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Introduction

Tyranny of the majority and rural environmental injustice

1. Introduction

A pervasive logic commands state-industrial complexes across developing and developed nations: rural sites have ample resources and fewer people, an ideal pairing for taking and dumping. Such widespread, utilitarian thinking and practice have caught some scholarly reference. Rural poverty pockets seem especially targeted for hazards and waste (Bullard, 1993), industries profile rural towns as least resistant (Di Chiro, 1998), and the poorest of the poor continue to be rural people of color (Cole and Foster, 2000; USDA ERS, 2015a). The addition of the term rural could apply to the contexts of many recent environmental justice (EJ) studies, such as Bell's (2013) and Scott's (2010) work on mountain top removal, Harrison's (2011) study of pesticide drift, and Mailin's (2015) review of uranium mining. Yet the rural goes largely unnamed – an implicit, rather than explicit, dimension of environmental injustice (for more, see Pellow, this issue).

A first, and critical, aim of this Special Issue is pulling the rural from the periphery of thought around environmental injustice and bringing it into the core. Scholars in this Special Issue find much analytical power in the rural. As an ideology and materiality, the rural helps reveal dependencies, cycles, laws, discourses, and economies behind environmental injustices. As such, this Special Issue brings the rural explicitly to the forefront of EJ scholarship, alongside race and class, to better address inequality in the ecohuman community. In the spirit of a broader formation approach to inequality (Pellow, 2000), this issue speaks to the ecohuman community as the interaction of ecology with human activity to shape the possibilities and realities of one another (Bell and Ashwood, 2016).

The rural helps identify relationships between people, ecology, and justice that bear similarity across disciplinary, nation-state, and even continental boundaries, as does this Special Issue. Epidemiologists, drawing on participatory work in North Carolina and Japan, capture regional health disparities in nuclear power and hog production areas (see Kelly-Reif and Wing, this issue). Legal scholars document in Canada and the United States the marginalization of sparsely populated places and people through the branding of the rural other in the courtroom (see Pruitt and Sobczynski, this issue; Van Wagner, this issue). In Ecuador, the devaluing of rural people, places and livelihoods aids in their dispossession, as an anthropologist traces (Partridge, this issue). Tight restrictions on landownership and access perpetuate stark inequality in South Africa, marring people and the landscape, as retold by a public heath scholar, sociologist, and a community activist (Stull, Bell, and Ncwadi, this issue). From the Riverina-Murray region of Australia, to biofuel production in Iowa, fracking in Pennsylvania, and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, sociologists and environmental scientists document varying levels of environmental concern, procedural inequality, and status shaped by the rural political economy (Kulscar, Selfa and Bain, this issue; Mailin and DeMaster, this issue; Masterman-Smith et al., this issue; Otsuki, this issue). Together, these authors find that the rural brings a level of categorical unity that aids in the deconstruction of environmental injustice.

The second aim of this Special Issue, and particularly of this introduction, is to forge theoretical continuity between the rural, race, and class as dimensions of environmental injustice. To do so, we draw on de Tocqueville's concept *tyranny of the majority* as a utilitarian intersection between state authority and wealth generation that helps explain environmental injustices along the lines of race, class, and rurality in the democratic context. The various nation-states explored in this Special Issue share the auspices of democracy amidst substantial environmental inequality. We argue that the utilitarian triumph of majority rule, a cornerstone of the democratic creed, affronts classically liberal human rights and the republican public good familiar to EJ. We identify the encroachment of tyranny of the majority on minority rights from the positions of rurality, race, and poverty.

2. Why rural?

The explicit use of the rural in this Special Issue may well raise a variety of concerns about the uncertainty the word *rural* carries with it. Notoriously, at this stage of scholarly debate, it is impossible to define singularly. Rural uncertainty has flourished, spurned on by the shrinking numbers of people living in rural places; in some cases, the shrinking number of sparsely populated places; reduced rural funding streams; and the broader disciplinary move in sociology towards networks, flows, and mobilities (Ashwood and Bell, 2016; Pender, 2015; Beaulieu, 2005; Urry, 1995, 2000). Nothing, not even what some thought to be distinct spaces like urban and rural, seem to hold much currency amidst globalization, critics at the time charged (Hoggart, 1990). Such materialist lines, like metropolitan versus non-metropolitan and urban core versus scattered, continue to promise little good news in terms of rural vitality (Bell, 2007). The United Nations reports that a minority of the global population, only 46 percent, lives in rural places (United Nations, 2014). In the United States, a mere 15 percent of the population lives in rural places (USDA ERS, 2015b). In Australia, only one in three people live outside major cities,

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what the Bureau of Statistics refers to as rural, regional, and remote areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In South Africa, 35 percent of households are in rural places (Statistics South Africa, 2009). And in Ecuador, a comparable number: about 37 percent live in rural places (World Health Organization, 2009). The story is the same across the national contexts that this Special Issue includes: if one designates the meaning of the rural as people living in sparsely populated places, and if those people are annually registering less of a share of the national population, the rural appears perpetually in decline. The rural seems to be losing to the urban bully and fraught in a fight for more capital. Perhaps, then, the rural no longer counts for much.

Other sociologists counter, with an idealist approach, that the rural is more than a head count or a thin stand of people (Bell, 2007, 1994; Cloke, 2006; Halfacree, 1993, 1995; Cloke and Little, 1997). Rural is a body of thought, a representation, with politics and cultural currency that do not fit such a strict, material sense of the rural. Rural continues to flourish in many places and senses, where a variety of countryside framings influence how people live in and understand the world. As a plethora of political movements across the globe show, the rural still bears much cultural authority in everyday life (Woods, 2003, 2006; Desmarias, 2007). The rural continues to be an apt political tool in general elections and rhetoric. All is not bucolic, ideological bliss. Deterministic approaches to the environment and rural can facilitate domination across differences of gender, class and race, and the exclusion of the rural other (Little, 1999).

How then, amidst such controversy over its meaning, can rural serve the study of environmental injustice? The answer is a relational one. Ideas of the rural have material impacts, and vice versa. One does not come *before* the other. As such, debates over the rural fold into similar debates over the key dimensions of environmental injustice: race and class. Pulido (1996) pinpoints four predominant issues with mainstream approaches to environmental racism: singular definitions of racism, limiting racism to overt actions or discrete events, denying racism as ideology, and the race versus class debate. Singular definitions of rural may prove critical one day in the courtroom for judgments if rural targeting becomes illegal. In part, that's why environmental injustice focused on *disproportionate* burdens and direct *targeting* – to gain footing in the courtroom for substantial judgments against polluters. Such a narrow meaning was vital to piercing the corporate veil and determining intent. But for scholars working on rural vulnerabilities now, such an approach could, as Pulido (1996) writes, hamper political movements that capitalize on many diverse meanings and actions of rurality to promote a shared framing (Benford and Snow, 2000). Narrowing what the rural means at the beginning of its exploration as a dimension of injustice limits the study of it and potentially overlooks the ideological role of the rural. As Partridge (this issue) points out, rural people can be titled “a problem,” such as “the Indian problem,” facilitating their limited access to land, water, and environmental outcomes. A solely materialistic, rural curtain eclipses the varying ideas of the rural and can play into a singularly doomsday view of rural decline and its sacrificial status.

Without attention to ideology, as Pulido warns in her study of race, scholars can also reify the very injustices they seek to overcome. With an absolute approach to material rural, such as few (and decreasing) numbers, rural decline can feel like an insurmountable inevitability. From there, utilitarian logic flourishes, the bane of many fights wrought against environmental injustice. With such thinking, targeting rural black communities, the poorest demographic in the United States where poverty is on average a startling 37 percent, makes simple sense (USDA, 2015a). There are fewer people, less money, and cheaper resources: why *wouldn't* industry logically settle there? Narrowing the rural definition to *only* sparsely populated reifies the targeting of such spaces for industries aiming to control risk, like the United State's Federal Code of Regulation's limitations on nuclear plant siting. Such logic self reproduces by leaving the meaning of human life to the loudest, collective voice, not barebones human rights. So goes the logic of minority targeting: the few of voice take the most of burden. This default position of minority burden, and majority benefit, ties into the chicken-and-egg debate specific to environmental injustice, riddled with the same utilitarian logic – that plants roost where the eggs lay. Rural has the eggs – cheap land, more poverty, fewer people, and natural resources – so toxic industries consequently follow to help them hatch, or so the logic goes. Arguments become so mixed up with corporate or governmental intent to overburden minorities, that the systematic disenfranchisement of large groups of people, along helpful categorical lines, like race, class and rural, can become lost. The point, Pulido (1996) and Pellow (2000) stress, is that these processes are part of a much larger sociohistorical formation that shapes inequality. The rural burden is not an inevitable one, and thinking of rural targeting as only a discrete event and ignoring it as part ideology, serves to reify utilitarian logic.

On the tail of recent debates over the rural, we might go so far as to say the well-heeled discussion puts the field in an excellent place to move forward with the study of rural environmental injustice. As this special issue is testament to, documenting the material impacts of such injustices, like eroded landscapes, radiation, cancer, asthma, extinction, and pollution, does not come at the expense of studying ideological constructions of the rural – like backward, brain drained, uneducated, primitive, native, trashy, hillbilly, and resource rich. The rural ideologically and materially plays a role in the justice rendered within the ecohuman community – and warrants our attention.

3. Tyranny of the majority

Bringing rural to the table of environmental injustice requires some theoretical continuity with existing dimensions of vulnerability. We find a perhaps unlikely source for fodder – Alexis de Tocqueville, and his concept tyranny of the majority, drawn from the American case, but applicable to democracies elsewhere that operate within majority rule. Alexis de Tocqueville, the son of an aristocrat, and a white Frenchman visiting what he unapologetically called the new world, stands in many senses far from EJ concerns. In his early 1800s chronicle of American democracy, he wrote that African Americans and American Indians were “naturally distinct” and “below” white men (Tocqueville [1969] 1835: 317). Women scarcely registered in his study, but in his few references, he saw them as subservient to men. Mostly, he spent his time documenting a minority of people who lived in the United States at the time – the white, property-owning men who were allowed to participate in democracy. Despite such glaring inequalities, Tocqueville registered the United States as an egalitarian, liberal-democratic nation, and many political scientists have followed his lead. Tocqueville has provided the theoretical backbone of countless treatments of the United States as a place that protects and upholds individual rights (Hartz, 1955), what he famously characterizes as the freeing of each individual link from the feudal chain.

America, like many democracies across the world, has repeatedly failed to live up to such liberal ideals, something Smith (1993) contributes to competing ideologies. Smith (1993) takes issue with scholars who argue that inequality is an exception to the otherwise liberal norm in American democracy. Such scholars then mistakenly, he argues, use Tocqueville as a theoretical tool to argue that U.S. democracy is fundamentally dedicated to