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The Politics of Illegal Dumping: An Environmental Justice Framework

David N. Pellow

Studies of the intersection between environmental hazards and community demographics have concluded that environmental inequality is prevalent in communities across the United States. While these studies offer persuasive indicators of environmental inequality, we still have little understanding of the social forces involved in the production of these unequal outcomes. Drawing on a case study of a community of color facing illegal dumping, I propose an environmental justice framework to explain the social dynamics that produced this outcome.

KEY WORDS: environmental inequality; environmental justice; environmental racism.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies of the intersection between ecological hazards and social inequality have concluded that environmental inequality and environmental racism are prevalent in communities across the United States (Krieg 1998; Mohai 1996; Pastor, Sadd and Hipp 2001). That is, communities of color and low-income neighborhoods are disproportionately burdened with a range of environmental hazards, including polluting industries, landfills, incinerators, and illegal dumps. Researchers have supported this conclusion with analyses of census data and case studies of contaminated communities where poor persons and people of color are the residential majority. Significant attention has also focused on the environmental justice (EJ) movement that has emerged with the aim of reducing the level of environmental risk in communities across the U.S. (Bullard 2000).

In this article, I argue that while these studies offer persuasive indicators of environmental inequality, we have little understanding of the complexity involved

Correspondence should be directed to David Pellow, Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California-San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093; e-mail: dpellow@ucsd.edu.

in the decision-making that produces or otherwise influences these unequal outcomes. Specifically, few if any studies have proposed a conceptual framework for understanding how environmental inequality emerges in communities. I propose an “environmental justice framework” to address these questions. In the remainder of the article, I review the relevant literature on environmental inequality/racism; I then develop an environmental justice framework, and apply it to a case study of illegal dumping in communities of color in Chicago, Illinois.

STUDIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL INEQUALITY: ORIGINS AND PROCESSES

Place-Specific Explanations for Environmental Inequality

While environmental racism and inequality are national, even global, phenomena, they unfold and impact people differently across space, depending on any number of factors. In their recent study of the state of Massachusetts, Faber and Krieg (2001) argue that a combination of white and middle-class flight to the suburbs, a rise in the number of people of color in the central cities, and increases in illegal dumping and the siting of incinerators produced environmental inequalities in that state. In a case study of the US Steel Corporation in Gary, Indiana, Hurley (1995) found that Latinos and African Americans faced disproportionately high levels of exposure to environmental toxins on the job and in their neighborhoods as a result of local racial discrimination.

Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss (2001) argue that the primary cause of environmental inequalities in the state of Louisiana is an alliance among business, the state, and other “growth machine” interests to create a “good business climate” that favors private profits over public and environmental health. The authors conclude that each particular EJ struggle may reveal driving factors that are unique to that specific context. For African Americans, Vietnamese, and Native American communities in the state, the process by which environmental inequalities emerged was distinct. For example, in the case of some African Americans in Louisiana, they face environmental racism not only as a result of contemporary racist environmental policies, but also because many polluting corporations occupy land that was once the site of slave plantations, land where the descendants of slaves and sharecroppers now live. Thus context, place, and history matter a great deal.

In a study of Torrance, California, Sidawi (1997) demonstrated that, as a result of racially biased urban planning during the last century, Chicanos faced the highest levels of exposure to industrial pollution in that city, when compared to Anglos. Similarly, Boone and Modarres (1999) argue that in Commerce, California, although hazardous industry was sited in close proximity to Latino populations, zoning and urban planning practices had as much, if not more, to do with industrial location decisions as did demographics and racial politics. As they state,

“demographics alone are not responsible for the concentration of manufacturing in Commerce” (ibid., p. 165). They emphasize the importance of “place-specific analysis” to determine the root causes of environmental inequalities.

Macro-Level Explanations for Environmental Inequality

While discriminatory zoning practices and laws certainly contribute to environmental inequality, Bullard (1990, 1996, 2000) demonstrates that all of the city of Houston’s municipal landfills are located in African American neighborhoods, *despite the absence* of any zoning laws. In this case, he maintains that there was *de facto* zoning by Houston’s powerful white city leaders, who apparently viewed African American neighborhoods as appropriate sites for waste disposal. In other words, Bullard concludes that racism is a general organizing principle of city and county politics in the U.S.

Compounding the institutional racism in politics, Pastor, Sadd, and Hipp (2001, p. 19) argue that a lack of “pre-existing racially based social capital” also places communities of color at a disproportionately higher environmental risk than white communities. Communities with low levels of voting behavior, home ownership, wealth, and disposable income are more vulnerable to high concentrations of polluting facilities than are other communities. Unfortunately, for communities of color, these characteristics are often highly correlated with race. Bullard’s (1990) classic study *Dumping in Dixie* supported this claim more than a decade ago with evidence that polluters follow the “path of least resistance” when seeking cost-effective dumping sites. In Bullard’s estimation, the basis for these choices is institutional racism, which, in turn, “influences local land use, enforcement of environmental regulations, industrial facility siting, and, where people of color live, work, and play” (Bullard 1996, p. 449). Those communities most capable of mounting effective collective resistance tend to be better educated, have higher income levels, and have fewer people of color. Building on this record of evidence, Lake concludes that environmental inequalities “arise from the unequal power relations controlling the organization of production in capitalist societies” (Lake 1996, p. 169).

Thus, on one hand, we can cull from this literature particular factors that have produced environmental inequalities in certain case studies: local growth machine politics, discriminatory and insensitive zoning (or lack thereof), residential and occupational segregation, and white flight. On the other hand, a number of scholars point to a range of interrelated macro-level factors believed to be the general cause of environmental inequality: racism, social inequality, a lack of social capital, and the limited capacity to engage in collective action in the face of powerful political economic institutions. I argue that, while both groups of studies are helpful for understanding the nature of environmental racism, a new framework is needed to address both the generalities and complexities of this phenomenon, a framework

that acknowledges both the macro-level themes of institutional inequality and the more micro-level motivations of particular organizations and actors involved in EJ struggles. In order to capture these factors that define many EJ struggles I propose an “environmental justice framework.”

An Environmental Justice Framework

The framework I propose is organized around four dimensions relevant to most EJ conflicts. First is the importance of viewing environmental inequality as a sociohistorical process rather than as a discrete event. A focus on the history of an EJ conflict opens a window into the processes by which hazards are created and distributed. Second is a focus on the complex roles of the many people and organizations (stakeholders) involved. Environmental inequality impacts many actors and institutions with often contradictory and crosscutting allegiances (the state, workers, environmentalists, residents, private capital, and neighborhood organizations). These stakeholders are engaged in struggles for access to valuable resources (clean and safe working and living environments, natural resources, power, and profit). Third is the effect of social inequality on stakeholders. Institutional racism, class and gender inequalities, political hierarchies, and other forms of stratification play decisive roles in EJ struggles. Specifically, those populations of workers and residents lower on the social hierarchy are generally low-income and/or people of color and are therefore more likely to suffer environmental injustices. Fourth is agency—the power of populations confronting environmental inequalities to shape the outcomes of these conflicts. That is, marginal groups can sometimes create openings in the political process to mitigate environmental inequality. Through resistance they can shape environmental inequalities.

I refer to this as an environmental *justice* framework because, although it underscores the causes and nature of environmental *inequalities*, I view the absence of environmental justice (EJ) as the central problem. In this study, I focus on a case in which a community of color faces an ecological threat. By drawing on the environmental justice framework, I seek to explain the social dynamics that produced this outcome.

METHODS

I collected data from 1997 through 1999—as part of a larger project—employing archival, interview, and participant observation methods. I collected numerous newspaper articles and government documents on EJ conflicts in Chicago during the 1990s. Data were also culled from hundreds of memos, reports, internal documents, and studies from various grassroots and environmental advocacy organizations involved in these struggles. I conducted forty face-to-face semistructured

interviews with residents, environmentalists, and government officials active in Chicago's solid waste conflicts. Interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours and were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed with a thematic coding system. Thus, through observation, interviews, and documentary analysis, I have triangulated data sources to provide the most accurate and complete presentation of the case study as possible (Denzin 1970).

HISTORY AND PROCESS: CHICAGO, A HOTBED OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE CONFLICT

Operation Silver Shovel was an illegal dumping scandal that occurred in Chicago's West Side Latino and African American communities during the 1990s. Thousands of tons of debris from construction, demolition, and residential remodeling projects were dumped in these neighborhoods, creating small mountains of waste, over the objections of local residents. Unfortunately, this case was not without precedent.

On November 19, 1913, Mary McDowell addressed the City Club of Chicago. McDowell, an activist associated with Jane Addams' Hull House, was widely known as "the Garbage Lady." She and other reformers were leading a battle against the city's unhealthful and exploitative practice of concentrating garbage dumps in immigrant neighborhoods. McDowell and her colleagues were, without question, early environmental justice activists, fighting against environmental injustices directed at European immigrant populations in their ward, but also speaking out against violence and discrimination directed at African Americans. The City Club requested that she address its members about "Chicago's garbage problem." Her remarks that day in 1913 are illuminating with regard to EJ struggles of nearly a century ago as well as today:

Finally, let me say that here in Chicago the people in the "back yard" of the city are awake. We can never go back to the old outrageous conditions. The old attitude of mind was represented by a lawyer before the Finance Committee in the City Hall when he said: "*Gentlemen, in every great city there must be a part of that city segregated for unpleasant things, and, of course, you know that people in that part of town are generally not sensitive.*" Now, Chicago dare not have that attitude. We must take a new attitude of mind toward these other districts because the people are thinking in those districts and the standard is growing higher every day . . . We must make it so that it will not be tolerable to the citizens even on the edge of town (McDowell 1913; emphasis added).

That powerful leaders and institutions behave in ways that create environmental injustices is rarely a question. However, many activists and scholars speculate as to whether or not those stakeholders actually *intend* to do so. This quote suggests a conscious, even nonchalant, ideological framework that supports the production of environmental injustices as an inherent necessity of urban life and politics.

Groups involved in Chicago's early garbage wars included Hull House, the City of Chicago, private waste haulers and dumpers, and the immigrant ethnic

groups living in the wards and neighborhoods where dumping was occurring. These stakeholders were in conflict over *the* seminal environmental justice issue: the distribution of solid waste in neighborhoods populated by less powerful socioeconomic or racial/ethnic groups. McDowell's very presence at the City Club of Chicago indicates that the protests that emerged over this crisis had caught the attention of the media, policymakers, and influential institutions. She also noted that the system was being changed precisely because of local neighborhood consciousness of environmental injustices, thus creating a "standard [that] is growing higher every day." In short, McDowell's statement nicely illustrates the *environmental justice framework*. She demonstrated that the history and process of waste management and dumping were in transformation; that multiple stakeholders were involved in this drama, not just waste dumpers and community residents; that longstanding practices of institutional racism and classism were at work in these communities; and that ordinary people, residents targeted by these practices, were changing the very face of these environmental injustices by challenging them.

Chicago is a city frequently rocked with environmental justice battles, as evidenced by its continual "garbage wars," wherein residents struggle to keep solid waste out of their communities and, by extension, inside other communities. More than eighty percent of the city's formal garbage disposal occurs in landfills on the mostly working-class, African American, Latino, and European ethnic Southeast side. Chicago hosts the most landfills per square mile in the nation. But formal waste disposal practices are only one dimension of Chicago's garbage wars. Less visible is the *informal* practice of illegal, or "fly," dumping.

Chicago has a long history of conflicts over illegal waste disposal. At the end of the nineteenth century in the immigrant enclave of the twenty-ninth ward, Alderman Tom Carey made a fortune creating large pits in the neighborhood to make bricks for his own construction company and then receiving payment from the city to fill them in with garbage (Hull House 1895, ch. VII). In 1910, the Superintendent for the Department of Health was dismissed after an investigation concluded that several incidents involving graft and extortion at a waste dump had occurred on his watch (Citizens' Association of Chicago 1910). In 1914 the City Council of Chicago passed an ordinance outlawing unregulated dumping. But since that time, there have been frequent scandals over the illicit trade in garbage for favors and cash.

This phenomenon also reflects the problem of environmental inequalities. A study during the 1990s by the Chicago Department of Streets and Sanitation revealed that, of the ten city neighborhoods with the most illegally dumped garbage, all are at least sixty percent African American or Latino. And wards where people of color are the majority account for seventy-nine percent of all illegally dumped garbage in the city (Cohen 1992). This is the historical context in which Operation Silver Shovel must be viewed.

OPERATION SILVER SHOVEL

A Multi-Stakeholder View of Illegal Dumping: Politicians, Firms, and Residents

John Christopher was a businessman. Since the late 1980s, he was in the business of “recycling” construction and demolition (C&D) waste and finding places to dump it at the lowest possible cost. The vast majority of the waste Christopher was dumping originated from highway construction projects and remodeling firms across the mostly white North Side of the city and suburbs. John Christopher began dumping his waste in working-class and low-income African American and Latino communities on Chicago’s West Side, particularly Lawndale and Austin. In order to ensure that he could commit these crimes without detection by the police or City Hall, he paid local aldermen cash bribes. For example, Christopher later admitted to paying bribes in the late 1980s of approximately \$5,000 per month to Alderman William Henry of the 24th Ward “in return for Alderman Henry’s agreement to assist [Christopher] in using and operating the site . . . without interference from the City of Chicago” (Plea Agreement 1995). Christopher’s deals intensified the close links that normally exist between political institutions and economic organizations in the urban political economy (Schnaiberg 1994).

Every community where Christopher dumped his waste was primarily African American or Latino, as was each alderman whom he bribed. The KrisJon company claimed to be recycling the C&D waste for use in future construction operations. However, KrisJon was not actually recycling the waste. Instead, the company was crushing large rocks and concrete blocks and simply piling them up—creating dumps in the neighborhoods. Local activists soon discovered that KrisJon had no permits for this operation and was therefore in violation of several city ordinances. KrisJon was engaged in illegal dumping.

Communities confronting environmental inequalities in the U.S. typically respond in a variety of ways. Public protests, petitioning and targeting political leaders, and negotiating directly with polluting firms are just a few methods commonly found in EJ groups’ tactical repertoires (Gottlieb 1993; Hurley 1995). Resident stakeholders on Chicago’s West Side were no different.

Local neighborhood groups in Lawndale and Austin protested against the illegal dumping operations early on. In 1990, residents held public hearings to discuss a site that was being proposed for a dump that KrisJon was to operate. A short while later, when the site was operational and producing a large volume of dust, an organization called Concerned Parents of Sumner, Frazier, and Webster Elementary School Children (schools located within blocks of the dump) sent letters to John Christopher requesting a number of environmental improvements. Christopher never responded. His dumpsites, however, were bustling and receiving waste from ninety-six different locations around metropolitan Chicago. The noise

and vibrations from trucks delivering the waste was so extensive that it cracked the streets and sidewalks, damaged the foundations of nearby homes, and kept residents awake at night. Residents believed that the dust from the operation was linked to severe respiratory problems in these African American and Latino communities. One man reported that he had experienced

... coughing, wheezing, short of breath, headache, sinus and I have been hospitalized six times since the dump been on Kildare [Street]. I had to remove carpet from floors because of dust and dust flares up my asthma (Interview 1997).

Another resident, Doreen Jenkins, wrote of her son's medical problems:

... including a trip to the emergency room in January for headaches, dizziness and difficulty breathing. The emergency services report attached to Ms. Griffin's letter describes that the "community is quite polluted by trucks that dump dirt into the air." Ms. Griffin pleaded to "please stop this illegal operation in our neighborhood" (Vinik and Harley 1997).

While perhaps not scientifically conclusive, these residents' claims resonate strongly with the testimonies of other persons living near polluting facilities in numerous communities across the nation (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Kroll-Smith and Floyd 1997).

Although the Illinois State's Attorney has the authority to bring legal action against a company when there is "substantial danger to the environment or to the public health," the community received only a noncommittal letter from an Assistant State's Attorney. By this time, one of the dumpsites was measured at eighty feet high. Residents began to refer to it as "the mountain" and successfully urged the City of Chicago to file a suit against John Christopher's operation as a common law public nuisance and as a violation of the Municipal Code prohibiting open dumping. In fact, the Illinois Environmental Protection (IEP) Act expressly prohibits both open dumping and the operation of unpermitted waste storage, treatment, or disposal facilities. There are also requirements in the IEP Act concerning dust minimization and permits. However, the court denied the plaintiffs' motions, allowing dumping operations to continue. Despite the fact that Christopher's facility violated all of these regulations, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency issued no citations. This official sanctioning of direct violations of city and state laws in a community of color stunned local activists.

The community meetings and protests continued. In February 1992, more than six hundred people signed a petition demanding the closure of KrisJon's two major sites at Kildare and Kostner Avenues. The South Lawndale Community Block Club wrote letters to city and state environmental regulators, stating:

KrisJon is receiving more consideration and respect by the courts than the residents who live and own property in this area. This is an insult to our community... We are still

appalled that this company has been allowed to operate in our area next to our homes, residents and schools with no regard to the rights of the people who reside in our area.

The resident-activist stakeholders were fighting what appeared to be either a case of near total insensitivity by the state or an alliance between government and polluters to allow the dumps to remain in these communities of color.

But not everyone in the community was opposed to the dumping operations. Some residents joined John Christopher and participated in neighborhood “beautification projects” wherein he provided them with grass, flower, and vegetable seeds for landscaping and gardening. He also received the support of one of the strongest institutions in the African American community—the church. In 1991, a local pastor wrote a public letter applauding Christopher’s efforts to “give back” to the community, and thirty residents signed a petition indicating they “. . . welcome the KrisJon Construction Company into the community and are grateful that the company is involved in a beautification project that will benefit the community and its residents.” Hence even under these particularly pernicious circumstances, there were local leaders willing to publicly support even the most egregious violations of community sentiment.

While local leaders and politicians were involved in this struggle, the federal government was also well aware of the illegal dumping operations and used them as an opportunity to launch an investigation of political corruption. In 1992 the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) secretly secured John Christopher’s cooperation in what became known as Operation Silver Shovel. Christopher became a “mole,” working undercover for the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the FBI in an effort to uncover political corruption associated with the disposal of solid waste in Chicago. So, just as he had done in the 1980s, Christopher bribed African American and Latino aldermen to allow him to dump waste in their wards; the only difference was that in 1992 he was secretly videotaping the transactions. The public was not informed about this sting operation until 1996 when the media broke the case.

Residents who had already been protesting the dumping were incensed that the government had sanctioned this process. The Reverend Jesse Jackson and his organization Operation PUSH joined local activists and exhorted community members to take action:

These dump sites must be removed. They bring property value down with rats and roaches . . . They’re health hazards. If you live in those areas call PUSH and fight back or they’ll keep doing it (Walls 1996).

Despite this persistence on the part of activists, it would be many more months before any positive changes would result from their protests. This is in large part because these communities possess few economic and political resources.

Inequalities: Race, Class, and Political Power

While local aldermen were receiving bribes to allow dumping to continue unabated, activists were aware of the environmental inequality/racism dimensions of this struggle. One resident wrote a letter to the Cook County State's Attorney about KrisJon:

The company operates *only in minority areas*. We also know that the company poses health hazards, damages our buildings and houses, and decreases our property values.

Echoing this sentiment, a local newspaper in the Austin community referred to the dumping practices as

... "environmental racism"... in poor areas of Chicago where toxic dumpers, solid waste treatment companies and others see large profits to be made from garbage and industrial waste [and they] attempt to gain footholds with the cooperation of greedy, corrupt, and stupid elected officials. Apparently, the first battle-ground is North Lawndale (*Austin Voice* 1994).

This writer makes two major points. The first is that the dumpsites are in poor communities; the second is that certain elected officials facilitated this process. I will address both issues because they underscore the nature of social inequality in these communities.

The two largest illegal dumpsites on the West Side were on Kostner and Kildare Avenues. The level of class and racial inequality evident at these sites is remarkable. For example, the neighborhood surrounding the Kostner dump (based on a one-square-mile radius from the site) had a median household income of \$20,469 compared to a citywide median income of \$26,301 (U.S. Census Bureau 1990). The majority of residents in this community are people of color, with Latinos comprising 46.3 percent and African Americans 40.2 percent. Citywide, African Americans comprise 39.1 percent of the population and Latinos 19.6 percent. Thus the median household income in this neighborhood is well below both the national poverty level and the citywide median, and the percentage of people of color is higher than the citywide percentage. The figures for the Kildare site are even starker. For example, the neighborhood surrounding the Kildare dump (based on a one-square-mile radius from the site) had a median household income of \$15,113. The majority of people in this community are also people of color, with African Americans comprising 89.6 percent and Latinos 6.6 percent. Both of these communities are what William Julius Wilson (1996) has called "new poverty areas," where the majority of people live in deep poverty and most adults are either unemployed or underemployed. Thus, the majority of the residents in these neighborhoods experienced a significant degree of poverty, economic instability, and relative deprivation.

With regard to the role of corrupt elected officials, this dimension of inequality requires analysis but should also include a consideration of activities by residents who themselves accepted bribes and facilitated illegal dumping practices.

The relative lack of status and political influence over citywide politics among Chicago's African American and Latino aldermen is rivaled only by the political powerlessness among their constituents. Poor and working-class residents of color in Chicago are not particularly influential in local politics and therefore offer polluters easy targets. The attendant lack of economic stability that characterizes many of these neighborhoods only reinforces their political powerlessness and the diminished status of their elected officials. This subjugated position also renders these groups particularly vulnerable to efforts by polluting firms to "divide and conquer" residents over potential economic benefits that may accompany industrial activity.

Frequently, when communities confront environmental threats, they are beset by internal fractures surrounding family conflicts, fear of job losses, and loyalties to various neighborhood institutions and firms involved. These tensions generally intensify the pain and anxiety that normally develop during conflicts over environmental contamination (Brown and Mikkelsen 1990; Hurley 1995; Roberts and Toffolon-Weiss 2001). Chicago's West Side was characterized by a particularly intense array of divisive wedges that rendered these working-class, polluted communities of color quite vulnerable.

Foremost among these fractures was the abuse—by aldermen—of their political positions to allow waste dumping in return for cash. But in addition to this, John Christopher had to build broader community support for his operation to ensure its survival. One strategy was to bribe *residents* who had complained about his facilities. One resident reported:

The [truck] running up and down the street shaking the building so bad it cracked the front of the building and the roof have come loose. . . My son has shortness of breath especially when the wind is coming from the west. I told John [Christopher] that his dust was a problem covering my cars every day. So he gave me \$20. I told him that wouldn't pay for a whole year. Earlier he had sent \$15 (Interview 1997).

For some observers fifteen or twenty dollars may seem outrageously small for a "pay-off." However, in some West Side neighborhoods in Chicago, including Lawndale and Austin, the unemployment rate among African American residents has exceeded 50 percent in the last decade (Wilson 1996). Given this context, the low price for compliance is not so surprising.

While some segments of the community were united against illegal dumping, the fractures remained. The divisions and betrayals within the West Side communities went much deeper than the misdeeds of corrupt politicians, immoral businessmen, and the occasional resident in need of cash. In fact, local street gangs in the Austin community were discovered regulating the fly dumping trade and were said to have charged as low as five dollars per ton of waste dumped on vacant lots. In another instance, in December of 1997, a number of Austin residents employed by a North Side remodeling company were cited for illegally dumping debris in their own community. "You have companies and residents, bringing garbage

from the suburbs back into their own neighborhoods,” one observer commented (McNeil 1998).

Austin and Lawndale are two communities in desperate need of sustainable economic development, so politicians and residents were easy prey to bribes, temporary jobs, or a range of cash-producing activities associated with illegal waste dumping. This dynamic illustrates the depths of economic despair in many communities of color, which have become so desperate for development that garbage—or one’s willingness to accept it—is viewed as one of the only marketable resources available. In the next section I consider these communities’ ability to produce real change and challenge environmental injustices.

Agency: Shaping and Reducing Environmental Inequalities

West Side neighborhood activists were ultimately successful at urging the city, the state EPA, and the federal EPA to take action in the Operation Silver Shovel case. The three levels of government have begun to develop a comprehensive “strategy to address the problem of illegal solid waste disposal in Chicago” (Vinik and Harley 1997, p. 32). Some of the concrete steps taken include: developing a community policing program specifically for illegal dumping; training police officers on illegal dumping surveillance techniques; strengthening the city ordinance regulating dumping; inspecting dumpsites and testing them for hazardous and chemical waste; and beginning waste clean-ups at the sites. New or modified city ordinances in Chicago include penalties such as jail time for illegal dumpers, the seizure and impoundment of all vehicles used for fly dumping, and the barring of contractors convicted of illegal dumping from future eligibility for city contracts. The city also introduced a new surveillance system near many illegal dumpsites and vacant lots and began vigorously prosecuting and fining dumpers (*Chicago Defender* 1997).

One West Side activist wrote a letter to a public interest lawyer about the community’s success:

We won the case and a law was changed because we fought so persistently to stop the illegal operation in our community. . . . Removal efforts just started after the recent publicity. Officials that we appealed to for years are now appearing to help since Operation Silver Shovel hit the news.

Crediting her own organization’s activism and the news media coverage, this activist acknowledged that it often takes many stakeholders several years to create an opening in the local political process.

The community fought back repeatedly and, despite years without official support, was able to initiate governmental action, regulatory enforcement, and a clean-up of the waste. Angry constituents also later voted out of office one of the aldermen who accepted bribes. At the national level, as a result of the Operation Silver Shovel scandal, U.S. Representative Cardiss Collins of Illinois (an African

American woman) introduced a House bill intended to outlaw environmental racism. Although the bill later died, this was evidence that grassroots activists were able to put the issue of environmental racism on the public agenda. In this way, even the most dispossessed and disenfranchised communities on Chicago's West Side shaped the discourse around—and even reduced the impacts of—environmental racism.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Illegal Dumping and the Environmental Justice Framework

Operation Silver Shovel was a case of environmental inequality/racism and can be analyzed using the framework I introduced earlier. First, a historical analysis reveals that Operation Silver Shovel was not an isolated instance of environmental racism without precedent. Illegal dumping in Chicago's communities of color and immigrant neighborhoods is more than a century old and it has been one of the key battlefronts in that city's garbage wars. Hence, the fly dumping in the Lawndale and Austin communities was part of a longstanding and larger pattern of environmental inequality around the city. Second, many stakeholders with a host of complex motives were involved in this conflict. While most residents opposed the waste dumpers, many locals were facilitating the waste trade, including aldermen, neighbors in need of cash, and gang members. The other key stakeholders were the various levels of government, each of which was complicit in allowing these acts of environmental injustice to go unchallenged, despite their obvious illegality. Third, Operation Silver Shovel is largely rooted in institutional racism and class inequalities in that this type of locally unwanted land use is likely to appear only in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. KrisJon and the FBI targeted these communities because of their vulnerability, their lack of political power, and the presence of politicians willing to accept bribes for favors. Finally, this was a defining moment for the power of the grassroots to exercise agency—to challenge powerful actors and institutions. Community groups persisted in their efforts to bring public attention to the problem of illegal dumping and to get the courts and government agencies to enforce the law and, despite virtually no assistance, were able to implement real changes. These formerly powerless networks of ordinary citizens placed the issue of environmental racism on the city's agenda and successfully reduced the level of environmental hazards in their neighborhoods.

Environmental inequality/racism occurs, therefore, when historical and contemporary social forces intersect to position various stakeholders in a state of power imbalance with regard to environmental resources. These conflicts are, in turn, shaped by all affected groups, and can be mitigated or exacerbated when the power imbalances are reduced or increased. Drawing on the environmental justice

framework and the case of illegal dumping, three things are clear: 1) Environmental inequality/racism is not just about correlations between hazards and populations. It is about the power dynamics that produce these inequalities and the power of the grassroots to challenge and reverse them; 2) environmental inequality/racism is not just about communities of color versus white communities. While racism may play a persistent role in these conflicts, the range of motivations among stakeholders—including the desire for political power—and intraracial divisions across a range of community interests matter a great deal; and 3) until we understand why certain interests in communities of color are willing to support environmentally harmful practices we will never truly understand environmental racism and will therefore be ill-equipped to move toward environmental justice. It is my hope that future studies will take these findings into account.

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