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Privileged access and rural vulnerabilities: Examining social and environmental exploitation in bioenergy development in the American Midwest

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ABSTRACT

Negative environmental externalities typically emerge in rural areas due to urban centers' privileged access to the rural hinterland for economic activities related to the extraction and processing of natural resources. Less attention has been given to those cases when both the promotion of economic activities and their consequential inequalities are driven from within rural communities themselves. Privileged accounts within communities naturalize environmental concerns and divert attention from the inequalities associated with the costs and risks of economic development. Within this context, it is important to examine local perceptions, framings, and power structures that create and perpetuate asymmetries in access to natural resources for economic development and the local vulnerabilities they create. Drawing on Freudenberg's theory of privileged access and privileged accounts, this paper examines the promotion and development of biofuels plants in the rural American Midwest. Here, proponents of biofuels development argued that biofuel facilities were ideally suited to local conditions, where large-scale corn production, the main biomass input, is extensive. Drawing on data from surveys of six case study communities in rural Kansas and Iowa, augmented by in-depth stakeholder interviews, we discuss the local support towards biofuels production in the context of environmental concerns. The results indicate significant rural community support despite evidence that the contribution of biofuels production to local livelihoods was minimal. We show how these privileged accounts create largely unified support locally for biofuels production and quiescence concerning the disproportionality of benefits, potential environmental harms and long term development challenges.

1. Introduction

In the mid 2000s, biofuels projects were promoted by governments around the world due to their potential for rural economic development, climate change mitigation, and as an alternative to fossil fuels in the era of 'peak oil' (Worldwatch Institute, 2006; FAO, 2006). In the Midwestern United States, the biofuels industry was also portrayed as an opportunity to utilize surplus low valued agriculture production, and provide local employment, thus helping to reverse rural outmigration in some regions (Kleinschmidt and Muller, 2005).

In 2008, broad agreement in the US began to fracture over the ability of biofuels to address the "trilemma" (Tilman et al., 2009) of food security, energy independence, and climate change mitigation (Lehrer, 2010). This was driven, in part, by a growing "food vs. fuel" debate in the international media and within academia that argued that the production of first generation biofuels, which rely on food crops such as corn as biomass, were contributing to the international food crisis. The intensity of that debate was exemplified by UN Human Rights Rapporteur Jean Ziegler's assertion at the time that biofuels are a 'crime against humanity' (McMichael, 2010: 610). At the same time, a growing number of scientists began to call into question the claims that biofuels could reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate the effects of climate change (Pimentel and Patzek, 2005; Farrell et al., 2006). Since this time, social and natural scientists' concerns have intensified that the social and environmental benefits of biofuels have at minimum been overstated, but more likely that biofuels have contributed to increased

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monocultural crop production, with detrimental effects on conservation practices, water quantity and quality, and greenhouse gas emissions (see for example, McMichael, 2010; Pimentel et al., 2009; Searchinger et al., 2015). Demographic research has also indicated that the presence of a biofuels plant shows little association with population growth. Instead, such developments typically occur in places with already existing capacity, and hence perpetuate spatial inequalities rather than reversing depopulation (Kulcsar and Bolender, 2011).

A growing academic literature reveals that at the community level, the fault lines in biofuel production are largely revealed in terms of potential trade-offs between economic development and environmental impacts, such as loss of land enrolled in conservation programs, nutrient and sediment pollution of waterways, and increased groundwater usage (Bain and Selfa, 2013; Gillon, 2010; Selfa, 2010; Rossi and Hinrichs, 2011). While criticism of biofuels has intensified at the national and international level, a key issue becomes why so few questions are put to biofuel proponents regarding its potential benefits and potential costs and burdens for local communities and the environment? For example, why have so few rural communities challenged the impacts of biofuel development on the local environment, or the value of state and local subsidies and tax breaks for biofuels production, or the discursive claims that have overstated its economic benefits, such as the number of jobs it will provide?

To explore this puzzle, we turn to the work of environmental sociologists (Freudenburg and Gramling, 1994; Freudenburg, 2005; Freudenburg and Pastor, 1992; McCright and Dunlap, 2003) to understand how dominant economic interests use "indirect forms of power" (McCright and Dunlap, 2003:351), together with public complacency, to gain privileged access to economic and natural resources. We apply this approach to frame our analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data collected in a large project investigating the social impact of biofuels in rural communities in Kansas and Iowa, two states with rapidly expanding biofuels industries in the 2000s. In this paper, we extend this analytical approach to consider how environmental problems are framed as non-problematic and economic privileges are naturalized in the rural Midwest as environmental justice issues. Privileged accounts contribute to persistent inequalities, and by extension, they often foster injustice. In the case we discuss in the paper, environmental impact, which is framed as a legitimate trade-off for economic gains, is not affecting all constituents the same way. We show that privileged access and privileged accounts are important drivers behind environmental justice. In the next sections we elaborate on our theoretical approach, followed by a description of research methods. We then present our findings and conclusions.

2. Theoretical approach

A key concern of Freudenburg (2000) was that sociologists typically focused on how environmental problems were socially constructed while paying little attention to analyzing how environmental *non*-problematicity —or quiescence— is similarly socially constructed. In other words, how are some environmental concerns, such as the over withdrawal of groundwater supplies, defined or determined to be a non-issue. Aligned with this idea is the need for sociologists to analyze how environmental *privileges* are socially constructed. Within this context, the challenge for sociologists is to focus on the ways that "powerful interests" who are typically concerned with "defending the status quo" are able to define certain issues "as non-problematic" (McCright and Dunlap, 2003:349). The study of biofuels production in the Midwest offers an opportunity to revisit this theoretical challenge. This approach extends Allan Schnaiberg's (Schnaiberg and Gould, 1994) work on the role of corporate actors in using consciousness lowering activities. The objective of corporate actors is to undermine the claims of environmentalists that "environmental problems are serious, are the result of the production system, and can be alleviated without unreasonable costs" (McCright and Dunlap, 2003:349).

A challenge within every society is to not only determine how economic and environmental resources should be distributed to privilege some actors but not others, but to do so in such a way that the rest of society considers it legitimate (Freudenburg, 2005). Freudenburg (2005:89) argues that the social construction of the non-problematicity of environmental issues, technological risks, or in our case the distribution of economic resources, involves a "double diversion." The first diversion involves unequal *privileged access* by some actors to these resources. While many assume that natural resources, such as ground water, are a public good, the reality is that access to these resources, together with the use of nature to absorb waste, is skewed to benefit a few private interests while imposing their associated costs on the majority of the public. The curiosity is why these inequalities, or environmental injustices, are so widely accepted and rarely challenged or questioned? Freudenburg (2005:90) argues that it is through the second diversion, the *privileging of accounts* that such inequities become "taken for granted" or "naturalized." Here, assumptions and arguments are perpetuated that help to ""naturalize" and "legitimate" privileged access, which is argued to be economically necessary because it provides jobs and income for local communities or it provides a crucial economic product. Thus, the public's attention is diverted from considering potential problems by focusing on the promised shared economic benefits. Freudenberg has shown that such arguments are rarely questioned even when there is significant evidence that they are wrong.

In discussions of *who* has privileged access and *who* shapes the discourse of privileged access, it is important to examine the role of natural resource interests. Drawing on Freudenburg's concept of conjoint constitution, where nature and society are co-constructed and interrelated, social phenomena are understood as not purely social but rather shaped in response to their relationship with the biophysical world (Freudenburg, 2002). From this perspective, there is a dialectical relationship between natural resources, economic and political decisions, and public policy. Fisher (2006) draws on the concept of conjoint constitution to argue that decisions about energy policy are directly affected by natural resources and "natural resources interests, " that is "actors with an economic and/or political investment in natural resources" (Fisher, 2006:472). Fisher (2006) argues that energy policy is always closely tied to concerns related to local and regional economic development, the environment, and national security. Fisher (2006:488) supports her argument by analyzing how the "natural resource endowment" in the US, and the natural resource interests associated with it, have played a key role in shaping climate change policy in the US, not partisan politics as many assume. Other recent studies illustrate how ideology and cultural politics play important roles in portraying development that is environmentally destructive as essential to the cultural identity, history and economy of rural places (Bell and York, 2010; Selfa et al., 2015; Scott, 2010).

We argue that natural resource interests associated with agriculture in Iowa and Kansas play a critical role in delegitimizing environmental and economic problems. This is often accomplished through privileged accounts whereby the economic benefits are emphasized and the potential environmental risks are minimized (Freudenburg, 2000). Here, local opportunities and constraints on the use of natural resources, such as soil and water, influence decision making and therefore policy in regards to local and regional development associated with biofuels. Proponents of biofuels argue that the sector is critical for revitalizing agriculture, sustaining rural