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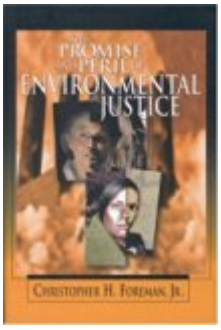
Christopher H. Foreman, Jr. *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice.* Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998. x + 191 pp. $22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8157-2878-8.



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Promises and Reality

Christopher H. Foreman, Jr. has made an important contribution to the discussion on environmental justice. Foreman's work presents some of the dilemmas of environmental justice rhetoric and politics when viewed within the political, social, and economic system of the United States, including mixed motives, multiple agendas, and failures to link policy initiatives with their costs. He catalogues some of the history of environmental justice and many of the arguments for and against the movement in general and specific sites, laws, and regulations. As such, the book–or at least its notes–will be useful to those interested in the environmental justice movement, its regulatory successes, and critiques of its rationale and techniques.

Foreman points to the limited scientific evidence to show that the poor and minorities are exposed to disproportionately high levels of pollution, but fails to probe or even consider the research funding choices that have constrained the available data. When Foreman discusses "unproven" risks and the exorbitant cost of cleaning up the last 10 percent of pollution in a given site, he assumes precisely what is at issue. "Science" is on the side of the polluters because the tools and techniques required to assess the problem-monitoring technology, scientific and engineering personnel, and standard protocols for assessing single sites (much less communities or individual exposure over a lifetime) are still under development or contested in their use. Since Foreman is writing within the tradition of economics or policy analysis, he fails to ask the broader questions about why within the U.S. political and economic system, it falls to the victims of environmental or occupational pollution to prove the harm done to their bodies rather than to polluters or employers to prove the harmlessness of their activities.

As Foreman perceptively points out, within environmental justice rhetoric (and indeed the larger dialogue about health risks of all kinds), it becomes difficult to set priorities among different dangers. Working within a utilitarian framework, Foreman seeks an accounting of which particular pollutants or sites pose the greatest risk to the greatest number. He is explicit about the fact that perspective puts his work in contrast to the activists about whom he writes, who hold the–in his view naive–belief that no one should have to live among toxins. Written with some sensitivity to the legacies of racism, *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice* addresses the concerns for housing and jobs of both rural and urban communities which unite to oppose toxic waste dumps and polluting industries. Unfortunately, this concern is cast throughout the book in patronizing terms, seeing grassroots activists as misguided and irrational, if understandably so.

Foreman's analysis assumes that U.S. society functions–or could function–as exactly the sort of technocratic utopia described in early-twentieth-century novels. Foreman imagines a world in which risks are approached on a "worst things first" basis. Though we may share his dream, the political negotiations and economic machinations that truly decide such questions

seldom work that way, whether in the realm of environmental risks or in other areas where lives are at stake like transportation safety, public health, drug regulation, and energy policy. Visible risks like hazardous waste disposal sites get more attention than those we have become inured to, like the risk of death in an automobile accident. Dramatic events–a new plague, an airplane crash–garner more attention and resources than those which take their victims quietly and alone. We handle health research and services one disease at a time. We treat transportation safety on a case-by-case basis. That we regulate environmental toxins one substance at a time is not a perversion of the policy process, it is business as usual. Ultimately, Foreman's call for an integrated approach to environmental pollution rather than regulation one toxin at a time is shared by many in the environmental justice movement.

Foreman's demands for priority setting assume that if environmental justice advocates (who can hardly be treated as a unitary group as Foreman himself points out) could simply sit down and agree on the order in which environmental sites should be cleaned up or risks should be addressed, that would change something. It is not up to them. They have neither dedicated resources nor enforcement powers over anyone. Under those circumstances, the politically rational response by advocates is to put forth all of their issues simultaneously and as loudly as possible in the hopes that at least a few of them will be taken up by government or business entities with the resources and power to do something about them–which is precisely the response that Foreman finds inflammatory and disorganized. Though the variety of issues may sound a cacophony to policy-makers, it seems to be inherent to the contemporary U.S. political system.

Foreman shrewdly notes that environmental justice advocates come with a variety of goals and agendas from reducing illness and death to building communities and improving quality of life. He fails to appreciate, however, that since these issues present themselves in the same communities as toxic waste sites, it is hardly surprising that they would be addressed by the same legislators and community groups, or that these issues would be tied together in coalition politics. These coalitions nicely illustrate the sociological principle of negative solidarity: A group with a variety of motives and goals can more easily be organized in opposition to a shared threat than in favor of a proposed solution. Perhaps Foreman is right that environmental pollution abatement is not the best way to address needs for job training, economic development, or community empowerment–but he seems to think that the advocates themselves don't know that, rather than that they have made the (likely accurate) judgment that environmental justice is an agenda that might achieve more results in the current political climate than calls for fair housing or jobs programs.

Foreman rightly points out that if we addressed all environmental risks simultaneously and pursued them to complete abatement, the costs could be enormous. What Foreman tellingly fails to ask, is *costs to whom?* He points out that as long as costs are borne by the Federal government or private corporations, local communities have little incentive to economize on clean-up costs. Those costs instead would be felt in terms of higher prices for goods and services and higher federal taxes. He suggests that those in affected communities should be educated as to the cost to citizens of complete clean-ups. But again he fails to ask which citizens. If environmental justice advocates are right that the poor bear disproportionate environmental risks, then he should appreciate that costs which will be borne predominantly by middle and upper class consumers who ultimately derive the majority of the benefits from polluting industries. Rather than being a perversion of economic and environmental justice, such a shift of costs to consumers may be precisely the way to place the full costs of production of goods and services on those who benefit from them.

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