

Beyond Eco-Apartheid

Is the Green Movement too White?

Sunday 23 September 2007, by [JONES Van](#) (Date first published: April 2007).

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In 2005, Americans sat before our television sets, horrified by images of an American city underwater. In 2006, we sat in the nation's movie houses, watching Al Gore make the case for urgent action. In 2007, Americans are finally rising from our seats and demanding action to reverse global warming.

Students are planning marches and protests to push Congress to curb emissions. Consumers and investors are flocking to carbon-cutting solutions like hybrid cars, bio-diesel and solar power. Reporters and editors are moving their environmental stories from the back of the paper to Page 1A, above the fold. Corporations are stampeding each other to showcase their love of clear skies and lush forests. And both the blue Democrats and the red Republicans are suddenly waving green banners.

The climate crisis is galloping from the margins of geek science to the epicenter of our politics, culture and economics. As the new environmentalists advance, only two questions remain: whom will they take with them? And whom will they leave behind?

We know that climate activists will convince Congress to adopt market-based solutions (like "cap and trade"). This approach may help big businesses do the right thing. But will those same activists use their growing clout to push Congress to better aid survivors of Hurricane Katrina? Black and impoverished victims of our biggest eco-disaster still lack housing and the means to rebuild. Will they find any champions in the rising environmental lobby?

We know that the climate activists will fight for subsidies and supports for the booming clean energy and energy conservation markets. But will they insist that these new industries be accessible beyond the eco-elite — creating jobs and wealth-building opportunities for low-income people and people of color? In other words, will the new environmental leaders fight for eco-equity in this "green economy" they are birthing? Or will they try to take the easy way out — in effect, settling for an eco-apartheid?

The sad racial history of environmental activism tends to discourage high hopes among racial justice activists. And yet this new wave has the potential to be infinitely more expansive and inclusive than

previous eco-upsurges.

Environmentalism's 1st Wave: Conservation

But first, the bad news: no previous wave of US environmentalism ever broke with the racism or elitism of its day. In fact, earlier environmental movements often either ignored racial inequality or exacerbated it.

For example, consider the first wave of environmentalism: the “conservation” wave.

The true original conservationists were not John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt or David Brower. They were the Native Americans. The original Americans were geniuses at living in harmonic balance with their sister and brother species. Before the Europeans arrived, the entire continent was effectively a gigantic nature preserve. A squirrel could climb a tree at the Atlantic Ocean and move branch-to-branch-to-branch until she reached the Mississippi River. So many birds flew south for the winter that their beating wings were like thunder, and their numbers blotted out the sun.

Native Americans achieved this feat of conservation on a continent that was fully populated by humans. In fact, the leading indigenous civilizations achieved world-historic heights of political statesmanship by founding the Iroquois Federation, a model for the US founders.

Unfortunately, those same founders rejected the Indians' example of environmental stewardship. Colonizers wiped out whole species to make pelts, felled forests and destroyed watersheds. Settlers almost exterminated the buffalo just for shooting sport.

The destruction of nature was so relentless, heedless and massive that some Europeans balked. They created the famed “conservation movement,” a slogan for which could well have been: “Okay, but let's not pave EVERY-thing!”

Fortunately, the conservationists' enjoyed some success; their worthy efforts continue to this day. But the first and best practitioners of “environmental conservation” were not white people. They were red people. And the mostly-white conservation movement still owes an incalculable debt to the physical and philosophical legacy of indigenous peoples. But it is a debt that conservation leaders apparently have no intention of ever repaying.

Case in point: today's large conservation groups together have countless members, hundreds of millions of dollars and scores of professional lobbyists. But when Native Americans fight poverty, hostile federal bureaucracies and the impact of broken treaties, these massive groups are almost always missing in action. In that regard, Indian-killing Teddy Roosevelt set the enduring pattern for most conservationists' racial politics: “Let's preserve the land we stole.”

Environmentalism's 2nd Wave: Regulation

In the 1960s, the second wave of environmentalism got under way. Sparked by Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, this wave could be called the “regulation” wave. It challenged the worst excesses of industrial-age pollution and toxics. Among other important successes, this wave produced the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the EPA and the first Earth Day in 1970.

But this wave, too, was affluent and lily white. As a result, it developed huge blind spots to toxic pollution concentrating in communities of poor and brown-skinned people. In fact, some people of

color began to wonder if white polluters and white environmentalists were unconsciously collaborating. They were effectively steering the worst polluters and foulest dumps into Black, Latino, Asian and poor neighborhoods.

Finally, people of color people began speaking out. And in the 1980s, a new movement was born to combat what its leaders called “environmental racism.” Those leaders said: “Regulate pollution, yes — but do it with equity. Do it fairly. Don’t make black, brown and poor children bear a disproportionate burden of asthma and cancer.”

Two decades later, that so-called “environmental justice” movement continues to defend the poor and vulnerable. But it functions separately from so-called “mainstream” (white) environmentalism. That movement has never fully embraced the cause of environmentalists of color. In other words, since the 1980s, we have had an environmental movement that is segregated by race.

Given this history of racial apathy, exclusion and even hostility, is there any reason to expect much different from the latest upsurge of eco-activism?

The Third Time’s the Charm: Investment

Well, in fact: there is. The reason for hope has to do with the very nature of the present wave. Simply put, this wave is qualitatively different from the previous ones.

The first wave was about preserving the natural bounty of the past. The second wave was about regulating the problems of the industrial present. But the new wave is different. It is about investing in solutions for the future: solar power, hybrid technology, bio-fuels, wind turbines, tidal power, fuel cells, energy conservation methods and more.

The green wave’s new products, services and technologies could also mean something important to struggling communities: the possibility of new green-collar jobs, a chance to improve community health and opportunities to build wealth in the green economy. If the mostly-white global warming activists join forces with people of color, the United States can avoid both eco-apocalypse and eco-apartheid — and achieve eco-equity.

Discussions of race, class and the environment today can go beyond how to atone for past hurts or distribute present harms. Today we can ask: how do we equitably carve up the benefits of a bright future?

And that kind of question gives a powerful incentive for people of color, labor leaders and low-income folks to come back to the environmental table. At the same time, for all their present momentum, the newly ascendant greens cannot meet their short-term objectives or their long-term goals — without the support of a much broader coalition.

Green Rush = Green-Collar Jobs?

From the perspective of people of color, helping to build a bigger green tent would be worth the effort. Green is rapidly becoming the new gold. The LOHAS (lifestyles of health and sustainability) sector is growing like crazy: it was a \$229 billion piece of the US economy in 2006. And it is growing on a vertical.

But unfortunately, the LOHAS sector is probably the most racially segregated part of the US

economy — in terms of its customers, owners and employees. Changing that could create better health, more jobs and increased wealth for communities that need all three.

For example, an urban youth trained to install solar panels can go on to become an electrical engineer. Imagine a young adult trained to keep buildings from leaking energy by putting in double-paned glass — on track to becoming a glazer. Those trained to work with eco-chic bamboo or to fix hybrid engines will find good work.

We need Green Technology Training Centers in every public high school, vocational school and community college. And America needs an Energy Corps, like Americorps and the Peace Corps, to train and deploy millions of youth in the vital work of rewiring a nation.

Beyond that, people of color must also have the chance to become inventors, investors, owners, entrepreneurs and employers in the new greener world. They should also use their political power to influence the scope, scale and shape of the green economy.

It makes sense for people of color to work for a green growth agenda, as long as green partisans embrace broad opportunity and shared prosperity as key values.

Eco-Equity Is Smart Politics

For global warming activists, embracing eco-equity would be a politically brilliant move. In the short term, a more inclusive approach will prevent polluters from isolating and derailing the new movement. In the long run, it is the only strategy that will save the Earth.

In the near term, opponents of change will actively recruit everyone whom this new movement ignores, offends or excludes. California provides a cautionary tale; voters there rejected a 2006 ballot measure to fund clean energy research. A small excise tax on the state's oil extraction would have produced a huge fund, propelling California into the global lead in renewable energy. But the same message that wooed Silicon Valley and Hollywood elites flopped among regular voters.

Clean energy proponents ran abstract ads about "energy independence" and the bright eco-future. But big oil spoke directly to pocket-book issues, running ads that warned (falsely) that the tax would send gas prices through the roof. On that basis, an NAACP leader and others joined the opposition. And the measure's original sky-high support plummeted.

To avoid getting out-manuevered politically, green economy proponents must actively pursue alliances with people of color. And they must include leaders, organizations and messages that will resonate with the working class.

The Hidden Danger of Eco-Apartheid

But the real danger lies in the long term. The United States is the world's biggest polluter. To avoid eco-apocalypse, Congress will have to do more than pass a "cap and trade" bill. And Americans will have to do more than stick in better light bulbs.

To pull off this ecological U-turn, we will have to fundamentally restructure the US economy. We will need to "green" whole cities. We will have to build thousands of wind farms, install tens of millions of solar panels and retrofit millions of buildings. We will have to retire our car, truck and bus fleets, which are based on combustible engines and oil, replacing them with plug-in hybrids and electric

vehicles powered by a clean-energy grid.

Reversing global warming will require a WWII level of mobilization. It is the work of tens of millions, not hundreds of thousands. Such a shift will require massive support at the social, cultural and political levels. And in an increasingly non-white nation, that means enlisting the passionate involvement of millions of so-called “minorities” — as consumers, inventors, entrepreneurs, investors, buzz marketers, voters and workers.

All For Green & Green For All

It is obvious that eco-chic, embraced by the eco-elite, won't save the planet. Climate change activists may be tempted to try to sidestep the issues of racial inclusion, in the name of expedience — but the truth is that eco-apartheid is just a speed-bump on the way to eco-apocalypse. Any successful, long-term strategy will require a full and passionate embrace of the principle of eco-equity.

Beyond that, there is the moral imperative. The predicted ecological disasters will hit poor people and people of color — first and worst. Our society has an obligation to insure equal protection from the peril — and equal access to the promise — of our new, ecological age.

So now is the time for the green movement to reach out. By definition, a politics of investment is a politics of hope, optimism and opportunity. The bright promise of the green economy could soon include, inspire and energize people of all races and classes. And nowhere is the need for a politics of hope more profound than it is among America's urban and rural poor.

More importantly, climate activists can open the door to a grand historic alliance — a political force with the power to bend history in a new direction. Let the climate activists say: “We want to build a green economy, strong enough to lift people out of poverty. We want to create green pathways out of poverty and into great careers for America's children. We want this ‘green wave’ to lift all boats. This country can save the polar bears and black kids, too.”

Let them say: “In the wake of Katrina, we reject the idea of ‘free market’ evacuation plans. Families should not be left behind to drown because they lack a functioning car or a credit card. Katrina's survivors still need our help. And we need a plan to rescue everybody next time. In an age of floods, we reject the ideology that says must let our neighbors ‘sink or swim.’”

Let them say: “We want those communities that were locked out of the last century's pollution-based economy to be locked into the new, clean and green economy. We don't have any throw-away species or resources. And we don't have any throw-away children or neighborhoods either. All of creation is precious. And we are all in this together.”

A Green Growth Alliance

Those words would make environmental history.

More importantly, they could begin a complete realignment of American politics. The idea of “social uplift environmentalism” could serve as the cornerstone for an unprecedented “Green Growth Alliance.” Imagine a coalition that unites the best of labor, business, racial justice activists, environmentalists, intellectuals, students and more. That combination would rival the last century's New Deal and New Right coalitions.

To give the Earth and her peoples a fighting chance, we need a broad, eco-populist alliance — one that includes every class under the sun and every color in the rainbow. By embracing eco-equity as their ultimate goal, the climate crisis activists can play a key role in birthing such a force.

P.S.

* From <http://www.commongroundmag.com/2007/04/eco-apartheid0704.html>

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