

# IS ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM TRULY RACIST? JE ENVIRONMENTÁLNY RASIZMUS SKUTOČNE RASISTICKÝ?

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## I. Introduction

In the eighties and nineties the new wave of social awareness emerged. The modernity represented mainly by capitalism, which without a doubt has brought several wonders, started to be questioned. Fulfilment of material and immaterial needs and decrease of global poverty were no longer the question since new burning issues have arisen. The one concerning environment was among the most significant issues. Speaking of environment we mean it in a broader sense including environmental justice particularly environmental racism, which took place in a vivid social discourse during early eighties in USA. As Diaz suggests, the environmental injustice in the United States is given by higher cancer rates, asthma rates, mortality rates and overall poorer health of poor people and people of colour in comparison with their affluent and white counterparts<sup>(1)</sup>. The Environmental Justice Movement, Diaz adds, links these health disparities to higher concentrations of environmental pollution sources in these communities<sup>(2)</sup>. The exposure to environmental harms in low-income, minority communities is disproportional and inherently unjust constituting environmental injustice<sup>(3)</sup>. The notion of justice has several connotations since it is connected to certain prescriptive theory of what is good and right to do. As it is indicated, the concept is based on distributive justice holding that benefits and burdens are to be distributed according to a specific manner. In the case of environmental justice, the key is strict

material equality. The rationale behind this ideal is moral equality of human beings born with the same intrinsic value. Thus, burdens and benefits should be distributed evenly. The environmental reality is although different. There are groups of people who suffer from pollution and environmental harm more than others. The available literature discussing topic of environmental justice suggests that those who are statistically affected by the environmental burdens the most are people of colour. At the same time, literature asserts that the main reason of this affection is not just urbanist, economic, ecologic, cultural reasons or merely coincidence but something much more serious – racism. That brings us to the main goal of our paper which is critical review of the concept of environmental racism. As it will be obvious, it is widely presumed and presented in descriptive manner that environmental racism is a social fact. This although does not result from available data and information. The environmental justice is admittedly one of the most widespread topics in environmentalism. However, we are concerned that findings of the existence of particularly racism may not be reliably proven. As we will try to show further, proponents of the environmental racism theory are possibly biased in their assumptions on racism, which may cause from *cum hoc ergo propter hoc logical fallacy* (with this, therefore because of this). Our aim is not to question the described condition state of environmentally affected people, we just challenge the idea that it is caused on racial basis. As we believe, identifying the problem and the cause correctly is the first step towards the effective and successful solutions. Therefore, we assume that addressing potentially existing bias may significantly assist in not just academic inquiry but also in real life situations.

<sup>(1)</sup> Diaz (2017)

<sup>(2)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(3)</sup> Pellow (2000)

### Abstract (EN)

The paper aims to critically analyse the theory of environmental racism as a part of the concept of environmental justice in order to point out possible overuse of the term racism. Through theoretical analysis, the author tries to prove that labelling any negative impacts of the environmental burden on racial or ethnic minorities with racism is an unnecessary overwork which moreover might be, according to available data, inconsistent with reality.

### Abstrakt (SK)

Príspevok si kladie za úlohu kritickú analýzu teórie environmentálneho rasizmu ako súčasť konceptu environmentálnej spravodlivosti s cieľom poukázať na možné nadužívanie pojmu rasizmus. Prostredníctvom teoretického rozboru sa autor snaží poukázať na skutočnosť, že označovať akékoľvek negatívne dopady environmentálnej záťaže na rasové alebo etnické minority rasizmom je zbytočnou nadpracou, ktorá naviac, vzhľadom na dostupné data, nemusí zodpovedať realite.

### Keywords (EN)

environmental justice, injustice, environmental racism, bias, causality, correlation, critique

### Kľúčové slová (SK)

environmentálna spravodlivosť, nespravodlivosť, environmentálny rasizmus, predpojatosť, kauzalita, korelácia, kritika

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Within the limited space, we will focus mainly on the Bullard's perspective of environmental racism. Choosing Bullard has several reasons. First of all, he was one of the most important persons who initiated the environmental justice movements in early eighties. Secondly, it was Bullard who has formulated requirements and standards for the movement. Without Bullard the renown of environmental justice would be uncertain. It could be objected that environmental justice and environmental racism are solely American concepts which are not relevant in European or specifically Slovak environmental and agricultural politics and practical management of pollution burden or that they are at least not challenged as a problem. It is true that European public debate on this topic could not match that's in USA, however the problem is not non-existing research but the fact that the robust research has begun only recently<sup>(4)</sup>. As we believe, theory of environmental justice is emerging and considering its ideological (universalistic) logic, it will be popularly applied on any place on the planet in the near future. Therefore, even though we focusing solely on American social reality, we suppose that under similar assumption as are present in USA results which are proposed in this paper may be applied anywhere else. In order to achieve the goal of our paper we will assess the notion of racism in terms of its practical consequences. Therefore, we decided to split the paper into four sections, introduction counting as the first one. In the second part we define the concept of environmental racism according to Bullard and others advocates of environmental racism theory. The third one deals with alleged environmental racism and the logic behind it focusing on the first famous case regarding environmental justice issue. This part also discusses logical incoherence in the theory of environmental racism and arguments against conclusion of environmental racism existence mainly based on available evidence. The last part – the conclusion contains main findings.

## II. The theory behind: What is considered as environmental justice and environmental racism?

Environmental justice could be defined in many ways all respecting social justice principles. One of the most popular definitions was, however, provided by Bullard who defined it as *"fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic or socio-economic groups, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programmes and policies."*<sup>(5)</sup> As Bryant asserts, environmental justice refers to certain cultural norms, values, regulations, decision ensuring sustainable communities with safe environment and con-

currently providing the highest potential of all people.<sup>(6)</sup> The term has relatively short existence. It is believed that one of the catalysts which caused grow of the environmental justice movement was increasing visibility of hazardous waste.<sup>(7)</sup> It is dated since eighties when a social movement, focused on the fair geopolitical distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, had been founded. It is indeed one of the fastest growing, and most successful, sectors of the environmental movement (including movements, groups, and networks) in the USA which are according to Schlosberg divided mainly to two major groups: antitoxic movement and the movement against environmental racism.<sup>(8)</sup> Environmental racism is a part of environmental injustice. If we consider environmental justice as a base for problem solving, then there has to be a problem that has to be solved. According to Pellow, environmental racism as a disproportionate impact of environmental hazards is the problem identified.<sup>(9)</sup> Bullard as the "father of environmental justice" in his famous article: "Justice in the 21st Century: Race Still Matters" asserts that environmental racism *"refers to any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or colour."*<sup>(10)</sup> He provides even more specific definition when he insists that the racism is given by providing advantages and privileges to whites while *"perpetrating segregation, underdevelopment, disenfranchisement, and the poisoning of their constituents"*.<sup>(11)</sup> He does not even hesitate to use much more emotional vocabulary suggesting that described could be denoted as genocide.<sup>(12)</sup> Bullard also mentions alleged targeting communities of colour for the siting of unpopular industrial facilities which is according to his opinion dumping on the black communities<sup>(13)</sup> and a form of environmental racism.<sup>(14)</sup> This type of institutionalized racism is present practically everywhere combining public policies and industry practices with only one either explicit or tacit goal: to provide benefits for whites while shifting industry costs to people of colour reinforced by governmental, legal, economic, political, and military institutions (which all are, as a state institution, racial institutions).<sup>(15)</sup> From the stated above it is quite obvious that environmental racism is defined extremely vague potentially including practically any action of officials or whites resulting into negative consequences counted on distributional basis involving racial or ethnic minority. To get a more accurate impression of what is regarded as environmentally racist action let us move on to investigate the phenomenon on the practical example.

<sup>(6)</sup> Bryant (1995)

<sup>(7)</sup> Pulido (1996)

<sup>(8)</sup> Pulido (1996)

<sup>(9)</sup> Pellow (2000)

<sup>(10)</sup> Bullard (2001)

<sup>(11)</sup> Bullard (1993)

<sup>(12)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>(13)</sup> Bullard (2000)

<sup>(14)</sup> Bullard (1993)

<sup>(15)</sup> Bullard (2000)

<sup>(4)</sup> Petrić (2019)

<sup>(5)</sup> Bullard (1999)

### III. For and against the case of environmental racism

It is not too difficult choosing real life cases of alleged environmental racism since the overwhelming number of scholars provide various examples of it. As Paulido implies there are several studies that found correlation between hazardous waste sites and blacks, specifically: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1983; United Church of Christ, 1987; Gelobter, 1992; Wernette and Nieves, 1992; Burke, 1993, Citizens for a Better Environment, 1989; Friedman-Jimenez, 1989; Ong and Blumenberg, 1993; Been, 1993; Hurley, 1995 and Lavelle and Coyle, 1992.<sup>(16)</sup> The origin of the environmental justice movement however could be traced to early eighties when set of protests against the dumping of PCB-laden dirt in a new hazardous waste landfill in Warren County, North Carolina took part.<sup>(17)</sup> Warren County belongs to the most underdeveloped regions in North Carolina and simultaneously the major population is formed by African-Americans. In other words, the incentive of officials was aimed to build hazardous waste landfill in the place where there is majority of African-Americans.<sup>(18)</sup> These are, according to many, unambiguous expressions of environmental racism. There is although strong belief that so-called empirical evidence shows differently. Diaz for example brings out "infamous" Cerrell Report elaborated by advising company Cerrell Associates. The outcome of the report was advisory on what social groups are the most opposing towards Waste-to-Energy conversion plant siting was mainly following: *"The kind of person who is most likely to oppose the siting of a major facility is young or middle aged, college educated, and liberal. For the purposes of this analysis, liberal specifically designates a welfare state orientation in political philosophy. The person least likely to oppose a facility is older, has a high school education or less, and adheres to a conservative, free market orientation."*<sup>(19)</sup> The report among other things stated that *"Members of middle or higher-socioeconomic strata (a composite index of level of education, occupational prestige, and income) are more likely to organize into effective groups to express their political interests and views. All socioeconomic groupings tend to resent the nearby siting of major facilities, but the middle and upper-socioeconomic strata possess better resources to effectuate their opposition. Middle and higher-socioeconomic strata neighbourhoods should not fall at least within the one-mile and five-mile radii of the proposed site."*<sup>(20)</sup> This revelation struck down the proponents of environmental justice theory as it appeared as clear evidence of targeting the poorest and consequently as intentional racism.<sup>(21)</sup> Statistically among the poorest there is significant number of the people of minority (people of colour). Presumably that is why Diaz<sup>(22)</sup> and others jumped to the conclusion of racist practices.

However, if the Cerrell Report is examined in more detail the only thing which is asserted is a description of moods of various groups of people towards hazardous structures which is standard inevitable component of cost-benefit analysis for such a project and investment. Implicating that construction of hazardous structure in a certain community is more or less risky referencing to resources is purely descriptive and it does not give rise to any racial affection or preference. The analysis explicitly highlights potential costs of building such a site in certain territory not by using racial card but possible future costs of legal and other disputes. Consequently, it would be naïve and irrational to expect choosing not to build hazardous structures on the places with the least cumulative negative effects solely on the racial criteria. This approach of using rather non-racial criteria is paradoxically understood as technocratic and it is criticized as approach without broader social valuation of the concerned.<sup>(23)</sup> As an example of technocratic way of thinking it is provided a case where risk managers try to lower the risk of exposure of people harm by accidents using for instance low density areas for siting hazardous waste facilities. The problem, Bailey asserts, is that according to these criteria the ideal place for placing the facility correlates with rural poverty which tends to be settled by high proportion of African Americans.<sup>(24)</sup> It seems to us that Bailey is trying to say that technocracy is not enough racial oriented as it should be. This opinion corresponds with the idea of distributive justice which, in the case of environmental policies, demands even distribution of environmental burdens between white people and people of colour. From the Bailey's perspective it is quite obvious that victimizing smaller number of people in general is less just than victimizing higher number of people provided that significant representation of victims would be Caucasians. The belief that hazardous wastes sites are located in a discriminatory manner mainly in minority communities is although held by a significant part of researchers.<sup>(25)</sup> On the other hand, there are researches that did not find the relationship between the degree of pollution and minority (racial) settlement.<sup>(26)</sup> Downey focusing on the hypothesis of conditionality between poor and coloured neighbourhoods and pollution in his study found out that residential segregation does not necessarily produce environmental racial inequality but surprisingly may in some cases "advantage" minorities by putting them further from environmental hazards in comparison with whites.<sup>(27)</sup> Downey emphasizes that conclusions and evidence produced by the study is nothing new since older researches conducted in Baltimore and Colorado<sup>(28)</sup> yielded comparable results.<sup>(29)</sup> Downey accordingly summarizes that *"neither residential segregation nor racial income inequality does a good job of explaining metropolitan-area variation in environmental inequality outcomes in the US."*<sup>(30)</sup>

<sup>(16)</sup> Pulido (1996)

<sup>(17)</sup> Schlosberg (2007)

<sup>(18)</sup> Bullard (1999)

<sup>(19)</sup> Cerrell Report

<sup>(20)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(21)</sup> Following this logic, Cerrell Report was not discriminatory only towards poor or people of color but also elder, people with lower education, or conservatives.

<sup>(22)</sup> Diaz (2017)

<sup>(23)</sup> Bailey et. al. (1995)

<sup>(24)</sup> Ibid.

<sup>(25)</sup> Lee (1992)

<sup>(26)</sup> Weinberg (1998)

<sup>(27)</sup> Downey (2007)

<sup>(28)</sup> Boone (2002), Downey (2005)

<sup>(29)</sup> Downey (2007)

<sup>(30)</sup> Ibid.

## IV. Conclusion

It is reliably proven that there are communities which are affected by environmental burdens significantly more than others. Often, the impacted minority consists of people of colour. Is there any causation between distributing the burden and racial discrimination? We believe there is not. As the evidence suggests the environmental burdens are not distributed according to the racial key. Moreover, according to Downey and others there are cases where the white majority is affected more than people of colour. The problem may be rooted in the belief that any action with potentially negative effect on non-white communities are racially motivated even though that the rationale for constructing hazardous sites is built on absolutely different criteria. This is implicitly suggested by one of the prominent advocates of environmental racism theory Bailey who asserts that the usual reason of siting hazardous waste facilities in low density areas, often inhabited by people of colour, is lowering the risk of exposure of people harm by accidents. Calling it technocracy, he also indirectly admits paradoxical demand for involvement of racial arguments in impact assessment analysis. In other words, protecting as much people as possible does not meet criteria of environmental justice but if the measure was based on race and higher environmental risks exposure of white people the request of environmental justice would be satisfied. Speaking of empirical data, evidence on systemic and structural discrimination with racial context has not been satisfactorily proven. The only thing which has been proven considering relationship between actors in the environmental justice field is higher or lower tendency to correlate but causation has never been shown. There are, however, different pressing questions connected with the topic of environmental justice which are simultaneously and indirectly arisen and would be interesting to explore. Could for example other circumstances (e.g. self-segregation of certain population based on cultural, social and economic reasons or its hygienical, behavioural and civilization standards) be the cause of the uneven distribution of the environmental burden? Examining latter would certainly yield interesting findings suitable for further discussion.

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