Reframing Sustainability:
Environmental Justice and Social Wealth

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I am going to speak tonight about the intersection of environmental justice and concepts of social wealth. I want to start by having you consider what you usually visualize when you think about the environment – likely what comes to mind is a picture of a beautiful place, pristine and protected.

What comes to mind for me a place in Huntington Park, an inner ring suburb in Southern California, called la Montaña, or the mountain. This isn't a natural feature – rather, it is a pile of concrete rubble that was placed next to a neighborhood after the Northridge quake of 1994 when freeways in the area collapsed. The neighborhood residents struggled for about eight years to try to get that mountain cleaned up because it was causing respiratory and other problems. Eventually, their organizing efforts led to a change in the city council and forced a state agency to clean up their neighborhood.

In my view, there is as much beauty in that group of people at La Montaña and their struggle for social justice as there is in the kind of pristine landscape that comes to mind when we generally think about the environment. We need to keep this in mind as we think through the relationship between environmental justice and social wealth; we need to keep in mind the social capital – and yes, beauty – of community organizing and community empowerment.

After George Lakoff's recent burst to fame, everybody is talking about "framing." If we think about the environment, it seems to me as if there are up to three different frames that are beginning to emerge. There is the frame of the pristine environment; unsullied by humans, with the central message that we need to protect it. There is also a sort of frame of victimhood; that is, a vision of environmental justice in which communities and workers are imposed upon by negative environmental decisions. And then there's a frame about empowerment – about tracking the efforts of communities to do something about this. While mainstream environmentalists sometimes see environmental justice (or EJ) through the victim lens, the environmental justice movement itself is about empowerment, community organizing and beginning to change policy.

This kind of tug between mainstream environmentalism and the environmental justice movement was most recently reflected in two very important pieces. *The Death of Environmentalism*, put together by two environmental activists and consultants, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, was a challenge to the environmental movement. The authors tried to argue that environmentalism wasn't really resonating with the public as it should currently because environmentalism is being seen as yet another special interest. Further, they said that the environmental movement is often being cast as being damaging

to economic growth and people's economic well-being. The authors argued that more attention needs to be paid to the potential win-wins. They also argued that the environmental movement has become too focused on technical policy and not enough on the values and visions that can really stimulate a movement and move things forward.

This publication had a very big impact on the environmental movement. However, it angered a lot of people in the Environmental Justice Movement because they felt that what was being captured by this critique was something that Environmental Justice Movement had lifted for some time. There was a response called the *Soul of the Environmentalism* written by eight people, including one of my colleagues Rachel Morello-Frosch. It basically said that, like Mark Twain's famous statement about rumors of his death, the rumors of environmentalism being dead are greatly exaggerated. It is just, they argued, that you need to look at the sort of environmentalism practiced in the EJ movement and at the new activists it is generating – people highlighted in a 2003 publication Jim Boyce and others put together out of the Political Economy Research Institute.

The set of folks who contributed to the *Soul of Environmentalism* acknowledge that language and framing are incredibly important – and insist that reframing may well be found in what is going on in environmental justice organizing. In environmental justice organizing you see focus on big ideas like: what should the urban landscape look like? how do we change it in fundamental ways that are sustainable in communities? how do we organize about it in ways that link together different communities? So while Shellenberger and Nordhaus are arguing the environmental movement has lost its ways by not having effective language or being able to form alliances with others that might have common interests, including the labor movement, the EJ movement has both developed new language and build new alliances out of necessity.

Can the environmental justice movement and research offer some insight into new approaches to sustainability and movement building? I'm going to try to review a little bit about the development of the environmental justice movement and also describe the arc of my own research on this topic. I'm not going to contend that our own research is really all that important but it does happen to be research that I know a lot about! However, I will argue what we have been looking at, and how some of that research has been done in coalition with community groups, has led to a transformation of the way that we as researchers produce knowledge. It has also led to some transformations politically and policy-wise. And at the end, I will draw a few implications of this work and the environmental justice movement for thinking about sustainability and social wealth.

So what is environmental justice? While there are many fathers and mothers of EJ, one important early event was the 1982 struggle in Warren County, North Carolina over the proposed siting of a hazardous waste landfill near a largely African American and poor community. People became to suspect that this was part of a larger pattern. The General Accounting Office was asked to do a study of landfills in the U.S. and seemed to find adisparate pattern, particularly for African Americans. A very important study was subsequently put out by the United Church of Christ, which looked at all sorts of hazardous facilities throughout the U.S. and that also seemed to confirm that this was a

problem.

Note the combination of organizing and research – the fact that those have gone hand in hand has been an important characteristic in the environmental justice movement. In some research areas, academic work is quite disassociated from community and social movements; in the environment justice field these two have been intimately related in their developments over time. This implies that telling the story of EJ requires an interweaving of the research and organizing efforts.

1991 brought the first national People of Color Summit on the Environment. This Summit not only lifted up who was affected by environmental negatives, it also began to position a different way of thinking and talking about the environment – the environment was not seen as nature to be protected but rather defined a the place where people work and live and pray and play and go to school. Humans were drawn into the picture and the environment was seen not only as a part of nature but something that is really an integral part of urban communities. This forced people to start thinking about urban landscapes, as well as issues like transit and in-fill housing, as other ways of seeing what is the environment.

That this is the way to think about the environment was perhaps made obvious by Katrina: those who were vulnerable were vulnerable not simply because of nature but because of where they lived and their lack of transit. We don't tend to think of this as part of the environment, but it is in fact part of the urban environment, and the issues of poverty and disconnection are in fact part of their environment. So, I think that Katrina really lifts up the full dimensions of environmental justice.

The EJ movement, in short, has raised very important questions about who gets to decide what the environment is as well as who gets to decide where hazards go. As a result, the environmental justice movement has consistently looked at issues of accountability as well as issues of democracy, participation and decision making. Therefore, there has been a sort of evolution of this environmental justice movement from the initial struggles around landfills to a very broad definition of what the environment is about. It goes further to really embrace and envision what democracy is about and what would it mean for people to participate in decision-making processes.

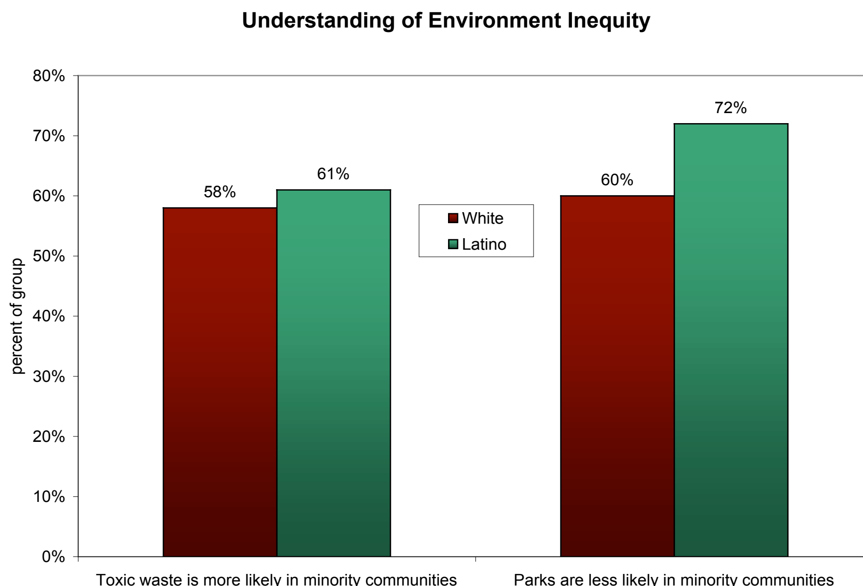
How did I come to EJ? In 1996, Jim Sadd and I had two students who came to us and said that they wanted to start working on questions on environmental inequality in Los Angeles. We said, that sounds like a great thing--why don't you folks go ahead and do that? They drove around Los Angeles with little GPS devices and then put that together some census data. They did some analysis and then leaked it to the L.A. Times; they didn't tell us that they were going to do that. The Los Angeles Times had a page one article on the state of environmental injustice in Los Angeles according to an Occidental study. Then, the next day, the L.A. city passed a resolution supporting the Occidental study and created an Environmental Justice Task Force whose first task was to meet with the Occidental researchers.

Jim and I decided that we should begin supervising these students more carefully! We

looked over their work, found a few analytical mistakes, and wound up spending two very busy weeks redoing the work before the L.A. Task Force came to meet with us. After this set of events, we began doing some work on these issues and began collaborating with community groups. Out of one of those collaborations came a wonderful opportunity for funding that wound up being a collaboration between philanthropy, organizers, and researchers.

I remember when we got our first grant together – it was for $1.7 million dollars, mostly going toward organizing. I was very excited about it and I went to go tell my Aunt, my Tía Dalia. I said "Tía, we just got a big grant on environmental justice." She said, "Oh, Manuelito, I am so proud of you. What is environmental injustice?" And I said, "Tía, it's is the fact that hazards are disproportional in minority in low-income communities." Then she looked at me kind of sadly and said: "Everyone knows that."

Of course, they do – it's common sense really. The Public Policy Institute in California conducted a poll in which people were asked, "is toxic waste more likely in minority communities, and are parks less likely to be minority communities?" What's interesting about this is that not only do most people agree with this but there are few differences across race. The two largest groups in California-- the ones for which the poll results are reliable-- are Anglos and Latinos. Both of those groups believe that there is environmental injustice (see Figure 1).



Yes, it's common sense and a lot of people know it – but that has not stopped science from coming to the rescue and complicating the picture. In the early 1990s, a series of studies came out and basically questioned the results of the United Church of Christ study. These studies began to argue that the geographic unit of the analysis was

incorrect, that non all explanatory variables had been considered, and that the statistical techniques were not sophisticated enough. Other authors argued that we don't really know what the risks are so we don't know whether we should take action about any disparity.

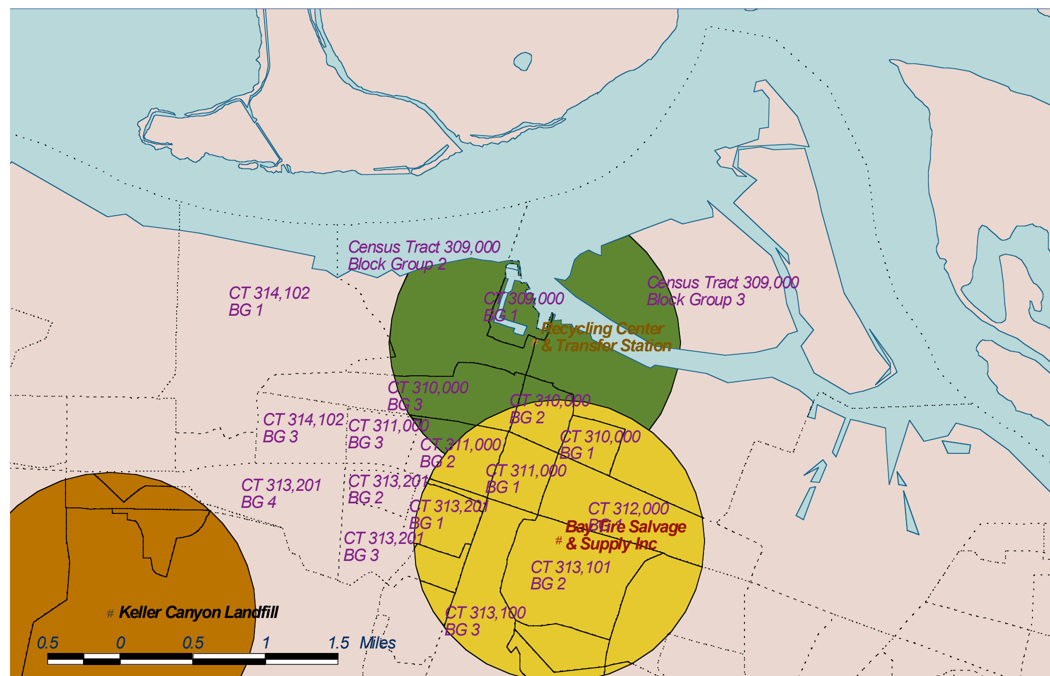
Of course, one possible response from a lot of environmental justice advocates was simply rejection of these arguments and findings. What we decided to do instead was to try to see what we would find if we took the methodological criticisms seriously and reworked some of the studies. And we began working on this as we began a collaboration with a community group called Communities for a Better Environment in Southern California. Partnering with us was a local philanthropy that sought funding for all of us, and also helped coordinate all of our work including the research piece. The full research team involved was myself, Jim Sadd from Occidental College, who does a lot of our GIS processing, and Rachel Morello Frosh, who joined us a bit later and is at Brown University in the field of public health.

When you try to look at the pattern of the distribution of environmental negatives, what you tend to find is that there are generally three explanations about why there might be environmental negatives disproportionately concentrated in minority communities. There are, of course, those that argue that there are no disparities at all, but there are three main explanations of disparities and even these are the crux of the arguments from the doubters.

One is what I call the "magic of the market" argument: poor people are poor, their lives must therefore not be so valuable, and so their communities might be good places to put hazards. This is reflected in the prices of real estate – and environmental negatives simply go to places where the housing values and incomes are low. A second argument is that these are really rational land choices -- environmental hazards are put in places that already have industrial land or a lot of transit land and therefore these are reasonable places to put such things. The third argument about environmental negatives being in low income and minority communities focuses on politics and power; it argues that this is really a reflection of the decision-making process and biases therein.

Disentangling those arguments is part of what we been trying to do over time. And we have focused on race rather than income as a signal of power. The reason why focusing on race is so important is that when you look at the correlation between low income and hazards, some people tend to think that it is the market working its usual magic. If you can show analytically that race makes a difference and that therefore power makes a difference, you can back-track to the fact that income is a marker, not just of the market, but also of the economic power to influence decisions.

The basic method for EJ research is to find facilities and draw buffers around the facilities to see who lives next to these facilities that is affected (see Figure 2 for an example). You then do some econometric analysis in which you entered variables such as income, race, and the presence of manufacturing employees (because that is a marker of whether or not firms were locating close to where their workers were). We have also often entered land use—unlike others, we have had really good data on land use, so we used it as well.



Again, our first study was on treatment, storage and disposal facilities for hazardous waste. Earlier studies had found out that such facilities were generally not close to populations – that is, that population density had a negative effect on the probability of having a facility. But this was because earlier studies had never controlled for land use, including the fact that the facility itself was taking up land. Once you netted out the land, hazardous waste facilities in Los Angeles County were actually closer to denser populations. We also found that race had an independent effect – and argued that this was evidence of environmental inequity.

Some critics responded that this research only had to do with hazardous waste treatment storage and disposal facilities. What about other facilities? We took up this challenge by looking at toxic releases from major plants that were located in Los Angeles—as are recorded in the U.S. EPA's Toxic Release Inventory. We did the usual location of

facilities, then ran regressions in which we tested for whether or not people had a facility and also for the degree of the toxicity (such as whether it was carcinogenic or not and what was being released). We found out that income still made a difference, land use still made a difference, but race was still important. And also the degree of toxicity, meaning whether or not our facilities were carcinogenic, was correlated with race.

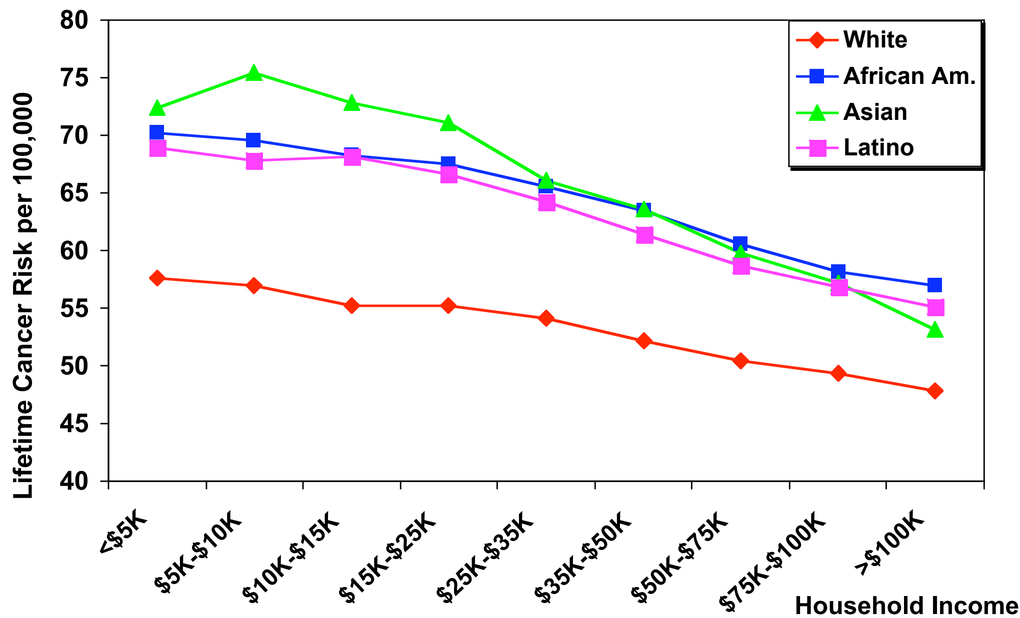
Completing that effort, we were confronted with another question: "Which came first?" That is some argue that it is not that these facilities are placed in minority communities, but rather that people of color simply move closer to toxic waste. We call this the "field of bad dreams argument"—build it and they will come. The argument is serious in policy terms because it does contain a reasonable story: you locate a facility, land prices go down, and then lower income, people of color would move in. It's important because it suggesting that maybe one shouldn't do anything because people are going to move there regardless.

Most people said that this was not a topic we could tackle. First, census tracts change shape over time and so you need consistent neighborhoods which is really hard to do. Also, you need to know where the facilities are and actually have to know when they began operation (which is not necessarily when they got a permit because they might have began operation and been "grandfathered" in). My colleague, Jim Sadd, managed to take the tracts and the associated census data backwards in time and then obtained the original business records of treatment, storage, and disposal facilities to find out when they began operation.

What we found out was that the statistical evidence was much like the case study of La Montaña. That mountain of rubble is a clear example of something that was put into a community that was 96% Latino and 42% non-citizen immigrant, with 25% people living below poverty level. And that story of local dumping was borne out in our larger scale study: we found that it turned out that there was a significant difference between which communities received hazardous waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities – they were more minority and more blue collar. And while these neighborhoods became more minority after siting, they did so no faster than any other area of LA County.

We also tried to control for the fact that siting and move-in can go on simultaneously – and even in that sort of model, the siting process dominated the impact of move-in. And we also found out an odd fact: the peak vulnerability for a community to receive a site was when it was about 45% Latinos and 45% African American – that is, when the community was hosting a mix of groups that were not necessarily talking to each other.

This drove us to consider the possibility that communities rapid demographic transitions weren't forming the social capital that is necessary to really make a difference in democratic decision-making. We came up with a measure called "ethnic churning" by looking at the degree of ethnic transition – this is a measure that includes changes in all groups and not just whether communities are becoming more or less white. We found out that ethnic churning was significantly associated with vulnerability to siting – a fact that lifts up questions of social capital and community organizing and their importance.

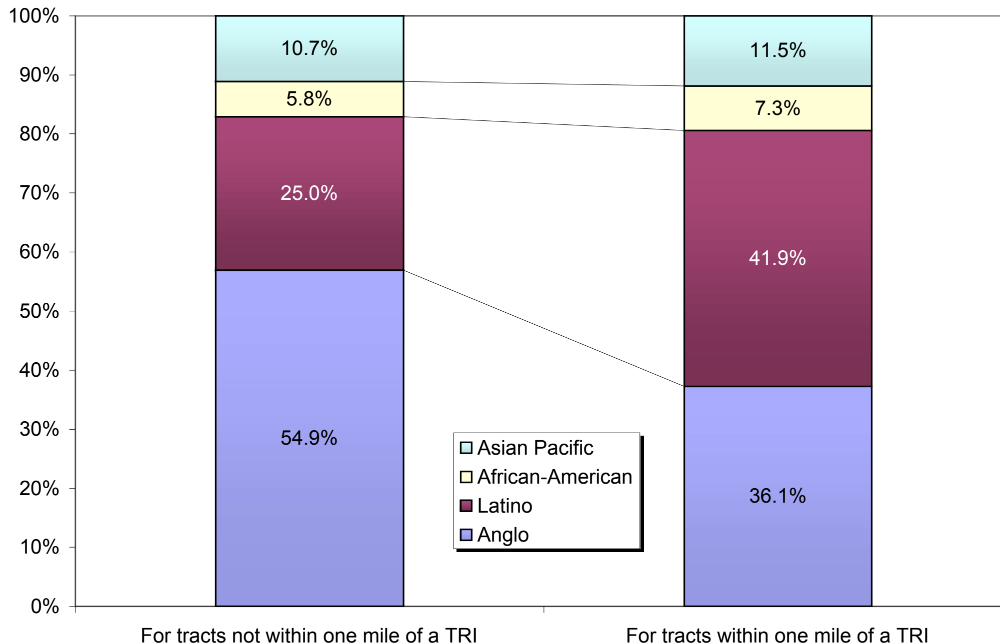


Our work has continued since. When we finished the findings on which came first, somebody asked, "But how do you know that the facilities are dangerous?" We decided to work with another database that takes into account health impacts, particularly estimated lifetime cancer risks from both point source pollution and mobile pollution. For Southern California, our research showed that as income goes up, estimated cancer risks from ambient air goes down. But at each and every level of income there was also a higher estimated lifetime cancer risk from ambient air pollution for minority communities (see Figure 3).

The research has evolved since but you get the idea of the dynamic: As researchers we go where the questions lead us. So with risk a question, we started taking a look at the question of environmental risks for the most vulnerable population: children. We specifically wanted to look at disproportionate risks for school children and found that ambient air toxics are much higher near schools with higher percentages of children of color in California. We have also looked at the implications for academic performance, conducting a set of statistical exercises in which we tried to predict the academic performance of a school based on the percent of kids on a free lunch program (which is an indicator of parent poverty), the teachers that were on emergency credentials (as a proxy of teacher quality), student learning English, and a variety of other variables. We found out that ambient air pollution has a statistically significant effect on academic performance, presumably through this issue of asthma and its impact on children's ability to breath and concentrate in schools.

This leads to some very important questions when we think about who's minding the kids and who's minding the future of the state. And we've recently looked at the continuing issues of toxic releases in California to see how much has changed. The data in Figure 4 shows you the distribution of folks who are living within one mile of toxic release in California in 2000. For those living within one mile, about 42% are Latino. If you move

to those that live further away, it's only about 25% Latino. There is a really significant difference in the demographics between those who continue to live near these toxic releases and those who are living in other places.



The research has been pretty conclusive in the case of California but our work has convinced us of a surprising thing: The facts are clear, but the facts don't count. That is, while it's pretty clear that there are issues of environmental in justice, at least in the areas that we have studied, it is also clear that every time that we demonstrate the facts, someone comes up with another challenge to what we have demonstrated. As good researchers, we take up those challenges but they are really emerging from an alternative frame that simply can't accept that environmental injustice exists – it just isn't American or perhaps it's just the result of an impartial market. As a result, you continue to have to demonstrate it.

But this need for demonstration raises an important point: while we should focus as researchers on making the case with evidence, the central task is to change the frame, the story, the narrative, the values and the vision. Simply demonstrating that there is tremendous income inequality in the United States, simply demonstrating that there is environmental inequality as well, simply demonstrating that domestic work is undervalued – all themes of this forum – turns out not to be enough. We need to have a broader narrative, a broader story, a broader way of thinking about these things in a way that captures people's imaginations.

The other thing that I lift up from our own experiences in this work is the importance of

coupling reframing and research with activism, community voices, and community knowledge. Part of this is to increase relevance but it also has a direct impact on quality. We believe that the research that we have done in environmental justice is the best research we have ever done. We believe that it's the best research technically—I would have never wound up investigating and utilizing so many complex econometric techniques. Environmental justice research has forced us to develop our technical and expertise and be better researchers than I think we have ever been.

Moreover, the evolution of the work has been driven not just by academic dimensions, but also by the communities that are using the research to further social change. They are the ones who say, "Okay, let's work on the toxic release inventory." They are the ones who say, "If we keep getting this argument about which came first, can you try to take a look at it?" They are the ones who are saying we need to think about risks and how we can assess risks. Again, this contributes to quality: community members have really great questions.

What I hope that what I am imparting here is that your best research can actually be done with conjunction with community groups and that the academy and the community do not have to be – in fact, shouldn't be – separate worlds. I would really encourage any of you who are graduate students to try to combine these worlds. They do not tear away from each other, but rather they build each other up in important ways.

What are the implication of this environmental justice organizing and research for progressive theory and politics, and for the general themes considered in this forum on social wealth? One of the things I would emphasize is that the environment justice movement has a fundamental distrust of markets and their impacts on equity. Maybe that is obvious to the people at UMass Amherst, but most of us, including progressives, are seduced now by the market and its logic and power. I remember when I first started talking to community groups about the emissions credit programs – programs where firms can basically "buy off" their own commitments to clean up by offering to spend to clean up another businesses' pollution. It seems like a rational idea – you could actually get more clean-up for the same money (or get the same clean-up for less money).

In Los Angeles County, for example, there was a program where large refineries avoided site-specific clean-up commitments by buying up old cars that tended to be high generators of pollution. They would junk the old cars, taking them off the road, and their argument was that this could have a bigger impact on lowering pollution than if they cleaned up their own facilities. But even if they were helping the commons because they were reducing regional pollution for everyone, the failure to clean up their own sites meant that they were leaving concentrated hotspots in communities that were on the fence line. And those were generally communities of color and so they organized to eliminate the trading program. In any case, environmental justice communities have a fundamental distrust of the market and the way it impacts equity.

The environmental justice movement, I would suggest, also has much to offer the mainstream environmental movement in terms of what is called "cumulative exposure." During California's so-called energy crisis, one of the energy companies proposed build a

new power plant in an older, mostly minority city called South Gate. They promised to use the most modern technology available and environmentalists were supportive because it was the first time this new technology was going to be scaled up and so this would be a model of a clean power plant for California. But the South Gate community already felt overburdened by poor air quality and did not want it to be built there – they basically suggested that if it really was that clean, perhaps it could be built in Beverly Hills. The company agreed to allow a vote on the issue, firmly believing that they would win because of job creation and other issues. But the South Gate community rejected the plant – even though it was very clean, it would have added to a cumulative set of effects in this community that were simply no longer sustainable. The company decided to not build the plant after all.

The environmental justice movement has also lifted up the question of community social vulnerability made so evident during the Katrina crisis. That is, the perspective goes beyond purely environmental questions – like the hurricane itself – to look at social dimensions, including access to health care, transportation, and other social assets. Indeed, logic would dictate that if you have something very hazardous you should build it in a very wealthy area because at least residents are likely to have good healthcare. But instead, what occurs is placement in communities that are already very vulnerable. Taking social vulnerability into account is a new emerging issue in environmental justice.

The environmental justice movement has also lifted up the need for coalition building. The research results I was describing before about ethnic churning – about how communities that are not connected with one another become more vulnerable to having hazards sited – is something that the environmental justice movement has known intuitively for a long time. The environmental justice movement has been very active in the kind of coalition building that Shellenberger and Nordhaus call for in terms of the environmental movement connecting with broader movements. This is a visceral experience for the environmental justice community and it is one reason why the movement has been resolutely multiracial.

The EJ approach also has much to offer to the overall discussion of social wealth and race. How do we think about race in America generally, and how we think about race in terms of this forum on social wealth? I would argue that you need to put race upfront to get race behind. That is, you need to put race on the front burner, and consider of issues of racial discrimination and bias early on. If you don't have a fundamental discussion about it, you will not be able to come to common ground later. The South Gate example illustrates it so well – by not thinking about cumulative exposure and the sense of racial disparity, environmentalists were caught on the wrong side of alliance-building with their insistence that the plant was good for everyone (except for the people right next door!).

The fundamental notion that you need to put race upfront to get race behind is important to progressive organizing and there is a big tension about that right now. Some folks are saying that we do not want to talk about race, that it is uncomfortable, and that if we do not talk about race and instead work on common things together, we'll get past our racial tensions. The environmental justice movement disagrees with this approach and insists that race needs to be put upfront. You need to talk about it and the way that you talk

about it helps you find ways to do something about it.

Finally, I think the environmental justice movement has also lifted up a new kind of epistemology that values community knowledge as much as it values scientific and academic practice. For example, the "bucket brigades" put together by Communities for Better Environments (CBE) and others are grassroots efforts of community organizers to go out and monitor refinery leaks and flares and begin to use the science from that to lobby for change. One of the things that is a key feature of the environmental justice movement is community knowledge and community participation in the knowledge production process.

Finally, the environmental justice movement stresses that lifting up and focusing on inequality can actually be good for all of us. Our colleague Rachel Morello Frosch is looking at issues of residential segregation and the level of air pollution over the entire United States. She is finding that inequality is associated with worsened overall levels of environmental quality – where people can put the hazards in someone else's backyard, there are actually more hazards. This echoes earlier work by Jim Boyce and others. This is very important to this discussion of social wealth because it lifts up how inequality itself is damaging economic and environmental performance and other measures of how we want our communities to be.

What are the new challenges ahead for the environmental movement? For the environmental justice movement, I think one of the new challenges that is coming up is how we balance economic imperatives and environmental justice. There is a lot of evidence that a worse environment does not generate new jobs. But there are often some tensions between economic progress and environmental justice—for example, the Alameda corridor in Southern California is a place that is generating a tremendous amount of logistics traffic moving materials from the ports to the downtown. It generates a lot of employment and that employment could help a lot of minority and low-income communities. But almost all of the negatives effects of that goods movement, including diesel-related pollution, is falling back into the same communities. So there is a struggle about the economic and environmental imperatives.

There is also a need in the environmental justice movement to move from a vision of rejecting things to a more positive vision of what kind of world we want. The movement needs to assert how we want the world to look—and some of that is definitely happening. The Bus Rider's Union in Southern California has generated a really positive vision which started from a rejection of transit racism and has since moved to getting buses that are both clean and move people to work. There are a lot of efforts in the environmental justice movement to determine what kind of world we want and not simply what kind of hazards that we do not want.

Finally, I think that there is going to be a tension as we move along in the environmental justice movement between the questions of scientific and community knowledge, and the questions of whether or not the risks that community see are really risks that are scientifically valid as well. Here, relationships will make a difference. There was a very interesting struggle in Los Angeles about Belmont High School being built on a methane

field. We were asked, should communities organize about that? It turns out that Beverly Hills High is also built on a methane field and there are ways that you can vent methane so it is not the most dangerous hazard; indeed, it might be more health-protective to focus attention on reducing or eliminating the diesel exhaust from school buses. We as researchers said this and it had an impact on the organizing efforts of some groups, but the impact was partly because we had a long-term relationship and therefore a level of trust. Balancing the science, the academic perspective, and community perspective will only happen with in the context of developing long-term relationships of trust.

I am optimistic. I think that the environmental justice movement can really contribute to the new vision of sustainability that I believe you are trying to put together under this rubric of social wealth. I think that the environmental justice movement is raising a new sense of the commons, raising issues about who has access and lacks access to the commons, who is treated as a sink for the hazards of a society, and who gains the benefits from economic activity. The environmental justice movement is also lifting up the notion that the more unequal the commons is, the worst the commons is for everyone.

I think that is a very important issue to be put in forward in this forum and I also believe that environmental justice movement is raising very profound questions of governance—who gets to decide where hazards are placed, who gets to decide who gets clean air, who gets to decide how our children will or will not breathe the best air possible on the way to school, etc. It's raising profound questions about governance and very profound questions about democracy.

I am inspired by the research many colleagues in this field have done and I'm more than inspired by the work of the environmental advocates. I think that they are offering some new frames that we should begin to consider and adopt for this kind of rethinking about social wealth, the economy, and sustainability. If we begin to draw on these experiences we will not simply have a new rhetoric, we will actually have a new vision and a new, dare I say, frame. It could make a difference as we struggle together for a new world. Thank you.

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