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Environmental Justice Response Paper

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Environmentally Just Disaster Planning: Integrating *Whose* Knowledge?

Comments on Barbara L. Allen, “Environmental Justice and After-Disaster Planning” and
Craig E. Colten, “Can We Create Environmental Justice in a Landscape of Tragedy?”

This paper responds to Barbara Allen’s and Craig Colten’s papers on environmental justice and disaster planning. I open with a brief review of the analytic approach taken by each author. I then use each of the workshop’s three cross-cutting questions to examine key insights from each paper and to put the papers into conversation with one another and with the larger themes of the workshop. I conclude each section by adapting and extending its cross-cutting question based upon insights made by Allen and Colten, which I hope will provide a springboard for general discussion.

Barbara Allen analyzes after-disaster planning by breaking the problem down into five component areas: knowledge, trust, debris disposal, access to rebuilding tools, and repatriation. In each of these areas, Allen shows how current injustices build upon and extend prior injustices such that inequalities accumulate. She provides example after example of how already marginalized social groups bear the brunt of environmental risks and how they are least able to take advantage of the policies implemented to assist Katrina victims. Allen concludes by identifying three organizational strategies that might serve to strengthen citizens’ groups: strong alliances with established national and international environmental groups; enrolling the support of sympathetic experts; and ensuring diverse demographic makeup with regard to class and ethnicity.

Craig Colten also breaks his analysis of environmentally just disaster planning into component pieces, which are conveyed as a progression of questions. Like Allen, Colten situates problems surrounding Katrina in a long history of social injustices. This history

of injustice has resulted in a “disjunction of meanings” surrounding disaster planning and response, where government experts and affected citizens understand differently both the nature of the problem as well as potentially acceptable solutions. Most significantly, Colten distinguishes between USEPA’s technical remedies and citizen’s social struggles, which demand moral as well as technical solutions. A moral solution entails not just ameliorating unacceptable environmental risks in the present, but doing so in a way that acknowledges and responds to past injustices.

• **How might we better integrate ethics/values with technoscientific knowledge?**

In addressing this question, I must first clarify my own intellectual background and the assumptions I bring to questions about values and knowledge. As an STS scholar, I assume that all knowledge is already, necessarily valued. Knowledge abstracted from human ambitions, human understandings, human activities, has no meaning, and hence cannot be “knowledge” in any typical understanding of the word.¹ For me, then, the question is not *how* to integrate values with technoscientific knowledge but rather *which* values are already so integrated, *who* benefits thereby, and *how to challenge* those configurations. Allen and Colten each provide examples of how disaster planners valued different things than those who were most harshly impacted by Katrina and the official governmental response.

Allen, for example, shows how FEMA prioritized rapid response and rapid reopening of (some) neighborhoods, despite known concentrations of toxic sludge, thereby valuing economic recovery over potential health risks. She shows how state public health agencies have long been complicit with industry needs, thereby valuing commercial productivity and jobs over strict adherence to health and safety regulations. She shows how FEMA’s damage declarations procedures were questionable in terms of accuracy and difficult to contest, especially for residents who couldn’t afford to return to New

¹ This is not an argument for epistemological relativism. To say that all knowledge is valued is not the same as to say values determine knowledge, nor is it to say that different domains of knowledge do not have different explanatory power with respect to solving different sorts of problems. To say that all knowledge is valued is merely to say that different domains of knowledge will be valued differently depending on which problems one considers worth solving.

Orleans for the inspection process, thereby valuing bureaucratic protocol over transparency and openness of process. In each of these cases, there is no objective, detached planning expertise needing a strong dose of values to put it on the right path. Rather, certain values inform the decision-making process at the expense of other values, thereby calling to attention the question of how such value determinations are made.

Colten also highlights the values problem in disaster planning by counter posing government planners' technocratic approach with citizens' rights-based approach to environmental justice. By prioritizing "technical fixes" to the complex social process of disaster response, the scientists and lawyers who staffed the USEPA were not acting without values; instead, they valued an analytic approach to environmental justice that met federal legal requirements but failed to connect with citizen understandings of justice (and in fact, as Allen shows, ultimately exacerbated citizens' experiences of injustice).

Even if one is uncomfortable with the claim that all knowledge is necessarily valued, Allen's and Colten's analyses of Katrina planning draw a strong correlation between dominant values informing decision making and unjust outcomes. Thus, for the purposes of group discussion, I would suggest reframing this section's question to ask: How can we rethink technoscientific knowledge to open it up to normative assessment? Or, how would our understanding of the authority of technoscientific knowledge change if its rhetorical underpinnings prioritized *justice* as well as *truth*?

• **How can public education be improved to include pertinent knowledge?**

Allen and Colten identify the same primary challenge to public education in the context of pre and post-Katrina planning: lack of trust rooted in a history of injustice. If members of the public do not trust government leaders or the experts who inform government policy making, official instructions and information concerning mandatory evacuations, land reclamation, damage assessments, health risks, etc. will be ignored or, at best, held in suspicion. Different reasons explain why members of the public have such "deep set mistrust of government officials and their disaster plans" (Colten, 1). The most obvious reason is the perception that official government positions represent interests that conflict

with those of the general public: Allen invokes the historical alignment of government and large industry, in particular the chemical industry, in Louisiana’s Cancer Alley, and Colten explains the historical roots of intentional levee breach rumors—a governmental decision in 1927 to protect elite business interests by intentionally flooding downstream lands and destroying the livelihoods of trappers and oystermen.

Another reason members of the public may ignore government instructions is the perception of disingenuous paternalism on the part government agencies. Colten shows that “largely African American lower Ninth Ward residents were kept out of their neighborhoods far longer [than] those from the largely white Lakeview neighborhood” (3), presumably for ‘their own safety.’ Similarly, Allen tells of FEMA’s handing out a list of recommended protective gear despite the fact that “there was no place within 100 miles to buy any of these items” (5). As residents began returning in larger numbers, it was non-profits, not government, that ultimately began the distribution of such protective gear.

Although problematic, FEMA’s recommendations for protective gear were a step in the right direction. Despite contradictions in how the government approached public education, the need for effective information dissemination is clear. Allen’s example of the laborers working with masks hanging around their necks suggests the importance of effective information dissemination activities. Without trust in government agencies, however, such efforts are doomed to being only marginally successful. To address problems arising from distrust, Allen and Colten suggest the need for a model of public education that accommodates public understandings of the problems they face, rather than ignoring those understandings in an effort to explain to them what they *should* know and do. In this way, government agencies might perform better as *agents* of citizens rather than as their caretakers. Thus, I would suggest reframing our second question in a way that challenges dominant assumptions of “public education”—where the public is understood to be ignorant, “empty vessels” and government officials as providers of knowledge. What sort of interactions between government planners and citizens would enable mutual learning, mutual respect?

- **How might we better integrate knowledge and policy?**

My suggested reframing of each of the prior two cross-cutting questions sets up my analysis of this question. Again, I will reject “knowledge” in the abstract and instead link different sorts of knowledge to specific groups, their experiences, and their understandings. Different people *know* different things, and just policy making must accommodate those differences in ways that leads to broadly agreeable outcomes.

In analyzing who knows what, Allen identifies a disconnection between “local” and “non-local” knowledge surrounding Katrina debris disposal. Local residents who were experienced with hurricane recovery and sludge toxicity separated their debris piles in preparation for a segregated waste stream. In contrast, non-local contractors disregarded this segregation, combined the piles, and hauled away the waste all mixed together. Colten calls attention to a similar “local” knowledge domain: stilt houses and ground-level “basements” were “traditional solutions to hazardous events” afflicting New Orleans. In asking what we might learn from communities who have long coped with environmental hazards, Colten identifies another version of local knowledge that could profitably inform policy making. Indeed, he points out that, through such inclusion, community members “become participants in the planning and partners in the solution” (3). Thus, the first step in better integrating knowledge and policy is to recognize a more central role for local knowledge in the policy-making process.

It is important to point out that local knowledge surrounding Katrina is not limited to context-specific adaptations of more general technoscientific knowledge, as the examples above suggest. (However “local” or appropriate they may be, segregated waste streams and elevated houses are, after all, technical solutions to the problems of disaster management.) Connecting again to questions of public trust in government, knowledge of the history of environmental injustice in New Orleans, in Louisiana, and elsewhere is another form of “local” knowledge that must be accounted for and integrated into policy making if policy outcomes are to be effective and just. As Colten points out, acknowledging and redressing past injustices are an important part of local residents’ expectations concerning a satisfactory and just response to Katrina.

Finally, Allen and Colten both point out the importance of addressing inequities around race and class for environmentally just outcomes. In this sense, the reply to accusations of environmental racism in response to Katrina—and the national dialogue (or dismissal) that followed—wholly missed the mark. The conversation retreated to a simpleminded denial of individual racism on the part of decision makers, including President Bush. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice exclaimed: "Nobody, especially the president, would have left people unattended on the basis of race."² However true it may be, this thinking ignores the racism institutionalized in national disaster planning, New Orleans' economic relations, urban housing patterns, state educational programs, governmental responsiveness, etc. Policies that fail to account for local knowledge surrounding institutionalized racism and class biases in New Orleans will forever struggle for legitimacy among the affected populations they are intended to serve.

To close, then, I would like to reframe our last cross-cutting question: Whose knowledge should be better integrated into policy? Or, rather than seeking to optimize it, how might we rethink the *knowledge prioritization system* currently in place?

² Quoted by the Associated Press, "Rice Defends Bush Against Racism Charges," 4 September 2005. (Quote taken from SFGate.com, accessed 7 March 2006.)