands, which used to occur every few decades, is now happening multiple times a decade—flooding freshwater ponds and crops with saltwater that destroys their food source. Not only is flooding a result of the rising sea levels but it is also connected with the depletion of coral reefs, which have gone on a significant decline in the last few decades.

These reefs, which provide a protective barrier to coastal regions and supply 500 million people worldwide with food, are very important to coastal regions that heavily rely on these services. However, the continuation of environmentally harmful practices around the globe prove that the facts are still not enough to instill permanent change. Something that might grab the attention of the world, however, is the economic benefit of the oceans and their coral reefs, contributing upwards of \$3.5 billion to the global economy and saving somewhere near \$100 million annually for flood protection. With this, the fate of almost two million people who live on the various Pacific islands remains in the hands of the global elite. Without changing their practices, the conditions of the ocean and islands will become increasingly worse and eventually unsuitable for life.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, these are the realities our world faces right now. If you use electricity, drive your car, even buy a pair of shoes, you are most likely contributing to the declining health of millions of helpless people who are struggling to have their voices heard. And that isn’t necessarily your fault, unless you do nothing to change the way things are. Call representatives to stop lobbying for oil companies, demand a stronger push towards renewable energy—we are in the greatest era for globalization, with almost any information readily available at our fingertips at any time. Doing the bare minimum isn’t enough anymore, and we can’t assume recycling is going to fix everything—because clearly people are dying from that too. Environmental injustices, both domestic and across the globe, cannot be fixed on an individual basis. It is a matter of globalizing a just movement. One that has a moral compass and does not seek to exploit innocent people.

At the end of the day, no, the US is not a model nation, we have so many flaws and issues greater than I can even begin to comprehend. But I still believe that there is opportunity to change, even if it is difficult to see from where we are now.

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