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Greening the Media

Is American Individualism Bad for the Environment?

The elusiveness of environmental justice for a freedom-loving country

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Posted Feb 07, 2017



As you walk through the world, you are not yourself. You are not a singularity. You are not an American individualist bootstrapping bull.... You are only borrowing this place from children you will never meet. And the only reason you have an opportunity to do that is because elders took care of it for you. (Native American Artist Cannupa Hanska Luger, of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation)

Individualism grips American minds in a vice of self-deception. Half the population believe they have never used a government program in their lives, when on average, they've benefited from four.¹ Government bureaucrats don't go around advertising their good deeds; they're much too scared to challenge the rough-hewn values of the heartland. But the military is our biggest employer of young people and everyone is eligible for public school and uses sidewalks and roads. Libertarian delusions are deeply inaccurate.

But imagining that comfort and success result from personal qualities has been a consistent and powerful ideology through most of this country's history. Of course, there was popular recognition of good government works during the prosperous years between the end of World War II and the 1970s (the GI Bill, the expansion of education, the end of segregation, the salvation of the bald-head eagle, and so on). But with the ascendancy of the New Right under President Ronald Reagan, big government became a pariah (even as Reagan built up his government bureaucracy to record, bloated levels).

Erased from Americans' welcome mats, government programs went into a kind of hiding—still working, but out of sight, and suddenly vulnerable. As the historian Jefferson Cowie explains, "Policies that are largely invisible to the citizenry also seem more disposable."² This makes it easy for many Americans to disavow the politics, collective struggles, and public funding that have given them tax credits, leisurely weekends, clean water, the internet, and disability rights. It also makes it easier for right-wing politicians to eliminate policies that aid the very people who voted for them.

So how do we square American ideology with the urgent need to save our planet from the ecological crisis? Intergenerational care is a hallmark of sustainable green living. Thinking about the health and well-being of our children is an obvious, personal choice. But the timeline needs to stretch well beyond the immediate future.

As we noted in our August 2016 column, the velocity at which the Earth is warming is fueled by human activity; but humans have no control over its eventual pace. We can't simply turn off global warming for our children's lifetimes, because the carbon already in the atmosphere prolongs ongoing warming. The carbon we emit will be in the atmosphere forever.

We can, however, reduce and capture carbon emissions. To do so, we'll need a new sense of time and politics that aligns intergenerational care with the Earth's timeframe. And that means thinking about other peoples' children, their children's children, and on into the future.

The familiar refrain of “not-in-my-back-yard” (NIMBY) objections to state intervention remains powerful. Why? Because it is orchestrated to the beat of white privilege. The latter takes perhaps its clearest form in environmental racism—the noxious custom of locating sources of toxic emissions and disposal in or near communities of color.

A recent study of chemical plant emissions in the US found disproportionate numbers of poor Black and Latino communities living in “fenceline zones” adjacent to these facilities: the inner-most tenth of an area from which there is no possible escape from a leak or explosion. The percentage of African Americans living in fenceline zones is 75 percent higher than for the total population; for Latinos, the figure is 60 percent higher than the norm.

Our Vice President, Mike Pence, acted responsibly last year as Indiana Governor in rushing to the aid of Greentown to clean up its waterways when harmful levels of lead were discovered. But when even higher levels of lead, and arsenic, were found in East Chicago, Indiana, he did nothing. The difference: “Greentown’s population of 2,400 is 97% white. In contrast, the over 28,000 residents of East Chicago, Indiana are 43% African American and 51% Hispanic or Latino.” And given the chance to declare East Chicago an emergency zone that would have brought federal assistance to the community, Pence refused (barely a month before his inauguration as VP).

American individualism is a bad source of ideas for addressing global warming and environmental degradation, both because it misreads the real role of government in our lives and because it nourishes ongoing white supremacy.

We need a different, more inclusive American ideology. The search for that new paradigm must begin by identifying environmental racism and eliminating it.

Hopeful signs stem from Americans who commit their communities to ridding the country of such injustices. From Flint Michigan to East Los Angeles, from Louisiana’s Cancer Alley to the water protectors fighting the Dakota Access Pipeline in Standing Rock North Dakota, strong forces stand for environmental justice. They are making significant progress towards a lasting change.

These organizing efforts must inspire this big-hearted, freedom-loving country to welcome back a government willing to build up our collective well-being—seven generations onward and more.

Notes

1. Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 224.
2. *Ibid.*



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