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Which Environmental Social Work? Environmentalisms, Social Justice, and the Dilemmas Ahead

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Which Environmental Social Work? Environmentalisms, Social Justice, and the Dilemmas Ahead

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Abstract

Social work has traditionally been concerned with the welfare of humans, a mission that some scholars want to expand to include other beings. How can concern for nonhumans and the natural environment best be integrated with the profession's commitment to social justice? Although commentators have made several proposals, few have critically examined the dilemmas or trade-offs that may await a more expansive social work. Examining such challenges in environmental movements past and present, we identify three logics by which some varieties of environmentalism have perpetuated inequity among humans. We then explore how diverse movements for environmental justice—which make equity among humans central to environmental activism—offer a path forward. Environmental justice foregrounds dilemmas raised by integrating concern for humans and nonhumans, and it offers principles for addressing these dilemmas that are rooted in a living tradition of practice. This makes environmental justice the best paradigm for environmental social work.

Introduction

How can greater consideration of nonhumans be best integrated into social work values? For most of its history, the social work profession has been concerned with human suffering, human striving, and justice among humans. In recent decades, some social work scholars have argued that these concerns are too narrow. They contend that some nonhumans—especially other species but also other "natural" entities like water bodies, land features, or even nature as a whole—deserve the profession's attention as well (Dominelli 2012; Gray and Coates 2012; Besthorn 2013; Närhi and Matthies 2016). In calling for various environmentalist reframings of social work, these scholars are forcing a critical reexamination of a professional value so fundamental that it had largely gone unarticulated before. In this article, we examine the stakes in this proposed paradigm shift for the humans that social work has traditionally served. We argue that the crucial question is not whether social workers should promote the welfare of nonhumans (they should), but how environmentalist values should be integrated with the profession's commitment to social justice.[1] In short: Which of the proposed environmentalist paradigms is best suited to social work?

Proposals for social workers to attend to the needs of nonhumans have been put forward under several banners, including green social work (Dominelli 2012), environmental justice (Hoff and Rogge 1996; Erickson 2018), postanthropocentric social work (Bozalek and Pease 2021), and ecosocial work (Matthies, Närhi, and Ward 2001; Molyneux 2010; Rambaree, Powers, and Smith 2019). In this article, we use "environmental social work" as an umbrella term for these various proposals and the growing scholarship on social work and the physical environment (Krings et al. 2020). In the eyes of many proponents of environmental social work—including the authors—an exclusive focus on human needs appears plainly shortsighted, perhaps even prejudiced. Some point to the inextricable entanglement of human needs with the welfare of other species or with the physical environment as a whole (Faver and Muñoz 2013; Hanrahan 2014). Others draw on philosophical critiques of anthropocentrism, arguing that the welfare of nonhumans is inherently important regardless of its relevance to human needs and, thus, that nonhumans deserve social workers' concern in their own right (Coates 2003b; Besthorn 2013; Rambaree et al. 2019; Bozalek and Pease 2021). But the pros and cons of an environmentalist mandate for social work have not been much debated.

This article weighs the stakes in proposals for environmental social work from a new angle, exploring what environmental movements can teach us about how best to integrate concern for nonhumans into social work. First, we identify three logics by which some varieties of environmentalism have produced or exacerbated social inequity: rationalizing injustice, obscuring injustice, and deprioritizing the struggle for social justice. We argue that the inequitable effects of these logics have hinged less on intention than implementation—less on environmentalists' values or intentions than on how they put their values into practice. Second,

[1] Although commonly taken as a core value of social work, "social justice" is often used vaguely, and its meaning has been much debated (Reisch 2002; Bonnycastle 2011; O'Brien 2011; Kiesel and Abdill 2019). In the article, we use this term broadly to refer to justice among human beings, distinguishing social justice from concern with fair or proper relations between human and nonhuman entities. Although we do not intervene in debates about the meaning of social justice, our discussion of the environmental justice principles of distributive justice, procedural justice, and recognition also pertains to the more general pursuit of social justice in social work.

we plot a path forward, drawing lessons from movements for environmental justice, commonly defined as fairness in the distribution of environmental burdens and amenities as well as in decision-making processes regarding environmental concerns (Bullard 2004; Schlosberg 2007; Krings and Copic 2021). Examining cases in the United States and India, we show how environmental justice movements offer both a set of principles and a tradition of practice focused on confronting practical dilemmas raised by integrating environmentalism and social justice. Environmental justice is the best paradigm for social work because of its emphasis on prioritizing social justice in the implementation of environmentalism.

Why is a new paradigm needed?

The emergence of environmental social work need not be seen as breaking with the profession's traditional concerns. There are historical continuities: Progressive Era forebears of the profession, including Jane Addams and settlement house participants, sought to address industrial pollution in urban neighborhoods and to improve access to green spaces (Addams [1910] 1998; Närhi and Matthies 2016; Gottlieb 2005). In a more philosophical vein, many scholars have noted that the profession's hallmark paradigm of "person in environment" seems ready-made for engagement with environmentalist values, even if it has traditionally emphasized the social environment over the physical environment (Hoff 1994; Besthorn 1997; Coates 2003a; Kemp 2011; Teixeira and Krings 2015). Moreover, much of the growth in environmental scholarship and practice can be seen as responding to issues—such as climate change, pollution, or natural disasters—that disproportionately affect the marginalized communities that social workers have long served (Mason and Rigg 2019; Rao 2020; Rao, Doherty, and Teixeira 2022).

Yet a growing number of scholars have called for an environmentalist transformation in the profession's core theory and values (e.g., Besthorn 2012, 2013; Gray, Coates, and Hetherington 2012; Peeters 2012).[2] Proposals for new paradigms vary, and the differences between them are not always clear. What they share, however, is the argument that the profession's dominant conceptual frameworks, methods, and pedagogies are inadequate for contending with the challenges of extending social work's mission to include nonhumans.

Many of those calling for a paradigm shift have framed this as a shift from an anthropocentric paradigm, concerned exclusively with human welfare, to an ecocentric paradigm that would make humans one of many targets of social work intervention, alongside other species and the natural world more generally (Besthorn 2002; McKinnon 2008; Ferreira 2010; Jones 2010; Gray and Coates 2012; Faver and Muñoz 2013; Ramsay and Boddy 2017; Klemmer and McNamara 2019; Bozalek and Pease 2021; Panagiotaros et al. 2022). For proponents of ecocentrism, this does not entail turning away from social work's traditional concern with social justice. Rather, building on analyses in the ecofeminism and deep ecology literatures that show how the roots of the exploitation of people and nature are linked, these scholars argue that the solutions to social and environmental problems are also inherently linked (Coates 2003a; Besthorn 2013; Coates and Gray 2018; Klemmer and McNamara 2019). Thus, when Coates and Gray (2018) tie anthropocentrism to Western "domination," they have in mind not only human domination of

[2] For an in-depth review of terms that are widely used to describe approaches to social work that incorporate ecological justice principles, see Ramsay and Boddy (2017).

nature but also patriarchy, racism, colonialism, capitalism, and other ways in which some humans dominate others (see also Coates 2003a; Norton 2012; Besthorn 2013; Boetto 2017; Bozalek and Pease 2021).[3] From this perspective, questions about prioritizing humans vis-à-vis nonhumans miss the point: challenging inequity between humans and nonhumans is also the most transformative path to challenging inequity among humans.

Proponents of ecocentrism have criticized some other proposed paradigms as insufficiently radical for environmental social work. In particular, some have argued that environmental justice is an inadequate paradigm because, in Besthorn's (2013, 36) words, "the philosophical foundation of its ethical activity is firmly situated, first and foremost, in human welfare and the human experience."[4] "Environmental justice" is one of the most widely used terms in calls for more attention to the physical environment in social work, and it is not always seen as contrary to ecocentrism (Hoff and Rogge 1996; Miller, Hayward, and Shaw 2012; Dominelli 2013; Teixeira and Krings 2015; Philip and Reisch 2015; Erickson 2018; Teixeira, Mathias, and Krings 2019). Yet, for some scholars, environmental justice is too anthropocentric for social work because it emphasizes the impacts of environmental problems on humans, and on inequality between humans, rather than giving central place to the value of nature as an end in itself.

Contrary to this reasoning, this article makes the case that environmental justice is the variety of environmentalism best suited for social work. But it does not directly refute ecocentrists' claims. Rather, we shift the focus from the philosophical foundations of environmental intervention to its practical consequences—especially its consequences for the marginalized humans that social workers have long served. From this angle, we show that, even when the exploitation of humans and nature shares common roots, this may not point to any synergistic, win-win solution. On the contrary, through an analysis of times when environmentalism and social justice have come into conflict, we demonstrate that common enemies do not necessarily entail common cause, particularly when one considers the more concrete, tactical details of making social change. As such, there is a need to consider scenarios in which the practical consequences of implementing environmental social work may, despite ideals of confluence and synergy, harm the marginalized populations that social workers have traditionally served.

Social work needs a new paradigm to contend with the theoretical, ethical, and practical challenges of extending its mission to include nonhumans. But the main reason we need this paradigm is not that our existing frameworks are too narrow or inflexible. Rather, we need a new paradigm because including nonhumans in our mission will lead to new dilemmas for which our existing paradigms are unprepared. Historically, environmental justice movements are rooted in efforts to tangle with such dilemmas, producing principles and a tradition of practice that are

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[3] This analysis builds on ecofeminist and deep ecology traditions in environmental ethics (Besthorn 2013; Klemmer and McNamara 2019). Ecofeminists have criticized the dualistic thinking that undergirds both patriarchy and the domination of nature by humans, especially in Western culture (Plumwood 1986; Warren 1987; Salleh 1997). Deep ecology elaborates ecological principles such as interrelatedness, diversity, and symbiosis into a broad ethical and political program, with ecocentrism as a central paradigm (Drengson 1995; Naess 1973; Sessions 1987).

[4] Notably, in rejecting environmental justice as a paradigm for social work, Besthorn (2013, 37) still maintains that he and other proponents of ecocentrism are not "anti-environmental justice." On the contrary, in an argument that parallels that of Coates and Gray (2018), he holds that embracing radical ecocentrism is the best, if not the only, way to advance environmental and social justice.

uniquely attuned to the challenges of integrating environmentalism and social justice. This is what makes environmental justice the right paradigm for environmental social work.

How some environmentalisms conflict with social justice: Rationalizing, obscuring, deprioritizing

In examining the record of environmental movements, we can learn valuable lessons from cases in which environmentalism has been at odds with the pursuit of social justice. Some of these varieties of environmentalism share terminology or genealogical links with current proposals for environmental social work, but our aim is not to point a finger at any particular agenda or paradigm. Rather, we seek to identify patterns in how care for nature has, at times, come into conflict with social justice—patterns that may indicate potential pitfalls ahead for social work. We identify three such patterns, each of which may overlap with others in practice but nonetheless operates by a distinct logic: rationalizing injustice, obscuring injustice, and deprioritizing efforts for social justice. Across these three logics, we point to a gap between intentions and consequences; many activists who claimed to blend concern for the environment with social justice nonetheless ended up furthering inequity instead. Thus, we argue that any environmentalist paradigm for social work must emphasize implementation.

Rationalizing injustice: culling the herd to save the planet

From their early roots in the heyday of colonial expansion, Western environmentalist movements have been dogged by the notion that caring for nature may be incompatible with advancing social justice (Grove 1996; Greenough and Tsing 2003). Thus, at times, a subset of environmentalist thinkers and movements has promoted manifestly unjust policies and practices as necessary steps toward an environmentally desirable future. A paradigmatic case is the eugenicist strain of the early twentieth-century American conservation movement. The elite members of the Boone and Crockett Club, the first US conservationist organization, advocated for eugenics as a means of preserving the best nature had to offer (Allen 2013). They sought to rescue the elites of nature: the California redwoods, the bison herds, the moose (Brechin 1996). Working with an early variety of survival-of-the fittest evolutionary theory, they believed that, within each species, it was crucial to preserve the "germplasm" (in today's terms, something like the genetic code) of the best specimens (Grant 1916). For humans as for nonhumans, this preservation meant not only ensuring the reproduction of the best specimens (i.e., themselves) but also preventing "mongrelization" with the unfit from deteriorating the species as a whole (Grant 1916; Allen 2013). These environmentalists saw a pattern of inequality in nature, and they sought to sustain that same pattern in society.

American eugenicist conservationists are arguably outliers among environmentalists, in that they made inequality their agenda. More commonly, environmentalist arguments for inequitable policy have pitched it as a regrettable, but necessary, means to an end. Often, such arguments have appealed to the resource limitations, or "carrying capacity," of Earth. Coming in the wake of Rachel Carson's (1962) landmark Silent Spring, the biologist Paul Ehrlich's The Population Bomb (1968, 45) argued that global environmental deterioration—including pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity—was ultimately traceable to a single cause: "too many

humans." The book helped to make overpopulation a central focus for environmentalists, who often located the problem of population growth primarily in "underdeveloped" countries (Robertson 2012). Ehrlich (1968, xi) argued in favor of forced sterilization in these countries (but not wealthier, whiter nations) and proposed that the United States cease food aid to nations where human populations had too far exceeded the Earth's carrying capacity. Such proposals received strong backlash from feminists and Black leaders, and Ehrlich and others eventually revised their positions to focus more on high levels of consumption in wealthier nations (Robertson 2012). Yet even criticism of overconsumption can lead to fears of the environmental consequences of equality—of the underdeveloped "catching up" with the consumption of the developed. Such fears have at times served to justify opposition to immigration, insofar as it might facilitate the economic aspirations of the poor (Silliman 1999; Robertson 2012; Hopkins 2018).

In part as a result of criticism of their antiequity implications, claims about overpopulation figure less centrally in mainstream environmentalist agendas today. Yet those who do still sound such alarms, even when openly disavowing racism and classism, sometimes reproduce the core logics of the overpopulation panic of the 1960s.When environmentalist scholars, wilderness groups, and animal rights activists advocate for an emphasis on smaller family size to be added to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, they commonly point out that they are not targeting less-wealthy families or people of color (e.g., Berke 2022; Dillard and Currie 2019; Shank 2019). Indeed, some suggest that, because the poor are more likely to have big families, reducing family size is a way to fight poverty (Dillard and Currie 2019).Yet the negative correlation between wealth and family size also means that, in practice, efforts aimed at reducing family size will disproportionately target the poor. Claims not to discriminate may reflect activists' intentions, but they are belied by any serious consideration of consequences.

Obscuring injustice: Branding capitalism green

For social workers, who make the pursuit of social justice a central aim, the varieties of environmentalism discussed above may appear transparently oppressive and, therefore, comparatively easy to avoid. More dangerous for the field are those strains of environmentalism that—although not calling for the exploitation, removal, sterilization, or culling of marginalized populations—nonetheless obscure the inequitable effects of policies or practices behind an aura of earth friendliness. In some cases, such masking of social injustice may be undertaken as a deliberate branding or public relations strategy (Swyngedouw 2007). But broad appeals to sustainability and greening can also give cover to the inequitable consequences of well-intentioned policies and initiatives, offering legitimacy to interventions at odds with social work values (Krings and Schusler 2020).

This logic can be seen in the role of the concept of sustainability in some environmental politics. The concept of sustainability appeals to many because it seems to obviate any clash between environmental conservation and economic growth. Sustainability is often operationalized as a "triple bottom line" that promises social equity, environmental integrity, and economic prosperity—also known as people, planet, and profit or the "three Ps" (Elkington 1994). Likewise, sustainable development promises to lift people out of poverty through economic development that also preserves natural resources for future generations (Brundtland

Commission 1987; United Nations 2015). Yet, in practice, many initiatives branded as sustainable (including everything from high-end condominium projects to chocolate bars) de-emphasize or neglect the social equity aspect of the triple bottom line (Swyngedouw 2007; Dale and Newman 2009). At the heart of this problem is a strain of environmentalism that Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier (2014) call the "gospel of eco-efficiency," which teaches that sustainable technologies can make economic growth environmentally friendly and improve social welfare without political struggle. When approached in this way, the "win-win-win" optimism of sustainability can foreclose critical questions about power relations, inequality, and exclusion (Swyngedouw 2007; Krings and Schusler 2020).

Within environmental movements, the rhetoric of sustainability and apolitical greening can obscure social injustices in multiple ways. In some cases, such rhetoric can mask the root causes of contamination and pollution while displacing responsibility for social action onto local groups or individuals. In a political ethnography of a southwest Detroit environmental justice campaign, Krings (2015) describes how a local environmental organization—whose executive board included representatives from polluting industries located in the neighborhood—supported individualized tactics such as recycling and neighborhood tire cleanups as opposed to structural interventions like challenging zoning rules, pushing industries to reform their practices, or advocating for the Environmental Protection Agency to increase regulations and enforcement. Despite the community's high rates of asthma and other respiratory diseases, their strategic and tactical choices were constrained, resulting in the organization's decision to focus on status quo collaborative interventions and individual actions rather than direct action or other conflict-based approaches. This version of sustainability led to the neglect of issues that might pit local residents against area polluters, or "people" against "profit."

In other cases, government officials, planners, and developers can use claims to "greenness" to elude critical questions about negative impacts on local communities or to temper local resistance to industrialization and urban development (Swyngedouw 2007; Checker 2011; Markus and Krings 2020; Willett, Tamayo, and Kern 2020). Such is the case in green gentrification, in which the cleanup of contamination (e.g., brownfields, polluted rivers) or the installation of environmental amenities (e.g., bike trails, gardens) lifts property values and rents, thus contributing to the displacement or exclusion of poor residents and communities of color (Checker 2011; Krings and Schusler 2020; Krings and Copic 2021). For example, Checker (2011) describes an initiative to repurpose land in Harlem to create a new park. Long-term residents, who were predominantly Black, interpreted the park proposal as another move to accelerate gentrification— in part because its planning process prioritized the interests of newer, whiter residents. City government framed active policing and the enforcement of noise regulations within the park as consistent with green initiatives, but some Black residents interpreted the use of this rhetoric as an attempt to increase state surveillance. Checker (2011, 212) argues that, in such projects, sustainable development continued the inequitable legacy of urban renewal in Harlem, becoming only the latest "iteration of historic discourses that legitimated uneven development."

These cases show that the environmentalist obscuration of social injustice can happen in both intentional and unintentional ways. For example, in the Harlem park example above, Checker (2011) describes how one local environmental group struggled with how best to prioritize social

justice in the context of limited options. Staff in the organization recognized that the city's technocratic discourse of sustainability foreclosed questions of equity. Yet they also saw opportunities to increase access to green spaces, decrease pollution, and improve the environment for long-term residents, including people of color. Thus, the organization's leaders opted to partner with the city on multiple greening initiatives, including the park, while also seeking to mitigate harm and "soften the potential blows" to current residents (Checker 2011, 220). In a capitalist economy and a city characterized by high economic inequality, their options were highly constrained. Such quandaries rarely allow for a perfect solution, and the inevitability of these trade-offs only increases the need to be wary of how discourses of "greening" may obscure them.

Deprioritizing justice: Marginalizing activism by and for the marginalized

Whereas both logics described thus far concern the inequitable aims and effects of environmental movements, the third logic concerns organizing processes within movements. At times, activists in some environmental movements (often labeled "traditional" or "mainstream") have marginalized environmental movements organized primarily by people of color and working-class activists, who sought to bring greater attention to the needs of their own communities. A classic case can be found in the history of the US environmental justice movement. Protest movements led by minoritized racial groups against the impacts of industrial pollution and other environmental hazards were long ignored by predominantly white US environmental organizations (Pezzullo and Sandler 2007). Neighborhood based and race-based causes were considered less important than the environmentalisms of predominantly white activists, who fought on behalf of the Earth itself. Implicit in these framings is the prioritization of human free "wilderness" over the places where humans live, particularly cities. These sentiments solidified environmentalism in law and in practice that lacked attention to the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues (Purdy 2017).

Conflicts over the racial makeup and agenda of American environmental movements can be traced to their origins in the early twentieth century Progressive Era (Daniels 2009). In US cities, the "city beautiful," "urban parks and playgrounds," and "garden cities" movements aimed to bring nature back to urban environments affected by rapid industrialization, booming immigration, and lack of government regulations (Daniels 2009). Jane Addams's urban environmental work overlapped with some of these movements (Gottlieb 2002). Simultaneously, environmental conservation became a focus of the federal government, which ultimately resulted in the creation of national parks.[5] Conservation activists prioritized what Purdy (2015) calls a "woods-and-waters" view of environmentalism that, he argues, "cared more about 'animal people' than about some human beings." What some call the "cult of wilderness" has maintained

[5] At this early stage, wilderness environmentalism was marked by debate about the relative needs of humans and nonhumans, with preservationists like John Muir advocating for the intrinsic importance of wildlife and wilderness and conservationists like Gifford Pinchot arguing that care for nonhumans should serve human uses and benefits (DeLuca and Demo 2001; Daniels 2009). These debates prefigured later discussion of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism in environmental ethics. What the conservationists and preservationists shared, however, was a willingness to put the "protection" of nonhuman animals and pristine wilderness over the rights of Indigenous peoples and other oppressed racial groups. In some cases, this willingness was tied to the eugenicist ideologies described above (Allen 2013).

this emphasis on preserving pristine natural spaces and nonhuman animals over improving the urban environments where most people live (Martinez-Alier 2015).

With its emergence into the mainstream in the 1960s, American environmentalism continued to develop along two major tracks. Rachel Carson and others drew large-scale attention to the human and ecological impacts of pesticides and polluting industries, spurring landmark federal legislation, including the Clean Air Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act (1972). Although this predominantly white-led antitoxics movement is often held up as a predecessor to the US environmental justice movement, many movements by Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander communities took shape along a similar, if not earlier, timeline (Taylor 2014; Perkins 2021). Black communities mobilized around antiwaste, antidumping, and anticontamination campaigns (Bullard 1990, 1993; Bryant and Mohai 2019). Perhaps the most well-known example was the 1982 campaign to protest the siting of a toxic waste facility in a predominately Black and low-income community in Warren County, North Carolina (Chavis 1993; McGurtry 2007). In addition, in the 1970s, movements such as Black ecology and apartheid ecology argued that a separate environmentalism focused on pressing issues in Black communities was necessary (Hare 1970; Santana 2002). Indigenous activists protected their sacred sites, including their lands and water, from threats caused by heavy mining, nuclear testing, and oil and gas pipelines (LaDuke 1999; Estes 2019; Cole and Foster 2000).Chicano and Latinx communities organized to mitigate health impacts caused by exposure to toxic contaminants at home and at work (Pulido 1996; Perkins 2021). Asian American communities used mutual aid strategies and organized for better working conditions to address issues, including seafood contamination, air and land contamination, and lack of access to clean water or arable land (Sze 2004; Krings, Spencer, and Jimenez 2013). These early environmental justice campaigns were concerned about the distribution of environmental contamination, as well as the lack of respect for, and basic recognition of, their people and ways of life (Agyeman et al. 2016).

Like the urban environmentalism of the Progressive Era, these movements focused on environments where people "live, work, and play." This broad focus was driven by the recognition that poor people of color and the working class generally face greater exposure to environmental health hazards through their jobs, living in proximity to contaminating facilities or natural resource extraction sites, and exposure to toxic chemicals in their households, food, and some commercial products (Alston 2010; Faber 2017). At the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, environmental leaders of color came together to develop a set of principles incorporating social, racial, and economic justice with commitments to protect the environment.[6] Policy victories included the adoption of federal legislation establishing environmental justice offices and a mandate that all federal agencies must address the effects of disparate adverse environmental conditions on minoritized and low-income populations (Exec. Order No. 12898, 59 F.R. 7629 [1994]). Although these policies have been

[6] As Miller and colleagues (2012) note, these principles include some strikingly ecocentric language, including commitments to "the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity, and the interdependence of all species" (Alston 2010, 16). Later scholarship on environmental justice has sought to build on this early emphasis on the intrinsic value of nonhumans (Pellow 2018), and others have called for ecojustice as a more ecocentric alternative (Kopnina 2016).

helpful to some communities and campaigns, the implementation of them remains uneven (Glicksman and Camacho 2020).

Despite this growing movement and its associated policy victories, the American environmental movement continued to marginalize people of color, urban areas, and the environmental justice movement well into the twenty-first century (Purdy 2017). From the founding of the Sierra Club to the antitoxics movement, "mainstream" American environmentalism has been framed as a fight to keep pristine natural spaces untouched, to protect idyllic suburban and rural communities from toxic threats, and to promote wilderness as a source of salvation from the ills of industrial society (Purdy 2017; Shutkin 2000).The Sierra Club and other "Big Green" organizations began reckoning with this history in the 1990s, in part by seeking to form collaborations with environmental justice groups. Yet recent movements for racial justice, particularly in the United States, have led to renewed reckoning with environmental organizations' white-dominated membership and leadership. Some members of the Sierra Club argue that it should have more vocally rejected anti-immigrant rhetoric and allied with immigrant rights groups (Hopkins 2018). There has also been a backlash against continued veneration of figures like John Muir, an early critic of anthropocentrism and founder of the Sierra Club, who espoused racist ideologies (Fears and Mufson 2020; Brune 2020).[7] More generally, as we discuss in detail below, the marginalization of environmental justice movements continues via ideologies that privilege "global" struggles against climate change over the efforts of "local" marginalized groups to protect their own people from harm.

From intentions to implementation

In considering what lessons to draw from these cautionary tales, it may help to reflect on the relations between intentions and effects in the cases described above. Across all three logics, this theme continually reappears, but in contrasting ways. Thus, we have some environmentalists, like the eugenicists, who deliberately worked to perpetuate inequity. We also have examples in which intentions with regard to other humans were ambivalent or unclear, as with those who seek to conserve wilderness without explicit agendas for racial or class equity. But the main story here, especially for social work, can be found in the many examples of environmentalists who claimed to value social justice yet ended up furthering inequity instead. The overpopulation activists' arguments for forced sterilization and reduced food aid seem patently racist or classist in hindsight, but many saw themselves as working for the ultimate benefit of historically oppressed populations. Many definitions of sustainability explicitly include language about social welfare, yet this same rhetoric is also employed in projects that marginalize or even displace people.

The key lessons for social work are about priorities and implementation. Across our examples, we find that not putting relations between humans first has often led to oppositions between

[7] 7. For recent position statements and descriptions of policies meant to address these issues, see Brune (2020). On the legacy of John Muir, the Sierra Club executive director writes: "The most monumental figure in the Sierra Club's past is John Muir. Beloved by many of our members, his writings taught generations of people to see the sacredness of nature. But Muir maintained friendships with people like Henry Fairfield Osborn, who worked for both the conservation of nature and the conservation of the white race." See also NRDC (2023), Lanham (2021), and Leber (2020).

environmentalism and social justice. In sustainable development, for example, a "triple bottom line" can allow economic growth or environmental conservation to supplant the pursuit of social justice. The alternative concept of "just sustainabilities," by contrast, places human-human relations at the center, making equity among humans the starting point for the pursuit of other aims—the bottommost line of the bottom lines (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003).

Ultimately, however, the effects of such concepts or values will depend on how they are put into practice. Claims of theoretical synergy between social justice and environmentalism have too often been belied by the social impacts of actual environmental movements. It is in the implementation of environmentalisms by activists and government agencies, more than in the treatises of philosophers, that the politics of ideas like overpopulation, ecocentrism, or just sustainability will be decided.[8] Thus, in choosing an environmentalist paradigm for social work, it is crucial to ask which paradigms best equip social workers to integrate social justice and environmentalist values on an ongoing basis, pursuing synergy as a practical accomplishment requiring continual critique and revision, rather than as a function of ideals or intent.

The environmental justice tradition: Principles and practice

In this section, we examine environmental justice movements more closely, critically analyzing the efforts of activists in the United States and India to make social justice central to environmental politics. As noted above, the concept of environmental justice originated with activists, many of whom were people of color, who were responding to racism in "mainstream" American environmental movements, which were dominated by white activists (Bullard 1993; Taylor 1993; Pezzullo and Sandler 2007; Sze and London 2008). These early environmental justice activists challenged other environmental activists and organizations to support those "mobilizing to protect their neighborhoods from garbage dumps or lead smelters" (Bullard 1993, 31). They argued that such people—whose survival was disproportionately affected by proliferating environmental hazards—should be central actors in environmental movements (Taylor 1993). Meanwhile, in their own movements, environmental justice activists developed theoretical and practical tools for embracing this challenge.

Today, the environmental justice tradition extends well beyond its US origins, with environmental justice protests identifiable around the globe (Temper, Del Bene, and Martinez-Alier 2015). In part, this global expansion has occurred through convergence between the US environmental justice movement and endogenous protest movements that similarly seek to redress inequities in the distribution of environmental resources and hazards. These movements include what Martinez-Alier (2003) has called "environmentalisms of the poor," a category he takes to include protests of environmental racism in the United States as well as protests to preserve mangrove-based livelihoods in Honduras, protests of the oil extraction industry in the Niger Delta, and protests of single-species tree plantations in Malaysia. Many of these movements emerged simultaneously with the US environmental justice movement, yet today

[8] Here, we echo Brodkin's (1990) argument, building on Lipsky (1980), that policy implementation should be analyzed as "policy politics—a continuation of conflicts to define social policy" (Brodkin 1990, 107). This may be even more true of the politics of the various environmentalist paradigm shifts proposed for social work, which are often ambiguous in their stances regarding philosophical debates about operationalization, let alone regarding application to dilemmas that may arise in practice.

they are often given the broad label of "environmental justice." Another important part of this global expansion has been the elaboration and critical revision of an environmental justice "frame" as a shared set of principles and practices (Walker 2009; Schlosberg 2013; Temper et al. 2018). Although the proliferation of the environmental justice label has greatly diversified what counts as environmental justice, the discursive elaboration of the environmental justice frame has served to give this diversity ideological coherence around a common problem: how to prioritize social justice in the conduct of environmental activism. This common problem serves to unify global environmental justice movements as a robust tradition of activism.[9]

In comparison with the "mainstream" environmentalisms described above, environmental justice movements have placed greater emphasis on social justice in the means, not only the ends, of environmental intervention. Early protest and scholarship centered on a distributive notion of justice— especially by calling attention to environmental racism embedded in the distribution of industrial pollution and hazardous waste sites (Bullard 1990; Bryant 2003). However, activists soon recognized that any policy gains would be illusory without greater justice in policy-making and implementation processes (Sze and London 2008). They have thus called for greater justice in the means, or processes, by which the ends of distributive justice are to be achieved. Such process-oriented aspects of environmental justice include "procedural justice," or justice in representation and participation, as well as justice in recognition of the concerns of affected populations, who are often culturally and racially marginalized.[10] Although activists seek both of these forms of justice in policy-making and governmental processes, they are also applied to organizing processes within environmental justice coalitions (Krings and Copic 2021). Thus, they offer a template for how social workers can approach the process of environmental intervention as well.

Procedural justice: crossing scales through coalitions

In demanding that "mainstream" environmental movements give greater attention to social justice, environmental justice activists have sought to uplift the causes of those fighting for their own health and survival (Taylor 2014). This emphasis contrasts with the prevalent discourse of "mainstream" environmental activism, which focuses on broadening ethical concern beyond the narrow bounds of one's own community or identity group (Singer 1981; Naess 2008).[11] Thus, the familiar environmentalist adage "think globally, act locally" expresses the notion that, even if one's activism takes place within one's own community, it should ultimately be aimed at

[9] In calling environmental justice a tradition centered on a common problem, we borrow from MacIntyre's (1981, 222) notion of a moral tradition as a "historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition." Although the environmental justice tradition offers some valuable practical lessons and tools, we argue that environmental social work should take up this tradition not because it has all the answers but because it brings the right problem to the fore.

[10] In addition, some have called for justice in capabilities—such as education, health, employment—as a necessary precondition for marginalized populations to have power within political processes, as well as a distributive end in its own right (Schlosberg 2007; Mendez 2020).

[11] Notably, however, environmental justice has also historically been seen as broader, or more "inclusive" (Taylor 1993), because it extends environmentalism to issues and populations overlooked by mainstream environmental movements.

benefiting all of nature; it should be ecocentric. Environmental justice activists offer a different framework that resists the notion that more global actors and perspectives are inherently superior. In practice, procedural justice means "thinking locally" in the sense that it means prioritizing the agendas and leadership of marginalized people fighting for the health and survival of their own communities.

In an in-depth study of a struggle over climate policy in California, Mendez (2020) shows how such emphasizing of procedural justice can produce synergy between so-called local and global concerns. Initially, differences over thinking locally versus thinking globally set environmental organizations at odds over climate policy. On the one hand, Big Green environmental groups like the National Resources Defense Council and Environmental Defense Fund favored what Mendez calls "carbon reductionism," advocating for a cap-and-trade policy focused on reducing overall carbon emissions globally.[12] On the other hand, environmental justice activists from Latinx communities wanted climate change policy to regulate the emissions of actual factories and plants located near their homes and workplaces, including emissions of other pollutants produced by carbon-producing industries. Pointing out that the most antiquated and environmentally hazardous factories were often located in communities of color, environmental justice groups argued that a cap-and-trade system would only enable these businesses to continue polluting, perpetuating environmental racism. Although both groups shared concern about polluting industries in California, they found themselves at odds over the scale at which pollution should be understood and addressed.

Mendez (2020) describes how the environmental justice activists' approach, which he calls "climate change from the streets," overcame these conflicts by building a coalition that worked across multiple scales, tying "local" issues like asthma to "global" issues like climate change. Big Green organizations tended to see working-class Latinx immigrant communities, many of whom depended on industry for employment, as opponents whose interests were at odds with their global carbon reduction agenda. However, environmental justice groups and the state legislature's Latino Caucus worked to "rescale the debate of climate change to focus on two key elements: public health, particularly air pollution and respiratory diseases that California's low-income communities of color face at epidemic levels; and local job creation and economic opportunity" (Mendez 2020, 64). By refusing to delink "global" carbon from its more "local" copollutants, a coalition of environmental justice groups and Big Green groups secured sufficient legislative support to pass a modified cap-and-trade policy that included some provisions meant to reduce health impacts among minority and low-income communities. This policy victory offers one example of how an environmental justice approach can effectively integrate environmentalism and social justice.

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[12] The Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006 established a statewide limit, or "cap," of carbon emissions for California businesses. This generates a carbon market of a limited number of purchasable carbon emissions, which businesses can trade with one another. The sale of these permits produces revenue for the state government. Mendez (2020) also tracks advocacy for and against the inclusion of carbon offsets within California's cap-and trade system (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation), which allow carbon producing industries in California to "reduce" their emissions by paying others, anywhere in the world, to plant trees or conserve forests. In both policies, a global approach is also linked to a preference for utilitarian logics and market-based solutions, which de-emphasize differential impacts (and questions of justice) in the pursuit of an aggregate "common good."

It is also significant, however, that this synergy was not long lasting. Mendez (2020) describes how the cap-and-trade policy was initially implemented in ways that minimized benefits for the local Latinx community. As such, the coalition's story might be seen as one of appropriation more than collaboration, insofar as the coalition's work advanced the global carbon reduction agenda while marginalizing the concerns of the local Latinx community. The Big Green organizations may not have set out to exploit their alliances in this way, but entrenched inequities in processes of policy making and implementation inherently favored their agenda. To counter this tendency, environmental justice groups formed a new coalition to advocate for a community benefits fund that would invest a portion of cap-and-trade revenues in the communities most affected by pollution. This effort was followed by a third coalition focused on the fair implementation of the fund. In other words, achieving procedural justice required ongoing struggle.

Recognition: Embracing tensions between multiple meanings of "environment"

The shortcomings of the California climate policy coalition point to the fragility of cross-scalar coalitions and, especially, the challenge of sustaining coalitions that think locally. Crucial here are practices of recognition, in which activists give priority to the values and perspectives of affected communities, especially when those communities have been systematically marginalized, suppressed, or ignored. Although some notions of recognition can undermine distributive justice by displacing claims to equitable resources with claims of belonging to an identity or being deserving of esteem (Fraser 2000), here recognition is conceptualized as necessary to the process of achieving any justice, distributive or otherwise (Schlosberg 2004). By opening up dialogue on the very meaning of notions like "environment," recognition shapes the ends that environmental justice coalitions pursue (cf. Álvarez and Coolsaet 2020).

Ahmann (2020) describes a campaign against a proposed incinerator in Baltimore in which both procedural justice and recognition played crucial roles. As in the California climate policy case, the campaign was conducted by a coalition of "locals" and "nonlocals," including a student group of racially diverse youth from the area, a regional activist organization, and an assortment of allied Big Green groups. This coalition enabled protestors to shift tactically between defining air pollution as "everyone's problem" or as differentially affecting residents, claiming authority at either scale. Within the coalition, however, activists took steps to ensure their multiscalar coalition would think locally. Ahmann describes how activists emphasized that "the community" (in this case, primarily members of the student group) should have the lead role in the campaign, a stance meant to prioritize the perspectives of those most directly affected by the potential pollution. Experienced organizers from outside the "community" were crucial in mentoring members of the local student group, who in turn "canvassed area streets, held participatory strategy sessions, and worked hard to involve neighbors" (Ahmann 2020, 480). Strategic decisions had to be routed through the student group, and the students were the primary public representatives for the campaign. In these ways, coalition members calibrated the unequal distribution of power within the campaign to mirror the unequal human impacts of the problem.

Even when activists take such deliberate measures, practicing procedural justice and recognition can be very difficult. Ahmann (2020) notes that some regional or national coalition members found it uncomfortable to defer to community preferences for organizing process and tactics,

which often differed from their own preferences. She argues that trouble arose whenever "a member of the coalition acted out of step by failing to honor" the centrality of local residents to the campaign (Ahmann 2020, 480).

Recognition can be especially difficult to sustain in environmental justice coalitions because coalition members are often working from fundamentally different meanings of "environment." For example, in an ethnography of activism against industrial pollution in a town in the US South, Checker (2005, 76) describes how African American residents historically had little use for notions of "the environment," which they saw as a "white, middleclass concern." However, once their land and their health were threatened by factory emissions, they adopted a notion of the environment as "a site of racism," eventually expanding this notion "to include all of the resources to which they lacked access (i.e., housing, schools, and police protection)" (Checker 2005, 76).

Similarly, Mathias (2017) gives an account of a campaign against a polluting gelatin factory in Kerala, India, in which local and nonlocal activists differed in how they defined the "cause" for which they fought. Residents of a nearby village were primarily fighting for the health and welfare of their families and neighbors; they were fighting for their environment. Activists from outside the village were, for the most part, fighting for the environment; they rallied around abstract universals like "the people" and "nature." Although these differences may seem philosophical, Mathias (2017) details how they ultimately led to practical disagreements over organizing processes and tactics, which, in turn, eventually led most of the nonlocal activists to withdraw their support from the campaign.

Because such differences in perspective are rooted in activists' distinct backgrounds, identities, and experiences, they can be difficult to reconcile. They are not, however, predetermined. On the contrary, Mathias (2017) shows that local and nonlocal identities in the Kerala case were, to some extent, a function of how various actors framed their activism. Nonresidents could be seen as "local" if they fought for their own communities and environments; residents could become "outsiders" if they fought for the environment as a whole. Nonetheless, such differences are also deeply entrenched; they are baked into the reasons why activists become activists at all. For nonlocal activists in the Kerala case, simply deferring to local leaders and their perspectives could not fully resolve the conflicts that troubled the coalition because, ultimately, they had not come to the campaign to save only one village. They were trying to save the planet.

The principles of procedural justice and recognition may not fully resolve these tensions, but they make such problems the focus of activists' critical attention. Indeed, the thorniness of such issues in environmental justice activism arguably arises from activists' insistence on the centrality of affected communities in organizing and policy-making processes. In varieties of environmentalism that do not emphasize social justice in both the means and the ends of activism, abstract global views of the environment may seem entirely unproblematic. Environmental justice illuminates the limits of such perspectives. As such, the challenges that arise from efforts to implement procedural justice and recognition are a sign of the relevance of these principles for social work.

Discussion

How can social workers take action to protect biodiversity while also challenging the lack of racial diversity in the environmental movement? How can social workers fight global climate change while also doing justice to the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities? How can social workers expand their mission beyond all community boundaries, even the boundaries of the human community, while also amplifying the efforts of those who are fighting to protect their own health or the health of their family members and neighbors? Environmental justice foregrounds such dilemmas and offers principles for addressing them, rooted in a living tradition of practice.

Many other varieties of environmentalism explicitly aim to promote social justice, and some even suggest that work to protect nonhumans is inherently conducive to social justice. Yet our cautionary tales provide examples of how the implementation of such ideals can fall short, at times perpetuating social inequity by rationalizing injustice, obscuring injustice, or deprioritizing the social justice struggles of marginalized communities. In the principles of procedural justice and recognition, environmental justice places emphasis on the means, or processes, by which socially just outcomes are achieved. As shown in our examples from the United States and India, this focus on means can help to counter some of the logics by which environmental intervention has, at times, been at odds with social justice.

How can the environmental justice paradigm be put into practice in social work? As illustrated in the examples above, procedural justice can be operationalized through organizational structures and decision-making processes that redistribute power to those members of marginalized communities whose health and well-being are most directly affected. Because of the high personal stakes, such local leaders can bring a crucial insider perspective on how exploitation of humans and nature is intertwined, as well as a deep commitment to their cause—a willingness to "lay everything on the line" to achieve justice (Taylor 1993). The challenge, however, is how to consistently give members of marginalized communities real power in the context of broader political processes that systematically disempower them (Arnstein 1969). In the Mendez (2020) case, for example, local representation in the process of making California's cap-and-trade policy did not automatically translate into representation or control over the policy's implementation. Procedural justice must be undertaken as an ongoing struggle, or inequity is likely to reassert itself down the line.

Moreover, without emphasis on recognition, mechanisms of procedural justice such as coalitions and community leadership may be rendered ineffective. In Mathias's (2017) account of the Indian gelatin factory protest, locals and nonlocals could not fully appreciate one another's values and perspectives on the campaign. Although this lack of recognition went both ways, it perpetuated existing social inequality when nonlocal activists were unwilling or unable to collaborate with locals because of these differences. Because of this failure of recognition, nonlocal activists' commitments to local leadership were rendered null.

In a similar vein, in environmental social work, recognition will mean valuing different scalar perspectives on the meaning of environment and the aims of environmental activism. Whereas many scholars and practitioners come to environmental social work because of a desire to protect nature or a concern about global climate change, those the profession serves commonly come to

environmental activism because of threats from factory emissions, lead poisoning, pesticides, hurricanes, or other environmental hazards (Krings, Kornberg, and Lane 2019).They may have a different take on the environment, one rooted in embodied experiences of pollution-induced asthma, displacement by green gentrification, or other environmental injustices. Likewise, much environmental activism focuses on building scalar bridges to link individual action (e.g., recycling, buying organic, and carrying a reusable water bottle) and global environmental crises such as carbon in the atmosphere and plastic in the seas. In the authors' own experience, many social workers focus on personal commitment and individual action for global change, and this can be a powerful tool. But individual-global bridges can sail over the scalar levels most relevant to fighting for environmental justice—such as the Latinx identity relevant to climate policy in California or the place-based communities fighting the proposed incinerator in Baltimore and the gelatin factory in Kerala.

These scalar gaps between social work professionals and community members demand a more robust approach to recognition than simply acknowledging or understanding another perspective. They call for recognizing how the stakes differ for those who live next to a polluting factory than for their allies from other towns, and they call for calibrating intervention roles, priorities, and tactics to align with those differential stakes. For example, Dennis and Bell (2020, 383) describe the vital role of Indigenous women in environmental protest in North America and make the case for "centering Indigenous women and cosmologies in environmental social work" as a whole.[13] Integrating social justice and environmental action should start from such calibrating work, fitting social work's units of intervention to how affected populations experience exploitation and enact resistance.

Many of the tools needed to put environmental justice into practice can already be found in existing social work methods, particularly in the community practice tradition (Sites, Chaskin, and Parks 2007; Gamble and Weil 2009; Pyles 2013; Gutiérrez and Gant 2018). This tradition, which takes Jane Addams as a key progenitor, places emphasis on community leadership, rather than positioning the social worker as an agenda-setter or leader. Like environmental justice activists, community practitioners have long developed conceptual and practical tools for fostering and supporting leadership from within marginalized communities (e.g., Rivera and Erlich 1992; Gutiérrez, Nemon, and Lewis 1996; Checkoway 1997; Staples 2000), and these tools are commonly taught in many social work programs. The challenges of operationalizing procedural justice and recognition will, no doubt, be familiar territory for practitioners trained in these programs. For example, core community practice skills like coalition building, community-engaged assessment, cultural humility, negotiation, and power redistribution are also integral to environmental justice organizing (Krings and Copic 2021; Kemp et al. 2022). Indeed, although this article has focused on what the environmental justice tradition can contribute to social work, it is also clear that the community practice tradition positions social work well to contribute to

[13] As Billiot and colleagues (2019) show, recognition and centering of Indigenous perspectives on environmental intervention is particularly valuable for social work. As Jeffery (2014, 494) points out, social work discourse about Indigeneity and environmentalism too often "slide[s] into nostalgia and depoliticized longing for a premodern self," continuing a pattern in which white environmentalists, especially in the wilderness tradition, have sought to assimilate Indigenous environmentalisms to their own agendas. As Billiot and colleagues (2019) make clear, recognition of Indigenous theories about interdependence with nature necessarily means recognition of the struggle to sustain these relationships in the face of racism, settler colonialism, and extractive capitalism. More generally, it should be clear here that we conceptualize recognition as a deeply political process.

environmental justice movements. In other words, engagement between community practice and environmental justice—both as areas of scholarship and modes of intervention—may be an ideal starting point for building an environmental social work centered on social justice.

Which environmental social work?

The numerous proposals for environmental social work are an indication of social workers' high enthusiasm for addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time. We should proceed with caution, however. Given the track record of environmental movements, we need to move beyond claiming synergy between social justice and environmentalism in theory and attend more closely to the consequences of specific varieties of environmentalism as they are implemented. The focus of the environmental justice tradition on prioritizing social justice in both the means and the ends of environmental intervention sets it apart as an ideal starting point for environmental social work.

This article is not an argument for environmental justice as a label or brand. On the contrary, it would be better to incorporate environmental justice principles across the diverse proposals for environmental social work than to insist that all environmental intervention by social workers be labeled environmental justice. But it is equally important that environmentalist social workers avoid dismissing the environmental justice paradigm as too human-centered for their aims. Like all social work, environmental social work will be undertaken by humans in the context of pervasive inequality among humans. Thus, its consequences for social justice must be central. To insist on this fact is not to deny the intrinsic value of other beings but to acknowledge the unavoidable politics of our own positionalities. As a paradigm for social work, environmental justice keeps this all-too-human reality front and center.

Note

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