

11.368 - Reaction Paper 1

Luke Cole's article, "Empowerment as the Key to Environmental Protection," called into question the paradigm behind many of the large environmental protection laws. I thought his claim that environmental laws are poorly suited to provide environmental justice because they focus on a 'bad actor' was intriguing. Even though I have taken 17.32, (Environmental Politics and Policy), I have never considered that environmental laws could aim to protect individuals from the 'normal operations' of polluters. I believe that revising the current laws to guard vulnerable populations against 'normal operations' pollution would go a long way in rectifying environmental injustice. Additionally, I believe that such a strategy could procure large environmental benefits for society as a whole. Targeting the 'normal operations' of known polluters would likely generate stricter environmental laws in general.

I believe that such a strategy would be effective because of the inherent problems associated with siting environmentally hazardous industries. As Cole and Sheila Foster highlight in "From the Ground Up," the characteristics used to site environmental hazards ("cheap land, appropriate zoning, low population densities, proximity to transportation, and the absence of hospitals and school") are race neutral if considered in a vacuum. Unfortunately, they are closely correlated to race and income within our society. If such criteria cannot be used to site environmental hazards, what can? It seems that no matter how hard we strive to equally distribute environmental hazards, some people are always going to suffer more than others. Considered from a utilitarian stance of procuring the greatest good from the greatest number of people, some siting decisions are much more

logical than others. Given a lack of better criteria with which chose where to site environmentally risky industries, it may be best to mitigate the health effects of those toxic industries. Targeting the normal operations of many companies is a perfect way to accomplish this. While it may not be popular, it may prove more popular, and more economically feasible, than placing a landfill in the middle of Beverly Hills.

I'd like to discuss what type of paradigm the government uses when choosing where to site toxic facilities. For example, does the government explicitly use a "greatest good from the greatest number," or does it subscribe to some other logic? I would also like to discuss whether there are any siting criteria which are not correlated with race and class. If not, is there any way to fairly employ such criteria?