

## CAPITALIZING ON ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE:

### The Polluter-Industrial Complex in the Age of Globalization.

Daniel Faber,  
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The hallmark of environmental injustice is the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. Indeed, researchers and activists have historically focused on the geographic concentration of industrial hazards or nuisances in lower income, non-white communities. Over the last 30 years, however, the definition and scope of environmental justice have broadened considerably. Moreover, what was once regarded as a uniquely American phenomenon, with its close association to American forms of personal and institutional racism, is now juxtaposed with other, non-racial forms of discrimination or oppression in non-American contexts, extending even to trade and military relations between countries. Daniel Faber's latest book continues this trend in environmental justice scholarship, describing environmental justice as "a convergence of seven formerly independent social movements": the civil rights movement, the occupational health and safety movement, the indigenous lands movement, the environmental health movement, the community-based movement for social and economic justice, the human rights, peace and solidarity movements, and the immigrant rights movement. According to Faber, this seemingly motley group of causes shares both common origins and a common cause, and environmental justice is an expression of those unifying commonalities.

Faber sees environmental justice at the forefront of a grander movement for ecological democracy — a reinvigorated democracy that is animated and guided by a more engaged and inclusive, grassroots base committed to economic justice and environmental sustainability. To get there, however, requires that the environmental justice movement develop an organizing "master framework," one that fosters solidarity and an identity based upon a shared understanding of the root causes of environmental and social injustices. For Faber, the root cause is a capitalist economy and marketplace. Or, as he bluntly states, "the problem is profit."

*Capitalizing on Environmental Injustice* is an eco-Socialist analysis of environmental injustice, and it is unapologetically polemical. The primary target of Faber's scathing critique is the Polluter-Industrial Complex (PIC) — a vast and amorphous juggernaut of globalized, corporate interests and their powerful political allies, who pursue a neoliberal agenda to undo the welfare state, dismantle the liberal environmental policy regime, erode workplace health and safety rules, and generally break down any and all barriers to profit. As global competition increases and cheap resources are depleted, the PIC is compelled to seek out new ways to protect and increase profits, either by commodifying new domains of life, or more commonly, by reduc-

ing costs. Reducing costs has meant weakening, eliminating or avoiding environmental and workplace protections, fleeing to places where such protections are minor or non-existent, and most troubling, “colonizing” the state apparatus in order to reconstruct government in a way that is most favorable to corporate profit making. Cost reduction works hand in hand with the displacement of social and ecological costs. Faber argues that the forces that create disproportionate distributions of social and environmental burdens in the U.S. share common origins with the forces that propel the movement of hazardous industries and their wastes to poorer or less developed countries. The PIC is a globalized phenomenon.

*Capitalizing on Environmental Injustice* provides a penetrating view of the interlocking levers of power that enable corporate entities and their power brokers to delay, deflect, undermine and roll back efforts to protect the environment and vulnerable communities, both within the U.S. and abroad. While neoconservatives and the Republican leadership (especially the Bush-Cheney administration) figure prominently in Faber’s critique, this is no partisan attack. Indeed, the insidious nature of the PIC is such that its neoliberal agenda has depended upon the compromises and even complicity of otherwise liberal champions like Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and many national environmental organizations.

While Faber is unsparing in his allocation of blame for the perpetuation of environmental injustice, his prescription for advancing environmental justice and ecological democracy is no less provocative. He argues that in order to recognize the capitalist roots of environmental injustice, the environmental justice movement must shed its strong non-white, racial and ethnic identity, as well as its preoccupation with the pursuit of distributional equity. From Faber’s eco-Socialist perspective, racial discrimination and unequal distribution of environmental burdens are not the “essential causes” of environmental injustice; rather, they are symptoms of deeper political economic dynamics of the capitalist economy. Focusing on these symptoms not only obscures the root causes, but it hinders the creation of wider solidarity by alienating working and middle class whites, who are important allies in the larger struggle for ecological democracy.

It is fair to say that the question of the relative importance of racism and political economy remains an unresolved and central tension of environmental justice scholarship and activism. While it certainly strains credulity to claim that racism is the root of all economic inequalities and environmental problems, it may be equally hard to accept that economic imperatives are at the root of all forms of social stratification and discrimination — racism, sexism, nativism — or that undermining capitalism will cause these problems to somehow evaporate. But Faber’s formulation and critique of the PIC and his eco-Socialist framework require that we understand environmental injustices as fundamentally derivative of capitalist imperatives. The capitalist imperative is the connection between so many disparate problems, and it is the basis for solidarity and an organizing “master framework.”

The strength of *Capitalizing on Environmental Injustice* is its theoretical lens and its conceptualization — and deconstruction — of the Polluter-Industrial Complex. Faber provides us with a much needed “big picture” of environmental injustice. His polemical approach, however, means that the strength of the analysis is somewhat over-dependent on the reader’s shared suspicions about the motives and associations of the political and economic elite, which may not resonate with a less sympathetic readership. This is not a book for the uninitiated (or uncon-

vinced). For students and scholars of environmental justice, however, Faber's book provides a valuable service by bringing together, under one theoretical roof, an ever widening scope of environmental justice scholarship.