

# From the Inside Out: The Fight for Environmental Justice within Government Agencies

By Jill Lindsey Harrison

Cambridge MA, United States: The MIT Press, 328 pp., 2019

ISBN: 978-0-26253-774-2 (pbk)

Reviewed by Nicholas Theis<sup>1</sup>

Jill Lindsey Harrison's *From the Inside Out: The Fight for Environmental Justice within Government Agencies* tells the story of how governmental agencies, in their organizational contexts, influence the relative efficacy of environmental justice (EJ) policy implementation. Harrison directly builds from prior work that documented the struggles for EJ endured by activists against toxic exposure (Cole & Foster, 2001). Harrison uses the key tenets of EJ as outlined by movement activists, such as equal protection for all, democratic decision-making, and prioritizing overburdened communities, to analyze and evaluate the discourses and practices within US government agencies, such the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). These analyses show how the organizational culture of environmental agencies, through their everyday practices and discourse, inhibit the ability of federal and state regulatory agencies to achieve meaningful justice in the distribution of environmental harms and goods.

In her words:

This book is about the shapes staff resistance to EJ takes, how persistent it has been, where it comes from, and what its consequences are. Importantly, this pushback against EJ reforms endures from one administration to the next. Staff make these agencies what they are and will continue their work into future administrations ... To truly support environmental justice, government agencies not only need supportive leadership and resources, but also need to look within and address their own cultural dynamics through which some bureaucrats undermine EJ reforms. (p. xii)

The book's primary contribution is showing the enduring nature of staff resistance to EJ principles—it is not simply a matter of leadership change at the executive level of government, but intra-organizational culture and inertia. Using data from more than 150 interviews, Harrison compellingly demonstrates that the “standard

---

1 Department of Sociology, University of Oregon, United States; ntheis@uoregon.edu.

narrative” of external pressures limiting resources is a necessary but insufficient approach to understanding how and why EJ policy fails to be effectively implemented by government agencies.

Harrison explores the “standard narrative” in environmental agencies first, setting the foundation upon which cultural dynamics are built. The slow progress of programs and reforms typically falls under three explanations under the rubric of the standard narrative: limited resources, regulatory authority, and/or analytic tools. Limited resources (e.g., lack of funding) influence the ability for staff to perform outreach in EJ communities. Moreover, it is coupled with an economic logic whereby staff are expected to report “returns on investment” to justify their labor. Agency workers also feel pressure from the threat of industrial lawsuits for pursuing regulatory action that may not be explicitly codified in law. Because of this threat, regulatory authority is severely restricted, with agency workers resorting to asking industry to *voluntarily* improve environmental conditions in overburdened communities. Lastly, the lack of analytic tools in EJ agencies inhibits their ability to empirically demonstrate the presence of environmental inequalities. EJ analysis involves cumulative impact assessment to contextualize regulatory decisions in terms of which kinds of hazards are present and how the combination of hazards could influence human health. Since real-world data about facility emissions and individual impacts are lacking and/or much data is aggregated to coarse geographical levels (e.g., counties), local zones of cumulative impact are often obscured from view and therefore overlooked.

Agency staffers who do not work directly on EJ-related projects challenge the work of EJ workers discursively within the organizations themselves. For example, staff frame EJ as an ephemeral “fad” that does not fit within organizational identity due to its particularistic nature. This is accomplished through boundary work, claiming that EJ is outside the purview of “ecology” and therefore not scientific. Perhaps the most interesting finding dealing with discursive limitations is that staff workers adopt the norm of bureaucratic neutrality, claiming that the race-conscious tenet of EJ is equivalent to favoritism or bias in favor of overburdened communities of color. In asking one staff worker about race-conscious policy-making, Harrison writes “he responded that he would remove discussion of race from the agency’s EJ policy and not take a community’s racial composition into account when doing its regulatory work” (p. 99). In this way, environmental regulatory agencies exemplify an organizational culture in opposition to anti-racist EJ goals, and through the ideological commitments of staffers can reproduce “colorblind racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), as staffers espouse a desire for race-neutral policies which disproportionately affect people of color. In other words, the bureaucratic norms of environmental regulatory agencies have conflicting frames with EJ’s central tenets (e.g., race-conscious policies). This frame misalignment fosters dissonance between regulatory workers and EJ activists (Liévanos, 2012) and contributes to perpetuation of environmental inequality.

Bureaucrats also challenge EJ work through the minutia of everyday practice, exemplified through organizational inertia. For example, Harrison documents that in EJ reform meetings, coworkers give positive feedback and encouragement but do not follow through in actual practice—paying lip service to EJ without actual implementation is pervasive. A similar tactic is simply claiming to incorporate EJ while not doing so in practice. For example, EJ is often a “box to check” with no serious analysis of unequal impacts conducted. This is compounded by managerial decisions to not consider EJ in performance reviews but to consider permit volume, which eschews meaningful EJ analysis for each permit. In other words, bureaucratic practices implicitly benefit industry (e.g., heightened permits) relative to the EJ movement (e.g., less community engagement). Investigations, grievances, and bullying of EJ staff also hinder the implementation of EJ in governmental agencies. Auditing new EJ programs and assigning EJ tasks to staff unfamiliar with that line of work are some of the strategies adopted by bureaucrats to undermine EJ staff workers.

While most of the book portrays EJ staff as a united front who face pressures from other agency staff, Harrison illuminates how EJ staff definitions of their work differ, and how these definitions influence the types of programs being implemented. Traditionally, EJ staff followed the movement in pursuing state regulations on environmental hazards in overburdened communities, as well as building green infrastructure and environmental amenities (e.g., parks and community gardens). However, such approaches have declined over time as some EJ staffers no longer hold a model of change involving state regulation, or the substantive focus of hazard reduction. In general, voluntary agreements with industry are reached to build natural amenities in overburdened communities to improve environmental conditions (for example, EPA’s Collaborative Problem-Solving model). This “new guard” views traditional EJ as inherently “oppositional” and focused on fighting, whereas their approach is “propositional” and focused on collaboration. The new EJ framing by some staff workers is contested and controversial among workers in general. It is also an example of a neoliberal politics which forgoes regulating industry as a way to implement change in favor of a business-friendly government. Implicitly, the neoliberal turn benefits industrial actors and perpetuates the reality of unequal exposure to environmental harms for communities on the ground.

Harrison provides a detailed account of the cultural dynamics in organizational contexts that inhibit EJ policy development. In so doing, she thoughtfully applies sociological theories on organizations and racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994) to her wealth of interview data, identifying and explaining the external, organizational, and discursive impositions on EJ staff. These insights contribute to scholarship on organizational and institutional effects on EJ programs (Liévanos et al., 2011). In particular, they further nuanced accounts of the state’s role in producing and reproducing environmental inequalities (Liévanos, 2012; Pellow, 2017; Pulido, 2017).

For the EJ movement, this book is important because it underscores the conclusion that a new administration that gives more funding is not enough to result in effective policy. A part of the problem is the organizational culture inhibiting EJ staff through discourse, everyday practices, and differing definitions among EJ staff themselves. Based on these findings, this book ends with recommendations for what environmental agencies can (and should) do to achieve equal protection from environmental hazards to communities of color and working-class communities.

*From the Inside Out* is an important, timely, and insightful contribution to research on EJ and environmental regulatory agencies. While some may have confronted Harrison's work with hesitation during the time when the Trump administration was in active combat with environmental regulatory agencies, she rightfully points out that "crisis is not a time to abandon our standards and principles, especially our commitments to equity and justice ... Federal agencies' current predicament" does not "mean we should turn a blind eye to government's oversights" (p. xiii). This book, in its critique of regulatory agencies, holds government to the high standard of ensuring equal protection from environmental hazards for overburdened communities. I recommend environmental agency workers, EJ activists, and academics read this book so that they can too.

## References

- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America* (5th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Cole, L., & Foster, S. R. (2001). *From the ground up: Environmental racism and the rise of the environmental justice movement*. NYU Press.
- Liévanos, R. S. (2012). Certainty, fairness, and balance: State resonance and environmental justice policy implementation. *Sociological Forum*, 27(2), 481–503. doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2012.01327.x
- Liévanos, R. S., London, J. K., & Sze, J. (2011). Uneven transformations and environmental justice: Regulatory science, street science, and pesticide regulation in California. In G. Ottinger & B. R. Cohen, *Technoscience and environmental justice: Expert cultures in a grassroots movement* (pp. 201–208). MIT Press. doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262015790.003.0009
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to 1990s*. Routledge.
- Pellow, D. (2017). *What is critical environmental justice?* Polity.
- Pulido, L. (2017). Geographies of race and ethnicity II: Environmental racism, racial capitalism and state-sanctioned violence. *Progress in Human Geography*, 41(4), 524–533. doi.org/10.1177/0309132516646495

This text is taken from *Human Ecology Review*, Volume 26, Number 1, 2020,  
published by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.