Legacies of Empire and Spatial Divides: New and Old Challenges for Environmentalism in the UK

Eeva Berglund

Further copies available from CUCR, Goldsmiths College, London SE14 6NW.

Legacies of Empire and spatial divides: new and old challenges for environmentalism in the UK

Dr Eeva Berglund, Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths College.

> From time to time, the long-dead corpse of the British Raj still twitches. When it does, Britons are presented with reminders – some nostalgic, some uncomfortable – that their postcolonial future remains firmly rooted in the imperial past. Consciously or not, Tony Blair carries the burden of history with him as he endeavours to play a diplomatic role in South Asia. Robin Cook uses chicken tikka masala as an emblem of modern British identity, while debate rages about the cohesion of Britain's multi-faith society.
>
> Huw Bowen, *The Guardian* 12/1/02

> [M]any of the country houses and estates forming the cornerstone of rural Englishness were funded with money from colonial exploitation and imperial expansionism.
>
> Lowe *et al.* cited in Agyeman and Spooner 1997

There is a growing interest in Britain in a kind of environmental politics which takes people and society as seriously as it takes nature, global warming and loss of biodiversity. In fact it goes beyond this, highlighting not only cultural differences but also how related assumptions about social order underpin the unequal distribution of environmental goods and bads. In short, room is being made for culture, politics and power in British environmentalism.

In this essay I survey how the practices and the language of environmental justice have begun to transform environmental thought and to push academic as well as political debate in new directions. I shall also, however, suggest that the legacy of colonialism still operates in British environmentalism and influences the emergent scene. It is also interesting to explore how the colonial legacy has informed the analytical exercises through which inequality in general has been addressed by British intellectuals and social theorists. How does it frame political action? What traces has it left in efforts to analyse social inequality and what are the implications of this for how environmental injustices are conceptualised?

Britons' growing interest in EJ (Environmental Justice) is somewhat reminiscent of the USA's earlier and well-documented experiences of environmental racism and resistance to it, but it has some very different features too. Broadly speaking, both within policy making and in the non-governmental as well as grassroots sectors, there is real support for the goals of EJ just as there is an explicit concern to support multiculturalism along with anti-racist and anti-exclusionist social policy. New Labour's environmental policies, however, frequently slow down and hamper a broadly 'green' and more specifically EJ-oriented agenda. The grassroots may be giving more attention to issues of justice and equity, but here too it may be premature to speak of an actual 'movement' or even a 'discourse', despite the acknowledgement within parts of the environmentalist lobby that social justice and environmental policy are interlinked (Agyeman 2001).

It should be easier to push an agenda that takes seriously both social inequality and environmental quality once researchers as well as activists calls for more research data are answered. Indeed, non-trivial factual material is always necessary and will no doubt require the attention of numerous researchers in years to come. In this overview, however, I shall suggest that the production of new, persuasive research data may not be the greatest challenge. Instead, in Britain as elsewhere, the challenge is to make room for new discourses and new ways of defining the problems, ways which would fundamentally alter the familiar paradigm in which nature and society are set up as separate unities altogether, or alternatively, in which they are brought together in an analytically impotent and politically problematic muddle! To help avoid this, economic and political inequalities offer themselves as a useful research focus, as do habits of thought which reinforce rather than question stereotypes.

This article is an essay incorporating a short literature review. I draw eclectically on a variety of sources which range from my personal observations as a Finn in London and before that in smaller British towns, and on an anthropological perspective complemented by reading what can be broadly defined as post-colonial critiques of history. Above all, I am concerned to highlight some observable habits of thought that still, in the new millennium tend to divide space into a metropolitan and multicultural urban milieu on the one hand and on the other, into purely English countryside. These habits have emerged together with the discursive framework which divided the modern from the traditional and the dynamic from the quiet or backward. Such conceptual binaries have helped master a complicated and ethically fraught lifeworld. In short, I see the challenges of environmental justice as part of the broader challenges bequeathed by a broadly colonial ideology which neatly, if inconsistently, separated 'us' from

'them'. Though it is hardly a panacea for the shortcomings of social theory in this age of ecopolitics (Kuehls 1996), a kind of postcolonial theory that highlights the thoroughgoing impact of colonialism's spatial and temporal ordering is helpful in this particular instance. For this reason, the chapter surveys not only processes currently underway in Britain, but the emergence of a racialised imagery of nature, both at home and abroad.

The Country, the City and ethnic culture
At the start of this millennium, compressed spatial relations have already had a thoroughgoing impact on everyday life throughout the world. Despite globalisation's flattening out effect on space and time, in British political life the countryside and the city continue to provide salient reference points. Doreen Massey has pointed out that conceptually as well as in practice, Britain is governed as if London and the South-East represented some kind of normality, whereas the world beyond is relegated to the status of 'regions' (Massey 2001: 7). External relations appear within an analogous framework: the West versus the Rest.

Narrating spatial relations within such frameworks has far-reaching consequences. In cultural geography it is already conventional to observe that discourse and matter are in a dialectical relationship with each other (Castree and Braun 1998). Discourse is far more than naming and intellectually based categorisation. It generates and upholds value. However, neither discourses nor spatial arrangements simply correspond to, or reflect, some ideological worldview. Discourses are alive and contingent, and they operate according to context. In England, for instance, the idealisation of the countryside has even given rise to mutually incompatible desires and visions, which vary across time, place and political situation. One result is that it is equally possible for communitarian and anarchist groups, such as *The Land is Ours*, as it is for conservative defenders of privileged landowners, to seek as well as find their ideals in gilt-edged rural imagery provided by the nostalgic chroniclers and historians of the English countryside.

David Harvey, a Marxist geographer, recently made the point that conservatism has its radical side too, for instance in helping prevent the penetration of commercial relationships into all social relations (1996: 179). With such caveats in mind, I do not at all aim to cover all aspects or even outcomes of the spatial division of England (which I believe underpins the main challenges to policy across the UK beyond England itself) and its discursive elaboration. Rather, I wish to make the point that in taking on the challenges of EJ, the biophysical impacts of this spatial division as well as its discursive elaborations need to be recognised.

The country and the city were turned into cultural spaces and literary images as well as literal locations in specific ways in the wake of industrialism and then romanticism. One result has been that influential (metropolitan, i.e. London-based) understandings of the countryside have been distorted by nostalgia for the better past it supposedly embodies. Another is that there is simultaneous contempt for the countryside's apparent inability to move with the times. This dualistic conceptualisation which persists to this day, developed as part of largely English bourgeois social sensibilities, as has been beautifully analysed by Raymond Williams in his influential book, *The Country and the City*, first published as a complete volume in 1973.

Thinking about the spatial organisation of England today, one is struck by the continuities, even the intensifications of the very processes Williams described. Economic practices continue which mean that control is wrested from rural areas and transferred elsewhere, most notably to London, to be recycled back to the rural economies – if at all – as subsidy or regional aid.

London-centred government also tends to have an impact on the country's North-South divide. As parts of the North struggle, and the South-East proclaims that there is no more room for population increase, these two processes – immiseration in the North, overheating in the South – are imagined as disconnected (Massey 2001). The economic circuits that underpin the polarisation of society and the fact that the resulting inequalities are geographically organised are, however, not the preoccupation of the public, nor often enough, of policy. Frequently enough, across a variety of discourses – media, politics, research – the problems of the North are treated as results of the people's cultural peculiarities, perhaps even their natural (that is, inherited) proclivities. The fact that the spatial networks of the national economy as a whole have systematic implications for populations can be conveniently sidestepped (Massey 2001).

Yet Tony Blair's government and urban political elites routinely profess their concern for the countryside. This is often expressed as class-based and conservative yet powerful nostalgia for an Arcadian idyll, not unlike 200 years ago. Sometimes it is articulated as admiration for organic farming and simple rural lifestyles. In some variants, the countryside provides a conceptual space if not a literal one, for experiments in radical eco-communist or –anarchist ideology and practice. As forms of political and ecological mobilisation these have their strengths and weaknesses, but none of these variations on objectifying the countryside is free of the traces of the hegemonic idealisation of the rural which Williams already highlighted.

The reality though is of constantly raging rural crises, from BSE and Foot and Mouth Disease to disputes over the 'sport' of fox hunting with horses and hounds. Government responses have been criticised, even as being responsible for the loss of thousands of livelihoods, and for a transformation of the countryside from a productive sector to purveyor of tourism services for urban consumers of the countryside. What is left of the productive agricultural sector continues to be displaced by commuters. Green spaces are captured by hypermarkets, and the reorganisation of food retail continues behind closed doors. The hunting issue, with its class-based rituals and its animal-rights dimensions has long been a focus for economic conflict (Cooper 1999), despite the fact that this is often expressed as a question of lifestyle or tradition. Despite long-standing efforts, New Labour has failed to stamp out this practice, considered by many voters to be anachronistic and barbaric.

The influx into rural areas of new kinds of rural inhabitants – non-farmers – particularly along the railways, has distorted real-estate markets and given rise to a constant stream of disagreements over the 'development' of rural space. Those who consider themselves at home in rural environments are marginalized, both occupationally and literally, as their homes become too expensive. Inhabiting the countryside also involves providing acceptable road infrastructure. One result has been a series of visible and, sociologically speaking, interesting coalitions of anti-road protesters (McKay 1998, Field 1999).

Disputes about road space demonstrate the point that in Britain individual mobility is defended by treating it as a key feature of a timeless and sacred element of a native democratic tradition. The right to drive a motor car is like a civil right. On the other hand, the language of road conflict reinforces the belief that the countryside is a 'white' space, the habitat of the original (English) individualist, and that for this reason too, it is a space untainted, so to speak, by the problems of the multicultural or ethnically fraught city (Agyeman and Spooner 1997). The values of the idealised countryside include not only individualism or self-reliance in efforts to make a living off the land, but also the value of privately owned property and the right to defend one's land (Cooper 1999). Individual rights were also apparently at issue in the court defence of the paranoid farmer, Tony Martin, who shot and killed a teenager, a 'gypsy', apparently intent on burgling him at his farmhouse (*The Guardian* 20.4.00). In this case too, the discourse of defending private property and individual rights, taken up throughout the media, obscured the kind of multi-layered, ethnically articulated politics of identity which sociologists, for instance, have analysed in detail in urban areas (Gilroy 1987, Back 1996, Rassool 1997). Such

language also obfuscates the mundane realities of new forms of hate and violence engendered by marginalisation and intensifying poverty in the countryside.

Before proceeding further, it seems sensible to take a brief look at the politics of race and ethnicity in Britain more generally. The hierarchical organisation of contemporary Britain is articulated to a great extent through racist principles, despite the fact that in Europe-wide comparisons, Britain is generally held to be a relatively tolerant society. Without a doubt, Britain has moved away from 'Victorian' racial stereotypes and their supposedly biological differences to discourses where culture rather than nature operate as markers of difference. And yet the *status quo* is defended via ubiquitous unofficial (skin pigmentation, dialect or accent, dress) as well as more official (e.g. education, social welfare) mechanisms. This is true despite the important fact that both state-level and grassroots action constantly changes racially based hierarchies and their implications for everyday life (Back 1996). What is significant here in relation to EJ – as it has been in relation to feminism – is that it is only possible to be an individual and act out one's civil rights according to the standard narrative, if one is not already somehow part of a marked category: Asian, Black, Gypsy-youth etc. In other words, defending individual rights in the framework of the indigenous democratic tradition is easiest for those who are not already defined as somehow problematic or at least significantly 'different'. And yet these unstigmatised individuals – male, white, and heterosexual, to rehearse the mantra of British social sciences – can only be defined as such in opposition to their already different counterparts: women, ethnic others and sexual minorities.

If social policy and sociology rehearses this important point, in the countryside the existence of minorities of all kinds becomes obscured, despite the fact of their real existence, given that the countryside is inhabited by many who are not white. But symbolically the countryside and its landscapes mostly appear as white spaces. They are characterised by traditions and practices specifically thought of as white, and, given the context of this essay, they are represented as somehow apart from the multicultural urban mileux, and as pure, purely natural and naturally English space. In this way the new relationship between the country and the city can easily be turned around, even upside down, so that the countryside can be idealised and highly valued even as it is treated as a problem. This kind of somersault is made possible precisely because dominant representations have flattened out the rural world into an image, one which can distort reality in specific ways, just as Williams (1973) indicated.

In contrast, the city and London specifically, has been represented over the last two decades or so as the cradle of a kind of home-grown cosmopolitan culture. Even a semi-official brand, 'Cool Britannia' was launched in 1997 as an effort to capture specifically ethnic margins into the mainstream of cultural production (e.g. Parekh 1998). Blair's Britain has been characterised by efforts to both celebrate and to manage the diversity of cultures, with the coolness of ethnopop and of fusion cuisine jostling for attention alongside reports and research into the institutionalised racism which fans violence and fear throughout society. In the wake of racial violence and failure to carry out justice, institutional racism has received increased attention not only from academics but from institutions right at the heart of social life, such as the police force itself (e.g. Macpherson 1999).

So though multiculturalism is fostered and valued, it tends to be seen as something that automatically creates problems. One effect of this is that the production of culture has itself become a focus of policy. Nevertheless, cultural differences and 'foreign' traditions hardly provide adequate explanations of systematic discrimination, particularly given how easily economic and political competition are dressed up as identity politics. Sadly too, spatial segregation in the form of gated communities has entered British urban planning over the last decade, despite the commitment many urban Brits express to ethnically and economically mixed cityscapes.

It is difficult, almost impossible, to write about ethnic politics and other forms of identity politics without generating too rigid an image of processes which are nevertheless in constant flux. One must also remember that the conceptual toolkit through which the dualism of the city and the country is made meaningful is also undergoing change. Many critical voices have warned against over-stating the argument that this dualism automatically leads to impotent romanticism. As I mentioned, discourses are both value-laden and confer value, but they do not pre-determine value judgements. Thus is it hardly surprising that environmental discourses in the UK easily incorporate internal contradictions and even mutually hostile elements.

Broadly speaking, Britain is no longer considered The Dirty Man of Europe. And yet many Brits still do not have access to the quality of life enjoyed by many of their European neighbours. A glance at everyday practice suggests that environmental consciousness is not a key civic virtue. At state-level, and in London certainly, transport policy is in constant crisis, waste management and recycling infrastructure are relatively underdeveloped. Demands for access to natural beauty for recreational purposes, particularly near built-up areas still engender local and nation-wide

conflicts, as the demands of the so-called market clash with the local or national public good (Kohler 1999, Milton 2002).

Environmental politics and conservation movements have, of course, been part of British history for a long time (Pepper 1996, Lowe and Goyder 1983) and nature has been a focus of concern for a wide range of political organisations and collective projects (Thomas 1983). Although the role of conservative classes has been prominent in environmentalism, the political left has also been very active in securing policies that enhance quality of life for everyone, particularly between the First and Second World Wars. The *Ramblers Association* was established as part of efforts to ensure that the urban working classes would have continued access to countryside amenities. As is well known, however, the politics of nature protection often obscures power imbalances and social hierarchies. In legislation in particular, the environment is still conceptualised in naively naturalistic terms, as a merely technical challenge emptied of social and political significance (Holder and MacGillivray 1999).

As elsewhere, English environmentalism has tended to focus narrowly on the rights of nature, or at most, the rights of unborn generations, but not on ecologically experienced inequalities in the present. EJ has already clearly contested this view, and its impact is already visible in state and regional government. Indeed, the rapidly developing discourse of EJ appears to be mounting a challenge to the anti-politics of more traditional nature conservationism, with the pressures for change arising for the most part from below. Anti-globalisation movements have also articulated with EJ agendas, bringing with them their own inflection into the broader critique of world-wide neo-liberalist fundamentalism.

Networks of various anarchist and other loosely organised protest voices have long operated, in some cases over hundreds of years, as part of Britain's political and ideological landscape. In the 1990s the state's support of car ownership provoked road conflicts but it also encouraged the growth of protest coalitions where new and old political traditions met and interacted. Here there is no scope to elaborate further on this interesting and important feature of English environmentalism, but it has been written about widely in many different contexts (McKay 1998, Jordan and Lent 1999). What bears mentioning, however, is that neither activists nor researchers were surprised by the close connections between cultural hegemony and economic power (even violence) that the road protests highlighted. Nor was anyone surprised by the continuing salience of class, gender and sexuality, or cultural identities in the way these struggles have been played out. In highlighting the role of such organising principles of social and political

power, the new social movements of the post-1960s world also brought mainstream politics and environmentalist demands into dialogue, as well as underlining the ecological dimensions of a wide range of contemporary political and ideological conflicts.

The left has changed considerably over the last decades, as the current ideological profile (and name, of course) of New Labour indicates. However, and despite the fashionableness of cultural theory, and the idea that culture as such explains social tension, social analysts of the left continue to underline the genuinely economic contradictions which are part of contemporary social conflict. Various forms of marginalisation, poverty, class-division, and their cultural markers are still brought with ease into English environmental discourse. This should not be surprising given how much these analytical categories have influenced regional and social policy in the 20th century (Bird and Jordan 1999, Massey 2001). And although there are still strong pressures to empty environmental politics of attention to social inequality, the rise of new protest movements alongside the increasing significance of identity- and ethnic politics, has generated new kinds of networks and links between more traditional conservation movements and newer ones with somewhat different preoccupations.

Even at government-level, as in some of the larger conservation organisations such as *Friends of the Earth*, questions of justice and social inclusion have become everyday concerns. At the same time, heterogeneous, local and context-specific protests are coming to be acknowledged as part of a wider web of concerns, even a network of political actors with some significance for decision-making. What still must be acknowledged, is that ethnic differentiation linked with economic relations is closely tied to the way environmental problems and amenities are distributed through society (Walker and Bickerstaff 2000, ESRC 2001). At the same time, the fact that environmental protest is not always prominent within ethnic and other minority neighbourhoods or social networks, should not be taken to mean that environmental problems, often grave ones, do not exist. They may quite simply not achieve the kind of media attention that traditional environmentalism does (Agyeman 2001), reflecting as it does the preoccupations and fears of mainly middle-class constituencies, thus further strengthening the association between countryside, nature and the white middle-classes. The now emergent EJ discourse, one that appreciates the social dimensions of environmental conditions is creating a new framework for old problems, even as new institutional structures are being put into place, whether at government-level (House of Commons 17.1.02) or the voluntary and/or research sectors (Adebowale 29001).

In the next section I shall sketch out a rough, largely literature based, picture of the emergence of EJ in the UK. By linking my survey to a critical history of an imperialist power and its ideological trends and worldviews, and to insights gained from an anthropological perspective which plays with the movement of perspectives from both centre and periphery, I aim to produce some interesting insights into the national peculiarities of EJ in Britain. My narrative rehearses the familiar themes of how discourse, imagery and mental habits have direct effects on tangible environments and living conditions, and of how places and events that appear disconnected are often linked in consequential ways.

Environmental Justice in Britain

> Everyone should share in the benefits of increased prosperity and a clean and safe environment. We have to improve access to services, tackle social exclusion, and reduce the harm to health caused by poverty, poor housing, unemployment and pollution. Our needs must not be met by treating others, including future generations and people elsewhere in the world, unfairly.
>
> UK Sustainable Development Strategy

It is the voluntary organisations and local activists who have provided the cue for academia to recognise the conceptual and political problems now articulated through EJ. On the other hand, one could argue that EJ has had a place in local politics for a long time already, even though it has not carried that label. Broader visibility has recently come from the research-led agenda of *Friends of the Earth*, and a little later in England and Wales (Friends of the Earth Scotland being a separately organised wing of the international ENGO). In Scotland the overlap between marginalisation and environmental problems has long been recognised. Particularly from London's perspective Scotland, and specifically its more outlying areas, is an internal colony which provides the South with raw materials for industry and the road-infrastructure. Mining for minerals in particular has led to several conflicts at local level (Milton 2002, *Friends of the Earth Scotland* n.d.). Like a colony, Scotland also offers those from the South an accessible place to enjoy cleaner and 'more natural' landscapes to escape to.

In the 1990s, Scotland's *Friends of the Earth* began to discern common concerns among the varied groups demanding attention to local needs in regional planning, community development and the environment. It supported local-level efforts to improve environmental quality, but it also

articulated the problems in the language of environmental justice, emphasising the rights of communities over and above the vague imperative of sustainable development (Scandrett 2000).

It is worth paying attention to the terminologies of environmental struggle. The concept of sustainable development, for instance, can easily obscure the social inequalities associated with environmental decision making. Furthermore, British grassroots activism has been hampered by suspicions about the authenticity and legitimacy of local campaigns. A liberal understanding of the dualist division of space – an understanding which is actually furthered by this essay – can easily be interpreted to imply that local protest movements in small, out-of-the-way locations are predominantly led by middle-class romantics, fleeing the rat race into the countryside, and subsequently react with cynical horror to efforts to 'develop' their adopted new homes. Above all, say the critics, these newcomers with their political clout, are likely to react strongly to developments that will adversely affect the property they have acquired. Time after time, protest groups have suffered from the derisory label (given by both liberal and conservative voices) of NIMBY (not in my backyard) activists, whose only apparent motivation is represented as self-interest (Coward, *The Guardian,* 18.12.01). Rather than NIMBY-groups developing into a flourishing network of local groups demanding justice and autonomy from far-away interests, communities in Britain struggle increasingly to defend themselves and their homes from the negative impacts of investments and policies made with other places and preoccupations in mind. Fortunately researchers too have recently woken up to the realisation that the NIMBY-label is not a tool of social science analysis, rather it is more appropriate to explore how it is deployed and with what effects (Burningham 2000).[1]

Whilst neo-liberalism holds sway in decision-making across the wealthy world, the British strain, Thatcherism, has left a particularly strong mark on government action including environmental policy. Political culture celebrates the individual above society, and is committed to the global market as the only true, indeed quasi-natural foundation for collective life. New Labour, in power since 1997 and also committed to a market-led vision of public policy, continues its agenda for modernisation through the marriage of private and public funding. Those who are at the margins are more likely to notice concretely the ways this leaves many previously public amenities in

---

[1] It may be worth mentioning that the negative connotations of NIMBY are being purposefully deployed in the recent government plans to speed up planning procedure, first unveiled in late 2001. New procedures will prioritise national economic competitiveness, not quality of life or environmental protection, as the overarching goal of planning policy (Heatherington, *The Guardian* 11/12/2001, *Friends of the Earth* 17/12/01). The exact form of the new legislation remains unclear, but the process is being observed with great concern.

private hands (urban and rural space, health care) whilst risks formerly socialised through the public sector are placed on the shoulders of the individual (pensions, environmentally induced health problems). Critics have challenged the trend (e.g. Hall 1998), but the relatively high value placed on individualism and individual rights create a stereotype of British society with some basis in reality.

The other side of this same coin is, however, that the traces of Victorian hyper-individualism and imperialist hubris are also visible in the experimental and even radical trends in socio-political ideology and research frameworks. The strengths and the weaknesses of the kind of identity and cultural politics that now holds sway in the globalised world, have long been problematised and made visible by social theorists in the formerly dominant world empire, and continue to be elaborated (Hall 1988, Keith and Pile 1993). Even on the political forum proper, despite its strong neo-liberal managerialism, Blair's government has put the problems of social exclusion right at the heart of domestic policy, and this is unlikely to change in the near future although – sadly – it still appears in tension with imperatives to ensure law and order.

Within the EJ landscape of Blair's Britain, ethnicity is also a key term alongside social exclusion, giving reason to assume that new thinking will enter the technomanagerialism of planning and environmental policy. In practice, efforts to improve environmental conditions are often framed as Local Agenda 21 (LA 21) projects run by local (municipal) councils in accordance with internationally agreed policy (e.g. EU directives). These initiatives range hugely in scale and scope, and include such varied things as provision for cycling and pedestrians, monitoring air quality, protecting and managing green lands and recreational facilities, but also things like improving the housing stock and encouraging healthier eating (Dowler 2000).

It is still acknowledged that LA 21 has stimulated new thinking and high levels of commitment that potentially cut across local government (Selman and Parker 1999). In a spirit of partnership that echoes New Labour, LA 21 projects tend to be coalitions of grassroots and top-down efforts. This does sometime means that charitable donations, rather than public money, end up providing necessary funds. Also, the concern for social justice and environmental quality is always at risk of being overshadowed by the more easily demonstrable indices of economic success, and populist visions of the good life, so that results are often contingent on local and historically specific conditions. However, it is the local context that is key in setting the tone for any LA 21 projects and fortunately the guiding principles of such

initiatives include a strong commitment to inclusivity and the empowerment of local communities and lay people. The emphasis on incorporating all sectors of the community has enabled ethnic minorities and their specific needs to become more visible in the hitherto rather people- and race-blind world of mainstream environmental activism.

Agyeman has documented one of the better known examples of LA 21's focus on race, the Roundtable Guidance Initiative organised by Leicester City in 1996. Here the council hosted discussions with 25 invited members from various minority communities from around the country. The Roundtable brought together people with similar experiences and from similar structural positions, an important achievement and source of support in a society where social order is reproduced through hierarchies of 'race' and class. Experiences such as the Roundtable have shown that although many minority activists may not consider their actions to be directed at environmental goals, their activities across a range of religious, community and cultural organisations do address concerns elsewhere treated as such: traffic levels and health problems for instance. But these are seen as being connected to pressing concerns such as drug problems, crime or inadequate childcare. Many of these organisations address the problems faced by ethnic minorities in a holistic way which is relevant to their everyday lives, but which often remain 'hidden' within the community (Agyeman 2001). Economic impoverishment and marginalisation are in fact frequently left out of view on purpose, or are incorporated as quasi-automatic consequences of cultural difference, in ways that can be described as environmentally racist.

Local Agenda 21 is thus part of the move towards developing environmental justice as part of local democracy and regional policy more generally. Without initiatives from the grassroots, the profile of LA 21 and local environmental policy would look quite different. As I shall shortly show, environmental risks in Britain have tended to be distributed to a large extent along economic lines (Walker et al. 2000). EJ has also pushed the acknowledgement that race is of great significance in the distribution of environmental goods and bads. There are therefore several organisations in Britain specifically committed to tackling environmental racism. In the mid 1980s already, the Black Environment Network (BEN) was founded (Agyeman and Spooner 1997). Interestingly, rather than centred in the metropolitan hubbub of London, BEN's main offices have been relocated to Wales, which is also a multicultural and cosmopolitan region (even if many Londoners are unaware of that fact). Perhaps this is not surprising, given BEN's continuing insistence on the rights of people of colour to enjoy the benefits of the countryside, a space so easily construed as 'white' and therefore supposedly racially unmarked. However, BEN's remit has gone

well beyond the issue of the countryside: it was 'one of the first "environmental" organisations to push the links between environmental, equity and social justice issues' (Agyeman and Spooner 1997: 210). At the moment, BEN is predominantly involved in aiding mainstream environmental organisations in efforts to recognise racial minority groups and to co-operate with them. Like many other environmental organisations, on its web site BEN claims that one of its main tasks is to work itself out of business!

Minorities face discrimination in many ways, and the British justice system has had some trouble identifying when a grievance should be considered racially motivated. Thus it is not surprising that one of the more visible aspects of environmental justice in Britain is its legal component. Both the European Convention on Human Rights and the Aarhus Convention defending public access to information are regularly invoked as having 'the potential … to enhance the affinity between respect for human rights and environmental protection' (ESRC 2001: 14). A recent development on the Environmental Justice front, has been the establishment of the *UK Environmental Justice and Equality Network* (Adebowale 2001), initiated by legal experts. Besides this broad network there are a number of lawyers and organisations more narrowly focussed on environmental racism across the country.

Britain's recent history, both in terms of ethnic discrimination and in terms of environmental policy has echoes of the USA's experiences, albeit with notable differences. On the one hand, the USA's experiences, and above all the pioneering research work of Bob Bullard (1993, 1995) have provided a valuable foundation upon which British research has been able to develop (see e.g. *Local Environment*, Vol. 4(1) 1999). Universities' geography and social science departments as well as other research institutions are constantly engaged in a broad range of work on environmental justice-related issues. There are also more and more funds and funders for this kind of endeavour, including campaign organisations. In the late 1990s for instance, *Friends of the Earth UK*, no doubt inspired by Scotland's successes, ran a campaign, Factory Watch, to reduce people's exposure to health-threatening pollution. This was combined with a broader lobbying and consciousness-raising campaign against Pollution Injustice, that is, the systematic overlap between poverty and polluting industry (FoE 2001). Friends of the Earth subsequently, in collaboration with academic researchers from a number of institutions, and supported by Britain's social science research fund, produced a Briefing covering British EJ in November 2001 titled *Environmental Justice: Rights and means to a healthy environment for all* (ESRC 2001).

Although the relationship of place and space to identity has long been a preoccupation of British geographers, only recently has this focus come to incorporate an environmental dimension. I would suggest that the research-community's relatively late entry into this area has to do with the association between environmentalism and white, conservative wealth. However, important new research has now been carried out, for example at the University of Staffordshire. This has demonstrated that current land-use policy maintains or even worsens environmental inequalities, whilst the 'market mechanisms' underlying the housing market continue to push the poor and vulnerable towards even more risky locations (Walker and Bickerstaff 2000, Walker et al. 2000). The results of this research clearly indicate the overlap between poverty and exposure to environmental danger. They also highlight that research must pay attention to the scale at which research methods are applied and to how the correlation between poverty and risk is represented.

Class and relative income are the key indicators in the UK, but Bullard's American researches into race and exposure to hazard have also provided direct inspiration across Britain (Evans 2000). British research also shows traces of the Marxist geography of Neil Smith and David Harvey, and its links with justice and geopolitics. Thorough research now exists with which government action and so-called market forces can be shown to materialise in the actual living conditions of different social sectors, even to the extent of demonstrating that city planning as well as mainstream environmentalism further the trend towards inequality.

Existing political discourses favour quantifiable claims. Measuring health is something that society has been doing for a long time, and indeed, environmental justice research has learned much from already existing work on the significance of gender, race and class for access to health and to nutrition. Now the political discourse on poverty has been linked to a research discourse on food and health giving rise to a new concept: food poverty. Researchers at the *London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine* (an institution itself directly inherited from Empire) have drawn attention to the effects of poverty on the eating habits, and consequently the health, of many of the most vulnerable groups in society (Dowler 2000, House of Commons 17/1/02). Lack of access to healthy food, and thus heightened risk of illness, also has a spatial component: those living in insalubrious inner city homes are more likely to have expensive 'convenience stores' close by rather than affordable shops selling fresh food. They are also least likely to have access to a car, which is a problem given that even in urban areas the lay-out and location of supermarkets cater above

all to motorists. In line with the neo-liberal policies of New Labour, the poor are, however, encouraged to become even more efficient in their use of resources and to organise to help themselves. Given the clustering of environmental bads that accompany poverty, such advice seems at best absurd, and at worst cynical (Dowler 2000).

The Environmental Justice agenda in Britain is explicitly an anti-poverty agenda. Not only is relative economic privilege clearly reflected in the health of the British public through their eating patterns, excess deaths are also caused by poor housing. According to official statistics, annually 30,000 people die unnecessarily as a result of inadequate heating (*National Statistics,* cited in ESRC 2001) giving a macabre twist to the country's building and planning record, and to the stereotype of old, cold and rickety British houses. In many parts of the country, what is known as fuel-poverty has recently become a campaign focus of even relatively conservative organisations. Green gurus have for years advertised the benefits of building with energy efficiency in mind, but these aspects have been neglected for the most part in both public and private sector housing. Apart from the negative effect on those who live in poor housing, this neglect contributes to Britain's greenhouse gas emissions.

In speaking of poverty and quality of life in Britain one must also mention the peculiar way that use of the motor car has increased and how it affects politics, where the right to free movement, especially the right to drive a private car, is defended as an explicitly civil right. The fact that the costs of driving are borne by specific social groups, and not by those who benefit, is easily lost from view, although there are signs that the mainstream press recognises that the 'Poor pay the penalty for the noisiest roads' (*The Independent* 29/4/02). Those social groups who are likeliest to suffer the adverse effects of constant traffic, live in the cities and are also least likely to own cars (ESRC 2001). On the other hand, for those who live far from metropolitan sprawl, the right to drive hundreds of miles daily across densely populated areas is sacred. It is acknowledged that in both rural and urban areas transport is in constant crisis, but it seems likely that the traditional division of space together with the peculiar interpretation of parliamentary democracy and its freedoms, will continue to be a huge challenge for EJ.

It fits the spirit of neo-liberalism to represent economic inequalities as inescapable outcomes of 'cultural' difference, for instance in how racial discrimination in the work place or on the housing market is hidden behind the workings of market mechanisms. The research I have cited does, however, emphasise the primacy of economic relations in organising social and cultural difference. And this is hardly surprising given Britain's tradition

of class-sensitive social science research, itself a reflection of a highly class-stratified society. Talk of class, and also of economic geography is also on the ascendant because of the ease with which it can be translated into the quantitative language of economics and government policy. In addition to this, inequalities which appear in the environment are relatively easy to represent through maps and diagrams in ways that persuade both publics and decision makers of the realities of the spatialisation of environmental bads or health risks (see McCarthy and Ferguson 1999).

Problematising poverty together with objecting to environmental degradation appears to have become part of even more traditional and conservative institutions, from the grassroots to government. In the literature, these concerns are treated as the 'second dimension of environmental exclusion'. They include physical needs for shelter, heat, food, clean air and water, also transport infrastructure, access to shops and (places of) work, as well as aesthetic and recreational needs, like access to green space.

In this section I have tried to demonstrate that political and academic debate has in just the last few years raised the profile of environmentalism and justice. I have also tried to map out some of ways in which the heritage of Empire, in the form of class and race discrimination, has become entangled in protest as well as in critical social science. Contemporary environmental groups, specifically those engaged with EJ, are context-specific however, and it is difficult to make broad generalisations about them. As in other social conflicts, hierarchical relations and identity politics operate at many levels and cross-cut each other. Not only do class and ethnic-minority status intersect in complex ways, gender relations cut across these too, providing scope for both antagonism and new alliances, such as the Women's Environmental Network.

What is systematic though, is the way difference continues to be constructed as an inevitable problem associated with variation in cultural if not biological heritage, and emptied of structural economic relations. This depoliticisation and de-economisation of the problems allows those who have most to lose to escape any hint of responsibility. Like everywhere where environmentalism is discussed, and in Britain in general, the possibility always offers itself of emptying environmental politics of its politics by appealing to nature as an asocial or acultural domain, and to the countryside specifically as a supposed repository of 'authentic' Englishness free of the problems and complexities of ethnic differentiation. If this does not work, the natural and inevitable which underpins history can always be located in the omnipotent global economy, that part of the universe which

now appears as the unchanging and unconstructed sacred rock upon which humanity has to build its life.

In conclusion

Class distinction has provided a framework for order in British society for at least two hundred years. Similarly ethnicity has been integral to society's organising principles, despite the fact that ethnic minorities have been visible as a significant social group for only about 50 years. Less visible minority groups have, of course, existed in Britain for over 500 years (some would say even longer). And yet there has been the possibility of constructing an image of 'natural order' in which neo-Darwinian logic has implied that the strong and powerful have earned their position and cannot but live out their superiority as nature dictates. In Victorian times, during the golden age of Empire, modern science could easily provide legitimation for the power held by those with fair skin and those of the male sex. Science, after all, was a mirror of nature. Those who did not master Science – that is, primitives, women, children, the insane and other groups locked in backwardness – thus represented the objects of Science. The power of imperial science was also almost impossible to challenge, for wherever non-scientific knowledge staked claims to intellectual respectability, it could only do so once it had been incorporated into the universal Science of the West. This could be achieved by simple stealth or colonialism, just like people and territories were captured.

In putting it like this, I have sketched Victorian social order and its knowledge practices as a stereotype. Yet it is a telling stereotype, whose pattern is repeated over and over again in environmental history, the development of science, gender studies and above all, in the literature on colonialism. In the variation and complexity even, they tell the story of what is going on in the apparent centre, at home. For the self was constructed by contrasting with and excluding the other. And so it is that even now, in the third millennium, geopolitics is carried out on dualistic principles, where identity must be either A or Not-A, emptied of all ambivalence, multidimensionality and history. The Cold War rehearsed this in the 20th century. Despite the way global economic circuits have brought a totally new intensity to the movement of people, raw materials, as well as images, the logic of a dualistic spatial division continues to flourish. The worldview of capitalism (of which we are speaking), with its competitiveness, tends towards polarisation, of space, gender or human kinds in general. Although certainly there are situations where dichotomising logic is appropriate, specifically conceptualising differences between people within a dualistic

framework is not only analytically flawed (Said 1978), it has supported and continues to support irreversible social as well as biophysical degradation.

As it has recently emerged in the UK, the EJ movement is integral to the kinds of conflicts (of which there are more and more) which arise out of the tensions between social inequality and material sustainability. On the basis of the USA's experience, it is demonstrable that the economy, racism and the (currently) hegemonic individualist ideology have created a situation where in the name of protecting supposedly pure nature it is possible and admissible to create elsewhere a totally toxic, even dead space, that can be relegated to a ghetto, separate from that part of humanity that counts as important. Not only the experiences of Black and Hispanics, but also of the USA's and Canada's native populations' histories at the hands of white colonialism, tell of almost unbelievable exploitation which nonetheless was dressed up as progress and inevitable destiny (Lohmann 2000, Anderson and Berglund eds. 2002). The point is, however, that the past sins of Empire are not merely to be experienced in the colonies but also at home, and they are increasingly difficult to ignore (cf. Adam 1998).

What is conceptualised as a natural order of fair-skinned economic, political and latterly even symbolic (religious, media) power does not simply operate in practice as a direct confrontation between good (native or indigenous) and bad (imperial whiteness). Rather, complicated experiences can easily be made meaningful in dualistic models that inform our mental models as much as our research questions. And so it is that in writing about EJ in Britain, particularly when I am myself white, privileged in many ways (and even a non-Brit), I have recreated an analytical framework that operates through a series of dichotomies, even a Manichean struggle between good and evil! And yet that was far from my intention.

What I wanted to achieve was a simple documentation of recent events, a picture that would also highlight what a difficult position EJ campaigners find themselves in. I wanted to highlight how a public, including institutions engaged with environmentalism and social injustice, is itself working through the implications of Empire, encounters already created self-images and myths, and generates new ones, more appropriate to current geopolitical realities and political trends. Many myths about the normativity of whiteness, the purity of the countryside, metropolitan chic and so on, have already been demolished, and new ones are indeed being articulated.

Blair's Britain seems to want to be everybody's friend (at least this was so prior to the new divisions that crystallised through George W. Bush's

war on terrorism). And yet not everyone can be a winner or a friend in an economic and social system based on individualism and competition. Blair's politics still operates within a contradiction between cultural inclusion and economic exclusion, that is, the ideology of a naturally globalised and supposedly even economic terrain. If EJ as a movement is to gain a higher profile in British politics, it has a difficult road ahead. And yet it is specifically the way that class and race discrimination have been experienced and analysed as fundamentally important social realities, that makes the emerging discourse of EJ resonate in Britain, and that may provide the tools to engage more fully with the difficult questions of the distribution of privilege with which environmental social science has long grappled (Suliman 1999). One can still hope that EJ discourses will highlight something that often appears as a virtue of British politics, but which has had little room in the managerialist politics of New Labour's Third Way, namely genuine disagreement and the analytical work such disagreement and antagonisms encourage.

References

Adebowale, Maria (2001) *UK Environmental Justice and Equality Network Remit and Objectives*. London: Capacity/South Bank University.

Agyeman, Julian (2001) 'Ethnic minorities in Britain: short change, systematic indifference, and sustainable development' *J. Environ. Plann.* 3 15-30

Agyeman, Julian and Spooner, Rachel (1997) 'Ethnicity and the rural Environment', Cloke, P. and J. Little (ed.) *Contested Countryside Cultures*, London: Routledge.

Back, Les (1996) *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: racisms and multiculture in young lives*, London: Routledge.

Bird, Tessa and Jordan, Tim (1999) 'Sounding out the new social movements and the Left: Interview with Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin', Jordan, T. and Lent, A. (ed.) *Storming the Millennium: The new politics of change*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Burningham, Kate (2000) 'Using the language of NIMBY: a topic for research, not an activity for researchers', *Local Environment,* Vol.5(1): 55-68.

Castree, Neil and Braun, Bruce (1998) 'The Construction of Nature and the Nature of Construction', Braun, B. ja Castree, N. (ed.) *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millenium*: 3-42. London and New York: Routledge.

Cooper, Davina (1999) 'Private Country? Hunting, land and judicial interventions', Holder, J. and McGillivray, D. (ed.) *Locality and identity: Environmental issues in law and society*, Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company.

Coward, Ros (2001) 'A green light to the developers: new planning laws bypassing environmental concerns make a joke of Blair's vision of sustainability', *The Guardian*, 18/12/01.

DEFRA (*Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*) (2001) 'Government launches strategy to make winter heating easier to afford', internet tiedote: http://www.defra.gov.uk/news/2001/011121a.htm, 21/11/01.

Dowler, Liz (2000) 'Environmental Justice in a Divided Society', Paper presented at Goldsmiths College, 25/2/00. see. Berglund, http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/academic/an/index.html

ESRC (Economic and Social Science Research Council of Britain) (2001) *Environmental Justice: Rights and means to a healthy environment,* Special Briefing No. 7, November 2001.

Evans, Bob (2000)'Environmental Justice in a Divided Society', paper presented at Goldsmiths College, 25/2/00. see. Berglund, http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/academic/an/index.html

Field, Patrick (1999) 'The Anti-Roads Movement: The struggle of memory against forgetting', Jordan, T. and Lent, A. (ed.) *Storming the Millennium: The new politics of change*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Friends of the Earth Scotland (no date) 'The Campaign for Environmental Justice' campaign publication.

Gilroy, Paul (1987) *There ain't no black in the Union Jack*, London: Hutchinson.

Hall, Stuart (1988) 'New Ethnicities', *ICA Documents 7: Black Film British Cinema*, London.Hall, Stuart (1998) 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show', *Marxism Today*, Nov/Dec: 9-14.

Harvey, David (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford.

Hetherington, Peter (2001) 'Green belt fears over Byers reform plans', *The Guardian* 13/12/01.

House of Commons (2002) Global Environmental Change Programme Briefing Launch, 17/1/02.

Holder, J. and McGillivray, D. (ed.) (1999) *Locality and identity: Environmental issues in law and society*, Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company.

Jordan, T. and Lent, A. (ed.) (1999) *Storming the Millennium: The new politics of change*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Keith, Michael and Pile, Steve (ed.) (1993) *Place and the Politics of Identity*, London: Routledge.

Kohler, Paul (1999) 'Common property and private trusts', Holder, J. and McGillivray, D. (ed.) *Locality and identity: Environmental issues in law and society*, Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing Company.

Kuehls, Thom (1996) *Beyond Sovereign Territory: The space of ecopolitics*, Minnesota University Press.

Lower, P. and Goyder, J. (1983) *Environmental Groups in Politics*, London: George Allen and Unwin.

McKay, George (ed.) (1998) *DIY-Culture: Party and protest in nineties Britain*, London: Verso.

Macpherson, W. (1999) *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report*. London: The Stationery Office.

Massey, Doreen (2001) 'Geography on the agenda', *Progress in Human Geography*, 25(1): 5-17.

Milton, Kay (2002) *Loving Nature: towards an ecology of emotion,* London and New York: London and New York: Routledge.

Parekh, Bhikhu (1998) 'Home at last?', *Marxism Today*, Nov/Dec: 54-55.

Pepper, David (1996) *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction*, London: Routledge.

Rassool, Naz (1997) 'Fractured or flexible identities: Life histories of 'black' diasporic women in Britain', Mirza, H. S. (ed.) *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, London: Routledge.

Scandrett, Eurig (2000) 'Community work, sustainable development and environmental justice', *Scottish Journal of Community Work and Development* Vol. 6 Spring, (*Friends of the Earth Scotland* internet site accessed 30/5/01: http://www.foe-scotland.org.uk/nation/ej2.html)

Suliman, Mohamed (1999) *Ecology, Politics and Violent Conflict*, London: Zed Books.

Thomas, Keith (1983) *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*, London: Penguin.

Walker, Gordon and Bickerstaff, Karen (2000) *Polluting the Poor: An emerging environmental justice agenda for the UK?* Critical Urban Studies Occasional Paper, Goldsmiths College, London.

Walker, Gordon; Mooney, John; Pratts, Derek (2000) 'The people and the hazard: the spatial context of major accident hazard management in Britain', *Applied Geography*, 20: 119-135.

Williams, Raymond (1973) *The Country and the City*, London: Chatto and Windus.