



Jan -March 1994

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Coping With Industrial Exploitation

The consequences of industrialization have forced an increasing number of African Americans to become environmentalists. This is particularly the case for those who live in central cities where they are overburdened with the residue, debris, and decay of industrial production. Social scientists have been fascinated with the relationship between race, development, and the environmental crisis. They have found that the costs and benefits of industrial expansion are not equally distributed in our society: some communities pay more of the costs, others receive more than their fair share of benefits.

People of color are the first to feel the irony of living in a country that represents 6 percent of the world's population and consumes 45 percent of its resources, including 60 percent of its energy resources.

The Price of Growth

Growth and development are sources both of wealth and destruction. Growth also reproduces inequality. Is it possible to limit growth and distribute goods more equitably? Hazel Henderson contends that it is never a matter of growth vs. no growth. What is crucial is what is growing, what is declining, and what must be maintained. Uneven development and trade have shaped power relations between nations and individuals over the past three centuries. These relationships have been named in several ways: colonialism, imperialism, underdevelopment, internal colonialism, and institutional racism.

The most advanced stage of industrial development has been the most toxic, thanks particularly to the petroleum, electronics, and aerospace industries. Such industries have left a trail of horrors in communities of color. Children of farm workers have suffered birth defects as a consequence of their mother's pesticide exposure at

work during pregnancy. In and around farm-worker communities, child cancer rates are unusually high. Children whose mothers work in low-wage, hazardous jobs in high-tech industries, where the use of dangerous chemicals is common, have high rates of birth defects. And children living around military installations have high rates of cancer and other illnesses.

Ecological disasters similar to those we find in Haiti (massive soil erosion, devastated forests, dead rivers, and extinct species of animals, plants, and even butterflies—to say nothing of the poor quality of life of the people) are usually dismissed as rare and explained as aberrations. But today these conditions are commonplace.

So-called socialist and capitalist economies alike have long operated on a fallacy that the earth's resources and capacity to absorb pollution are inexhaustible. There is growing official recognition, however, that unchecked growth, based on excessive resource consumption and use of nonrenewable resources, can no longer be sustained. Even the authors of the cornucopian theory of unlimited industrial growth and development have begun to modify their positions. Walt W. Rostow wrote in *Getting from Here to There* that by the year 2000 we must develop new renewable energy sources, recycle them, and control pollution. This is the conviction of a strong proponent of unlimited growth.

One of the byproducts of unlimited growth along the petrochemical route is the toxic waste crisis. The United States produces between 250 and 400 million metric tons of toxic waste per year or about one ton per person per year. To date, no viable solution has been found to deal with this mounting waste problem. There are more than 6,000 industrial plants in the United States producing dangerous chemicals. Many, if not most, are found in working-class districts with high percentages of people of color. The waste products of this production is also frequently stored in such communities or sent to

the Third World (Center for Investigative Reporting & Bill Moyers 1990; The Panos Institute 1990). This waste export pattern has aptly been tagged "toxic imperialism."

Africa has become a prime dumping ground for toxic industrial and pharmaceutical residues and even deadly radioactive material. Shipments arrive there from Norway, France, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg, Netherlands, West Germany, Canada, and the United States. South America and Central America, as well as the Caribbean islands, face the same problem, largely from U.S. exports. As organized local resistance raises consciousness, governments simply move the problem elsewhere. At the same time, banks are eager to acquire equity in Third World debtor countries and have initiated "debt for nature swaps" where debts are reduced in exchange for unspoiled land. Communities of color in the United States, like their counterparts in the

The Need for Alternatives

Both Western liberalism's and conservative notions of individualism, private property, and the free market provide the philosophical base of industrial "democracy" that dominates modern thought and society. The industrial revolution also gave rise to Marxism, of course. Yet, ironically, though Marxism rested on a chronicle of the inequities and irrationalities of capitalism, it accepted industrial development and the technological domination of nature by human society as a precondition for a liberated, communist society. Indeed, applied Marxism stands alongside liberalism and conservatism in its defense of industrial growth and development. Even liberal policies that emphasize fairness, opportunity for all, and state regulation of production are predicated on the promise of growth. The greatest defenders of those corporations most active in the de-

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Third World, are offered economic incentives in exchange for accepting the toxic consequences of hazardous waste storage.

To date, our legal and political system has protected those who are destroying our future. In the name of private property and free enterprise, corporations are allowed to pollute the air, water, and soil we all share. In the name of progress and development, industries consume vital resources and transform harmless elements into hazardous byproducts. This depletion of resources and industrial destruction of the environment are now constants, not occasional externalities.

We must now weigh our philosophical and policy alternatives with this knowledge as our backdrop. We need a reconceptualization of evolution that would include a decentralization of power and allow for new forms of political participation to emerge before totalitarian measures are imposed to control the crisis of resource scarcity and environmental degradation.

struction of the environment is the common left-liberal-conservative commitment to industrial development.

Our legal, cultural, and economic systems have promoted the good of the few over the good of the majority. The corporations' achievement of legal personhood has allowed them to place narrow profit above the broader concerns of real people and their communities. We now need to break with the school of thought that excludes community, nature, and justice from our consideration.

To halt this self-destructive march of industrial growth and development, citizen action is necessary. It must be guided by a critical approach to community development and industrial production and transcend isolated, individual crises so as to confront the national and transnational consequences of corporate, industrial behavior. So far, environmental activists and theorists have been slow to develop a theory of political action or community development because of

their focus on instrumentalities: rules, bureaucracy, and administration (in the tradition of liberal and conservative thought). What's needed instead is the creation of an "economic democracy" that institutionalizes decentralized, local and regional approaches to development, production for use, and the greening of urban environments as well as preservation of the wild.

It is very important that we rebuild our cities for they have become centers of social injustice as a result of our current development models. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), "the future will be predominantly urban, and the most immediate environmental concerns of most people will be urban ones" (WCED 1987, p. 255). This connection between the urban and environmental crises was further developed at WCED hearings in 1986:

Large cities by definition are centralized, man-made environments that depend mainly on food, water, energy, and other goods from outside. Smaller cities, by contrast, can be the heart of community-based development and provide service to the surrounding countryside.

Given the importance of cities, special efforts and safeguards are needed to ensure that the resources they demand are produced sustainably and that urban dwellers participate in decisions affecting their lives. Residential areas are likely to be more habitable if they are governed by individual neighborhoods with direct local participation. To the extent that energy and other needs can be met on a local basis, both the city and surrounding areas will be better off (WCED 1987: 243).

New planning must be undertaken, with the assistance of people from multiple disciplines, to achieve this goal of neighborhood empowerment. In the area of technological alternatives, we must focus on renewable resources and conservation (e.g., solar energy and recycling) to replace our dependence on nuclear and fossil fuels.

Our new call for an ecological democracy must also recognize the class interests in both Western and developing societies. We must highlight the political consequences of existing growth and development strategies, which often mean the destruction of working-class communities in central cities. We must now reject a view of development as simply a neutral technological advancement.

A new social contract between citizens and their governments must be made. Our communities must resist transnational corporations that use their economic power to influence political officials and render them unresponsive to citizens and their communities. Accountability requires new leadership and new forms of citizen participation in governance. Multiple decisionmaking units (like neighborhood councils) should regulate development and ensure citizen input on economic and environmental decisions. Centralized political decisionmaking, as well as centralized planning, must be replaced by decentralized methods. This is the essence of what Henderson calls "thinking globally and acting locally"

To develop a more complete definition of social justice and democracy, we must transcend the limitations of private property, recognize environmental rights as human rights, and embrace community activism in pursuit of the common good. Liberal and conservative political philosophies have only served to justify industrial development and sanctify unlimited individual rights. As a consequence, we are a long way from achieving environmental or earth rights.

The Politics of Reconceptualization

Given these problems and needs, it is reassuring to know that the basis for alternative policies and institutions is being developed through grassroots struggles in communities of color around the country. The contradictions resulting from U.S. development strategies have put African-American and other communities of color (primarily Latinos and Native Americans because they too have been victims of de facto segregation) on the cutting edge of the 21st century. Indeed, the effects of those strategies on communities of color in the United States have made most grassroots organizations wary of development models emphasizing capital intensive projects such as building highways, office towers, shopping malls, and condominiums.

It is no accident that the crisis of industrialization would manifest itself most dramatically within communities of color, for they have experienced the most severe economic underdevelopment and the most contamination from industrialization. The health consequences already have been catastrophic. Many others will not manifest themselves for years. Even now we know that

Navajo teenagers have a rate of organ cancer 17 times the national average; that 50 percent of the nation's children suffering from lead paint poisoning (resulting in low attention spans, limited vocabulary, behavior problems, etc.) are African American. These are the real implications of America's institutional racism and development strategies that ignore human and social costs as well as environmental costs. All of this has badly eroded the quality of life in urban America.

Many of these problems emanate from discriminatory land-use decisions, which ensure that poor and people of color live in close proximity to polluting industries. Noise and pollution

concentration of industries and households increases the likelihood that a huge volume of waste will be transformed into dangerous pollution.

After the major drive to organize unions in the 1930s, industries often relocated to the urban periphery. To escape their workers' increasing demands, industries began to move even further away from the urban core into the suburbs. Later during the 1970s, industries again sought new locations, this time in the Sunbelt in order to take advantage of region's cheap land and labor. The government helped by providing subsidies for production and new building by indus-

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from factories, warehouses, and stockyards, have become the trademark of African-American communities, further ensuring de facto segregation. As whites left the inner city to escape its deafening noise, congestion, foul air, water, and land, African Americans were allowed to move into the houses left behind. The boundaries of African-American communities are often formed by rivers or lakes on whose banks we find factories, warehouses, stockyards, and other nonresidential structures.

The central business district of cities in the early 20th century was where people of lower socio-economic status generally lived. In many cities, African Americans replaced the European, ethnic working class people completely in these areas by the end of World War II. In many instances, housing had been built on marshes and landfills. Frequently, in the Northeast and Midwest, elevated trains traversed the length of the African American neighborhoods as business continued as usual beneath them. The geographic

tries engaged in the military-industrial complex and by financing public housing and highway construction to facilitate the transit of workers and commodities. This desertion of the inner city left a decaying core.

This is an international condition, as noted by the WCED 1987 report:

[Industrial] cities account for a high share of the world's resource use, energy consumption, and environmental pollution...Many (industrial cities) face problems of deteriorating infrastructure, environmental degradation, inner-city decay, and neighborhood collapse. The unemployed, the elderly, and racial and ethnic minorities can remain trapped in a downward spiral of degradation and poverty as job opportunities and the younger and better-educated individuals leave declining neighborhoods. City or municipal governments often face a legacy of poorly designed and maintained public

housing estates, mounting costs, and declining tax bases.

The WECD report also notes that because the resources exist to solve the urban environmental crisis in industrial countries, "the issue for most industrial countries is ultimately one of political and social choice" (WCED 1987). In most instances, the choice has been to build a new urban core, displace the poor, and create a new corporate city to fulfill a new set of functions. Cities are now no longer needed for the centralization of production but rather for the housing of administrative and financial headquarters.

As the role of finance capital has expanded, centers to facilitate transactions have become more elaborate. They now contain housing banks, stock exchanges, insurance companies, brokerage firms, etc. The old industrial city has now taken a new corporate form—not only a new appearance, but new inhabitants, as the poor and working class are displaced. Corporate decentralization and urban sprawl have replaced clear, functional, central cities. Lost too are the institutions of urban policies that provided some measure of social justice for poor people and communities of color. Left to their own devices, communities of color have organized themselves to fill gaps in services provided by local governments. This has been true even when many people of color have been elected to key governmental leadership positions in these restructured cities.

Land-use decisions have always reflected class and race bias. Because they reflect the distribution of power in society, they cannot be expected to produce an equitable distribution of goods and services or a balanced sharing of social responsibilities. This is true in inner-city ghettos, middle-class suburban neighborhoods, and even affluent subdivisions inhabited largely by African Americans. African-American communities are systematically redlined by banks, savings and loan associations, and insurance companies. Yet, now citizens in these communities are expected to assist in the bailout the failed savings and loans institutions, many of which engaged in illegal redlining practices for years.

These same communities also host an unfair share of prisons, highways, sewer treatment facilities, bus garages, salvage yards, hazardous waste treatment centers, storage and disposal facilities, and other polluting industries. As in the Third World, rising poverty, unemployment, un-

payable debt, aid with strings attached, trade barriers, and export-driven economics are at the root of many environmental problems in the United States. Ironically, the art of justifying or "selling" communities on development projects that are not in their best interest has become a new business specialty for consultants.

The mainstream environmental movement has not yet taken leadership in resisting these projects. Resistance has fallen to the movement for environmental justice led by the residents of poor and communities of color most affected by virtue of their proximity to the major sources of pollution. As long as land can be acquired cheaply and easily in communities of color, and as long as zoning and other regulations can be minimized, these communities will continue to be prime targets, particularly for waste disposal waste-to-energy incinerators. This will likely intensify as landfill space decreases.

Avoiding Western Chauvinism

Participation by mainstream environmentalists in the decisions to move poison from one community to another, more vulnerable community does not move us any closer to viable alternatives. Communities of color begin their organizing with a recognition of limited options and allies. These communities start with a clear view of the link between the exploitation of the environment and their own exploitation. They recognize industrial and environmental inequities precisely because their communities have been so neglected.

We must understand that the way we conceptualize economic development can produce very different cultural attitudes and behavior. For example, Native Americans have always insisted that their culture (as embodied in their religion) is the source of their economic system and values. These values emphasize harmony with Earth and the Creator. On the other hand, Western thought emphasizes humanity's control of nature. Nature and wildlands are thus seen as needing to be controlled, tamed, and dominated. It is not by chance that the symbols and mythical heroes (like Prometheus) of Western culture are the embodiment of domination and production. The anti-heroes (Orpheus, Narcissus, Dionysus) are the antagonists of domination, and considered weak and disruptive. However, it is through these anti-heroes that the symbolic op-

position between "man" and nature, subject and object, can be overcome. For Marcuse, they represent a much different reality: "[T]heirs is the image of joy and fulfillment; the voice which does not command but sings; the gesture which offers and receives; the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest; the liberation from time which unites man with god, man with nature."

It is not surprising that the characteristics of these anti-heroes were attributed by Hegel to "Africa...the land of childhood, lying beyond the day of self-conscious history..." or dismissed by other Western philosophers as effeminate.

Not surprisingly, Western scholars are quick to characterize Africa's proximity to nature as a source of weakness. Feelings, emotions, and sensations—not reason—are said to characterize the Sons of Ham. This idea was stood on its head by African and West Indian writers and activists from French colonies in the 1930s as they launched the Negritude movement. The technological achievements of the West were presented as symbols of colonialism and oppression, of a "civilization of machine and cannon." The African Renaissance movement offered humanism as a tool to tame technology and subjugate it to human needs. These writers extolled those qualities denigrated by the West. As Leopold Senghor wrote in "Prayer to the Masks":

*For who would teach rhythm to a dead world
of cannons and machines? Who would give the
shout of joy at dawn to wake the dead and or-
phaned? Tell me, who would restore the mem-
ory of life to men whose hopes are disembow-
eled?"*

But, these were not voices rejecting technology as such. Rather, they sought to point out the misuse of technology and the need to infuse it with the spirit of people. They, therefore, point to alternatives. Here is but one example of their poetic critique of industrialization and technology:

*Eia for those who never invented anything,
Who never explored anything,
Who never conquered anything,
But who abandon themselves to the essence of all
things,
Ignorant of surfaces, caught by the motion of all
things.
Indifferent to conquering but playing the game of
the world...*

CYNTHIA HAMILTON

*Listen to the white world,
Horribly weary from its enormous effort,
Its rebellious joints crack beneath the hard star
It rigid, blue steel penetrates the mystic flesh;
Hear its traitorous victories trumpet its defeats;
Hear the grandiose alibis for its sorry stumbling,
Pity for our conquerors, omniscient and naive!*

Ironically, those in the West who have been responsible for industrial development have been least likely to explore its consequences. Qui possibly the reason is their alienation from the land and nature. Some poets have suggested that the alienation of most immigrant Americans comes from their lack of contact with the mythic beginnings of the land. They contrast this with the experience of Native Americans, who trace their own development alongside that of the land.

The early Negritude critics shed light on the persisting criticism by non-Westerners of environmental destruction and domination and articulate clearly the direction the designers of new paradigms must explore. Those who present an alternative analysis of development must continue where this critique ends. Development, as it has been made manifest in the world, is more than increased industrial production.

Women and Alternative Models

Some feminist scholars suggest that the domination of nature provides a context for viewing the domination of women. They suggest that the status of women actually declines with modernization and industrial development. Their integration into low-wage jobs and their access to a multitude of household appliances has not enhanced women's equality. Not all sectors of the women's movement would agree, of course. Many accept the claim that women can be beneficially integrated into existing development models.

Yet, focusing on women also helps to put the critique of development in perspective. Historically the domination of women was linked to their isolation in the private sphere, away from formal economic work and community politics. A "women's place" was limited to "the home." At one time community life was an extension of home, but with the transformation of neighborhoods and the industrial destruction of settled communities, women lost a very important arena for political action that placed them at the center

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of community-based politics, working on schools, churches, youth activities, and voluntary organizations.

The isolation of suburban living and that of new urban housing projects not only decreased the public space for women's voices, but also has increased their physical vulnerability. It is not mere coincidence that urban women are now fighting back and at the forefront of movements to preserve community and oppose unhealthy development and destructive environmental exposure.

This is particularly true of women of color in urban settings. For them urban environmental issues are a "natural." Because the urban crisis threatens personal health, family, and the neighborhood community, women of color have frequently found themselves in leadership roles. Some analysts have suggested that women of color have inherited the language of participation and political confrontation from the civil rights struggles of the 1960s:

The 1960s revolt of central-city minority neighborhoods invented a political vocabulary which has been embraced not only by service professionals choosing to reside in the central city, but by the suburban dwellers as well. This has induced government agencies and local political leaders to become much more neighborhood-oriented and participation-oriented at least in their rhetorical style (Mollenkoph 1983, p. 331).

The organized environmental efforts by women of color have great potential and are already seen as a threat by corporate elites. For example, the Trilateral Commission identified, over a decade ago, the challenge to corporate interests presented by such social movements. In its 1975 report *The Crisis of Democracy*, the Commission expressed its fear of true democracy,

citizen participation, and civic notions of the "common good":

The vulnerability of democratic government in the United States [thus] comes not primarily from external threats, though such threats are real, nor from internal subversion from the left or the right, although both possibilities could exist, but rather from the internal dynamics of democracy itself in a highly educated, mobilized, and participant society...Previously passive or unorganized groups in the population—Blacks, Indians, Chicanos, white ethnic groups, students, and women—[have] now embarked on concerted efforts to establish their claims to opportunities, positions, rewards, and privileges, which they had not considered themselves entitled before (Sklar 1980, p. 3 and 37).

Clearly, when groups previously left out of formal parliamentary and electoral processes of participation began to demand institutional access or develop new methods of civic involvement, capitalism and elite politics is threatened. The grassroots environmental struggles of women of color reflects just such a struggle for non-corporate alternatives. Non-hierarchical, decentralized structures are frequently advanced by these women. In their struggles, they encourage individual initiative while emphasizing respect for interdependence and cooperation, thus breaking with the both individualistic and bureaucratic extremes of modern life. Their life experience leads them to start questioning the private ownership of common resources and the elite domination of modern "democratic" politics. It encourages them to ask: What are our rights regarding quality of life? What are the rights of those already victimized by environmental abuse?

Conclusion

After years of struggle for civil rights, communities of color see their victories threatened by unjust environmental decisions. Many land-use and siting decisions place municipal landfills, toxic waste dumps, incinerators, and polluting industries in their communities. Persistent problems of lead poisoning in urban areas and pesticide poisoning in rural areas are also key concerns.

communities of color. According to Lois Gibbs, the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste, our society has begun to witness "ordinary people doing extraordinary things." New grassroots leadership is developing to challenge both business executives and political officials who place corporate interests over those of "ordinary" citizens. This struggle is even beginning to transform the agenda of the mostly white, mainstream environmental movement.

It must be understood that human progress in the Western world has largely been seen as synonymous with the alienation of human beings from each other and the natural world.

Addressing these problems require new perspectives, new leaders, new organizations, and new actions.

Changing government policy is no longer enough. The problems of development and unlimited economic growth have emerged from the economic/corporate arena where government is only a junior partner. Current organizing efforts to defend the families, homes, and communities of people of color from environmental degradation need to address this reality directly. They need to not only demand greater accountability from elected officials who are all too often beholden financially to the corporate elite through PAC money and corporate donations, they also need to demand greater democratic control of economic ownership, production, and investment. The environmental justice movement cannot allow questions of land use, land rights, and land ownership to remain the province of corporate decisionmakers. They need instead to create a democratic alternative.

This is beginning to happen. While the public is trained to look for leadership among those considered exceptional in our society, the environmental justice movement is turning this idea on its head. Women and men have been at the forefront of fighting toxics and other environmental problems in low-income, working-class,

The longterm promise of the environmental justice movement also depends on its transcending the limited views of progress, growth, and environmental ethics so deeply embedded in the modern Western worldview, and even common among many of its critics. It must be understood that human progress in the Western world has largely been seen as synonymous with the alienation of human beings from each other and the natural world. Domination and the rise of corporate capitalism can be explained, in part, as a consequence of this alienation. Individuals and societies can no longer stand apart from nature and other people. Overcoming the divisions within society and between society and the natural world must be the goal of the environmental justice movement. Only this struggle against alienation's perversion of humanistic and ecological values can bring us closer to an alternative way of life predicated on a healthy, just, and sustainable relationship to the natural environment. This must become our ultimate task.

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