

Networks and Mobile Arrangements: Organisational Innovation in the US Environmental Justice Movement

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This study examines and evaluates the political practice of networking in the US environmental justice movement. Networking is a strategy that has evolved in opposition to perceived problems with centralised organisations, and out of the inherent diversity of the movement. This form of organising not only proposes a remedy to the limitations of the conventional model, but is also more able to confront changes in the nature of power, capital, and the political oversight of environmental problems. The study concludes with an examination of some of problems that might hamper a networked movement.

Over the last decade or so in the US, many grass-roots environmental groups have become increasingly alienated from the major environmental groups and the mainstream environmental lobby.’ Criticisms have increased of a number of aspects of the major organisations, both in their everyday actions and their organisational form. There has been anger at the lacklustre and ineffective campaigns of the mainstream, disappointment at the lack of attention to the diversity of the grassroots, distrust of the professional atmosphere of organisations, frustration with control by the major funding organisations rather than memberships, and criticism of the centralised, hierarchical, professionalised organisations that are not accountable to memberships or local communities.’

In addition, and more specifically, the environmental justice community has been critical of the larger organisations for what they claim is their disregard of the wide variety of environmental hazards faced by people of colour, a paternalistic attitude toward low income and minority communities and grass-roots groups, and the lack of attention to diversity in the memberships, staffs, and boards of the Big Ten groups.’

Increasingly, grass-roots environmental movements have developed an entirely different *form* of organising. The environmental justice community, for example, has responded by organising a movement in a manner quite distinct from the Big Ten – in its model, its structure, and its tactics. Rather

than constructing large Washington-based organisations, this movement has been networking and making connections, creating solidarity out of an understanding and respect for both similarities and differences, and working from a variety of places with a wide array of tactics.

It has become popular to talk about networks in social movements generally and the environmental justice movement specifically. Indeed Diani argues [1995: *xiii*] that it has become the rule rather than the exception to talk about social movements as networks in recent years.⁴ This trend began, one could argue, with the seminal work of Gerlach and Hines [1970] on the loose, dispersed networks of social movements in the 1960s. More recently, Bullard describes the environmental justice movement as a network of civil rights, social justice, and environmental groups.

My purpose here is twofold. First, I examine the *processes* that make up the network that is the environmental justice movement. What does it mean, and what does it look like, to be a social movement that is structured as a network? Secondly, I examine these structures as an *alternative* to the model used by the larger, major US environmental groups, which are structured more like the interest groups of conventional pluralist thinking and design. The argument here is that the environmental justice movement has recognised the limitations of past models of organising and eschews that conventional form and strategy.

I begin by exploring the value of difference in the movement, as the base of the newly developed network structures and processes lies in an acknowledgment of plurality, varied experiences, and diverse understandings of environmental problems. I continue by examining the bases of the environmental justice movement in a number of pre-existing social and political networks. I then turn to how networks link issues and establish alliances among diverse groups, and how networks form in order to deal with environmental issues of varying dimensions. I will also examine some of the reasons why this form of organising is a tactical strength, as it mirrors and maps itself onto the changing nature of the structures and practices of capital and politics. Finally, in an initial attempt to evaluate the network form, I examine some of the difficulties in, and criticisms of, networking as a social movement strategy.

The Value of Plurality

From William James's [1976[1912]] understanding of radical empiricism to Donna Haraway's [1988] situated knowledges, a variety of theorists have insisted on acknowledging that diverse understandings are bred by varied experience. Such an acknowledgment, however, has had trouble making the crossover from theory to political action; numerous examiners of past social movements and attempts at democratic process have pointed this out.⁵ But

environmental justice takes difference seriously, and the recognition of diversity is really at the center of the movement.

While Capek [1993] writes of a singular Environmental Justice ‘frame’, she acknowledges that many environmental justice groups and networks incorporate ideas and themes outside of the frame she defines. This inability to completely frame the movement is crucial. In the various organisations and networks that make up the environmental justice movement, there is no insistence on one singular point of view, one policy that will solve all problems, or one tactic to be used in all battles. There is no one ‘environmental justice,’ ‘minority,’ or ‘grassroots’ view of the environment. One study of social and environmental justice organisations found varied motivations for organising and a **basic belief in the heterogeneous nature of the movement** [ECO, 1992: 3.5, 39]. While there are obvious themes repeated throughout the movement – health, equity, subjugation, and the inattention of governmental agencies and representatives, for example – the particular experiences of these issues, and the formulation of understandings and responses, differ according to place. Rather than one particular frame, there is a coexistence of multiple beliefs as to the causes, situation of, and possible solutions for issues of environmental justice. The movement is constructed from differences such as these, and revels in that fact.

The environmental justice movement has an understanding of perspective and culture as grounded in the experiences of individuals and their communities. Knowledge is seen as situated, and hence the diversity of perspectives that emerge are seen as points of view located solidly in a particular place. The challenge of the movement is to validate this diversity in order to bring it into a network and add to its strength. As Barbara Deutsch Lynch argues:

If environmental discourses are culturally grounded, they will differ in content along class and ethnic lines. Where power in society is unequally distributed, not all environmental discourses will be heard equally. Thus, questions of environmental justice must address not only the effects of particular land uses or environmental policies on diverse groups in society, but the likelihood that alternative environmental discourses will be heard and valued [1993:110].

Environmental justice requires an understanding of the existence and importance of multiple perspectives and the validation of that variety. The cultural pluralism that forms the base of the movement, once recognised, opens opportunities for collaboration and the innovation of common action.

The processes that were present in the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit of October 1991 serve as an example of

the importance placed on plurality. Resisting a political process that many saw as built on keeping people of color divided, participants emphasized that all those coming to the table would be respected, that there would be equity in participation across race, ethnicity, gender, and region. Numerous participants noted the openness to difference, the listening to others, the mutual respect, solidarity, and trust that were both expressed and affirmed at the conference (see, for example, Grossman [1994]; Lee [1992]; Miller [1993]). Organisers worked to make the experience, at its base, inclusive.

Participants affirmed that difference and plurality, forged with mutual respect into solidarity, add a strength to the movement. There were differences around race, gender, age, culture, and the urban/rural split, among others.” Dana Alston argued that the Summit brought a spirit of solidarity, and that the most important thing was the bonding that occurred across the differences [DiChiro, 1992: 104]. Lee notes that the openness and inclusivity of the process showed that ‘difference can be cooperative instead of competitive, that diversity can lead to higher harmony rather than deeper hostility’ [Lee, 1992: 52]. What appeared through a respect for the many different stories, perspectives, and cultures, were some common themes. Difference was forged into unity, but a unity that kept diversity, rather than uniformity, at its base. Participants entered diverse; they left both diverse and unified.

The point here is that diversity is more than a slogan for environmental justice. There is attention paid to the many different experiences people have in their environments, the cultures that inform those experiences, and the various evaluations and reactions that emerge from them. Recognising and validating these differences is at the heart of environmental justice.

The Social Bases of Networks

The networks that make up the environmental justice movement differ from the organising of the Big Ten from the very base, and one of the key differences between the major organisations and grass-roots networks is where participants actually come from. Big Ten groups grew tremendously in the 1980s, and have become increasingly dependent on recruiting people from mailing lists – people who have no previous connections to the groups, but share basic interests. Conversely, local environmental justice and anti-toxics groups most often begin **with** people **as** real members of community social networks.

Solidarity originates in community relationships – pre-existing social networks around where people live, work, play, and worship. A number of sociologists [e.g. Fischer; 1977: Wellman, Carrington and Hall, 1988] have written about the importance of social and civic networks in creating

community, and social movement theorists have picked up on the relationship between these networks and social action. As Tarrow [1994: 6] has argued, the magnitude and duration of much collective action 'depend[s] on mobilizing people through social networks and around identifiable symbols that are drawn from cultural frames of meaning'. Organisation emerges out of shared experiences and existing social networks around family, neighbourhood, school, work, religion, and racial and ethnic identity.'

Pre-existing relations and social networks have been crucial in the organisation of the environmental justice movement. Churches have played a major role: the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice did the first major study of the relationship between toxic wastes and race [United Church of Christ, 1987] and was the major organiser of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit. The United Methodist Church's Department of Environmental Justice and Survival and the National Council of Church's Eco-Justice Working Group have also helped to bring religious networks into the development of the movement. Other pre-existing social networks, such as established social justice organisations, community organising centres, and historically black colleges, have added to the movement.

Two illustrations should suffice here. In the Southwest, the establishment of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ), came out of an original meeting and 'dialogue' that built on a decade of previous organising of groups working in issues such as police repression, immigration, food and nutrition, health care, campus issues, land and water rights, and worker/community issues of plant sitings [Moore and Head, 1994, 192]. One member group of SNEEJ, the Mothers of East Los Angeles (MELA), is a closely knit group of Mexican American women who organised in opposition to the siting of a prison, oil pipeline, and toxic waste incinerator in their neighbourhood [Pm-do, 1990]. The mothers already had some contact with one another through traditional roles as the caretakers of the health and schooling of their children, and it was through these networks that they disseminated information about the numerous unfortunate plans for the neighbourhood. They also used the common experience of the church: weekly Monday marches would be organised through Sunday contacts [Schwab, 1994: 56].⁸

The point here, and one that distinguishes the environmental justice movement from the major groups in the US, is that people become involved not through mailing lists, but from the variety of systems of pre-existing support.

People get to build support, friendship, camaraderie, goodwill, and fellowship with people they already know. If they have to form a

coalition with others, it is not one person going cold turkey to deal with a group of unfamiliar people; it is a group of people who have already established some relationships with others whose interests might be similar, interfacing with another group [Taylor, 1992: 43].

At the base of networks are not simply shared interests, but more broadly shared experiences. Their origins demonstrate a politics of relations rather than a politics of isolated bodies of interest.

Linking Issues, Creating Networks

The environmental justice movement expands the notion of environment by defining it not just as external nature or the 'big outside', but as the places that people live, work, and play. Environment is community [Di Chiro, 1995]. The movement address 'environmental' issues as they relate to a broader agenda which includes employment, education, housing, health care, the workplace, and other issues of social, racial, and economic justice [Austin and Schill, 1991]. As Pulido has argued [1996: 192-3] environmental justice struggles are not strictly environmental. Instead, they challenge multiple lines of domination, and 'it is difficult to discern where the environmental part of the struggle begins and where it ends.' This linkage of issues is evident in surveys [ECO, 1992: 35], and in much of the literature of the movement itself [e.g., Alston, 1990: 13; Cole, 1992: 641; Lee, 1993: 50; Moore and Head, 1993: 118]. Richard Moore of SNEEJ argues, 'we see the interconnectedness between environmental issues and economic justice issues' (Moore quoted in Almeida [1994: 22]. Lois Gibbs, of the Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW),⁹ notes that 'environmental justice is broader than just preserving the environment. When we fight for environmental justice we fight for our homes and families and struggle to end economic, social and political domination by the strong and greedy' [CCHW, 1990: 2].

This understanding of an environmentalism with diverse issues and an assertion of linkage calls for a broader movement — one that must necessarily forge a solidarity among a range of groups and movements. This type of networking across issues and groups is a key defining characteristic, and organising strategy, of the growing environmental justice movement. Examples of these issue linkages, and the concomitant networking, are numerous. Individual member organisations of SNEEJ often deal with the interrelationship of issues of race, class, and gender. Activists battling computer chip plants often have to deal not only with issues of contamination, but also with the politics of public subsidies of private corporations. Organisers working on health problems of strawberry pickers

in California are inevitably brought into the contested terrain of immigration law.

While individual groups begin by working on specific issues, they often come to see not only the theoretical links between diverse problems, but usually begin to take on some of the other issues that affect them. As Peggy Newman, a past field organiser for CCHW, explains, '[i]nstead of seeing differences in our work for environmental justice and homelessness, health advocacy, worker rights, immigrant rights, community economic development, gay and lesbian rights, we must look for the common ground among the issues and be willing to assist in each others' efforts and coordinate our work' [Newman, 1994: 94]. Some see the linking of issues in the movement as a unifying phenomenon [Hofrichter, 1993: 89].

But it is important here to note that this type of unity does not emphasise uniformity. Networks and alliances in the environmental justice movement depend as much on their differences and autonomy as they do on unity. In the formation of networks of solidarity, this is an important notion: that there is not necessarily one single unifying commonality, a single glue or mortar. Instead, a network holds itself together along the common edges of its pieces -where there is similarity or solidarity. The resulting mosaic itself - the movement-becomes the major commonality. Within a network, there remains both multiplicity and commonality.

Some networks or alliances are very conscious of this issue. Groups that share environmental concerns may still have radical differences. Yet the commonality of environmental experience serves as the mortar, even when there are differences in culture, style, ideology, or tactics. Respect for differences goes hand in hand with the building of an alliance." SNEEJ, for example, is constantly working to keep Asian and African-American, Latino and Native American, urban and rural, and other differences, part of the network. When the women of South Central Los Angeles were battling a city-proposed incinerator, they were joined by white, middle-class women from two slow-growth groups across the city. Hamilton notes that '[t]hese two groups of women, together, have created something previously unknown to the City of Los Angeles - unity of purpose across neighborhood and racial lines' [Hamilton, 1990: 11]. Part of the crucial task of building networks is developing co-operation across numerous gaps - geographic, cultural, gender, social, ideological - and numerous organisations have come to see part of their task as the building of bridges between diverse communities and organisations [Anthony and Cole, 1990: 16; Schwab, 1994: 415; Williams, 1993]. The resulting alliances and networks span diverse issues, individuals, and groups, connecting them while continuing to recognize the numerous foundations those bridges are based on.

Rhizomes, Locality and the Breadth of Networks

Networks, in addition, have grown beyond the bounds of these examples of working together solely on the local level. Environmental problems do not limit themselves to the imposed boundaries of neighbourhood, city, state, or nation. Neither nature on its own, nor the environmental problems we construct through our interaction with it, confine themselves to a single level. Networks have developed along a number of lines that environmental problems and issues spread.

The metaphor of the rhizome is useful here. Rhizomes are a type of root system that does not send up just one sprout or stalk; rather, they spread underground and emerge in a variety of locations. Rhizomes connect in a way that is not visible - they cross borders and reappear in distant places without necessarily showing themselves in between." The rhizome metaphor may be helpful in discussing situations that may be localised, but still shared by people in different places. Rhizomatic organising is based in making the connections -recognising patterns across both distance and difference. The conditions outside an oil refinery, municipal incinerator, or silicon chip manufacturer will be similar no matter where they are located, and so those communities will share environmental problems. Networks, then, may be built not only by people and organisations with differences coalescing around a particular local or regional problem, but also as people in distant areas respond to similar circumstances - toxic waste sites, types of manufacturing, particular toxins, shared health problems.

Local groups in the growing anti-toxics and environmental justice movement rarely remain isolated and unconnected. What makes environmental justice a *movement* are the linkages formed beyond the local. Most groups make links to other groups in their own locale, but, increasingly, groups make contact with outside organisations and existing networks which can provide resources, information, and solidarity. This 'translocality', as Di Chiro [1997] calls it, brings together groups and communities that would not otherwise have identified or developed a sense of commonality.

The first key large-scale network to develop came directly out of Love Canal and the Love Canal Homeowners Association (LCHA). Lois Gibbs and the LCHA were inundated with requests for information as the story of Love Canal and their fight with the local, state, and federal governments spread [Gibbs, 1982]. Gibbs and other volunteers began the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (CCHW) with the idea of helping other communities organise for environmental justice. By 1993, they had reported assisting over 8,000 groups [CCHW, 1993: 3].

Networking at the CCHW happens in a number of ways. As a resource

centre, the CCHW funnels information about key toxics, issues, industries, and companies to communities who are faced with these particular environmental problems. Communities share their experiences with the CCHW, enriching the resource base for other communities. The CCHW also distributes information about specific problems **and** issues in organising, such as fundraising, research, leadership, running meetings, legal issues, and the problems faced by women as they become increasingly involved in a political battle. They also send organisers to work with citizen groups on environmental and organisational issues. The organisation sponsors regional Leadership Development Conferences, where local leaders from various communities come together to share knowledge, experiences, and tactics. And CCHW holds a national gathering every year, which in addition to enabling networking, gives people the sense that their local battle is part of a larger, diverse movement.

In addition, the CCHW helps to bring individuals and communities together in a number of ways. Often, individuals or groups that call with a specific issue are put directly in touch with nearby groups that have had similar experiences. One of the unwritten rules of the CCHW is that if you get help, you are also expected to give it to others [CCHW, 1989: I]. A local group that has been victorious, keeping a facility out of their community, will be encouraged to follow the story and see where a company is likely to try again. They then contact grassroots groups in these communities, warning them of the impending issue and offering assistance in organising.

The CCHW also focuses on the space between the local and the national, with an emphasis on 'larger than locals'. As local grassroots groups continually spring up, they need someone or group to turn to. The national group is there, but they cannot be continually everywhere and all-knowing. The larger than locals occupy the middle space. They are often state-wide organizations who know specific state laws and related battles, and are more accessible for help on a daily basis [S. Lynch, 1993: 48-9]. Larger than locals may develop and stay focused around specific issues, offering networking and assistance to groups dealing with these issues. Or they may expand either on the issues they deal with or on the tactics used.

One of the other most well-organised environmental justice organisations is the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ). After its beginning in a dialogue of Latino, Asian American, African American, and Native American activists from over thirty community organisations in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California, the Network has become involved in campaigns around environmental justice in the EPA, the impact of high-tech industries on communities, justice on the US-Mexico border, sovereignty and toxic dumping on Native lands, and farmworker pesticide

exposure. SNEEJ focuses on the importance of linkages, and has used networking to make a variety of connections.

Member groups of SNEEJ include those involved in struggles in both urban and rural communities, such as those fighting contamination from oil refineries in Richmond, CA, and those who live near the waste site in Kettleman City, CA, where toxic materials from the refinery are dumped. SNEEJ also has developed a network of communities that have dealt specifically with issues raised by the location of particular industries, such as the microelectronics industry. SNEEJ expanded this work in developing, with the Campaign for Responsible Technology (CRT), the Electronics Industry Good Neighbor Campaign (EIGNC). In its origins it tied together communities in Albuquerque, Austin, Phoenix, and San Jose; it has expanded to include groups in Portland and Eugene, Oregon, as well as groups across the border in Mexico.

The growing concern with networking and alliances, and the development of a rhizomatic movement, works against the NIMBY misnomer and the claim that local protests against environmental problems and undesirable land use comes from an 'enclave consciousness'. Plotkin [1990: 226, 229] argues that 'the place-bound confines of neighborhood constituted the relevant "environment" of community land-use protest ... Clearly the end result of the enclave consciousness is a policy of "beggar thy neighbor" as community groups regularly seek to export or exclude the perceived "bads" of urban life while fencing in the goods.' The only aims of these groups, he argues, are to avoid domination and be left alone [1990: 227]. But the development of networks and alliances expands the understanding of community and locality. Numerous neighbourhoods need protection, and the way to get that is not to be left alone, but to develop solidarity with others facing the same dangers in their neighborhoods. Activists celebrate the grass-roots links forged with other communities. As they argue, environmental justice is not about NIMBY, but rather the critical invention of new forms of coalition politics [Avila, 1992].

The anti-toxics movement may have begun isolated, with communities fighting companies and local governments on their own. But after Love Canal, hundreds of citizen groups began to form, and they reached out to others. The EPA's own study on public opposition to the siting of hazardous waste facilities [US EPA, 1979], notes that siting opposition before 1978 was done almost exclusively by groups on their own, while after 1978 more than half of the groups began to network in some way. Just as Love Canal became a focal point in 1978, resistance to PCB dumping in the majority African-American Warren County, North Carolina in 1982 became a focal point for further organising around environmental racism and environmental justice. Community groups are no longer isolated; far from

NIMBY and enclave consciousness, connections are being made with an understanding that the concern is with 'Everyone's Backyard'."

Network as Organisational Structure

The concept and practice of networks applies not only to pre-existing structures that evolve into political organisations, or the formation of groups around interrelated issues in various localities, but also to the very organisational structure of many of these groups. Previous ties in the neighbourhood, such as those that aided in the development of MELA, or **previous social justice networks**, which came together to form SNEEJ, become the basis of more formal organisation. But these networked organisations are quite distinct from a centralised, hierarchical, formal social movement organisation – what Zald and McCarthy [1987:20] call an 'SMO'.

In fact, it is a critique of the SMOs, or major environmental organisations, that has driven the environmental justice movement to a more decentralised structure. The top-down, centralised managerial style and structure of the major groups has been criticised as disempowering, paternalistic, and exclusive. Organisers of the environmental justice movement have been conscious of the need to keep ownership of the movement in the hands of everyday participants, rather than in centralised organisations." The key for organisers has been to create organisational models that are sufficient for networking purposes and strong enough to confront issues, but yet are both flexible and diverse enough to respond to changing circumstances at the local level.

Documents and discussions within the movement repeatedly stress the importance of decentralisation, diversification, and democratisation, as opposed to the centralised organisation with a singular leadership. When activists gathered for the regional dialogue that led to the development of SNEEJ, there were some that wanted a national organisation – but most argued for the importance of developing the network at the grassroots and regional levels [Almeida, 1994: 30]. The CCHW has also eschewed centralisation, arguing that 'it is empowered communities and local group autonomy that makes us strongest' [CCHW, 1993: 3]. Those gathering at the First National People of Color Leadership Summit also declined the temptation to develop a centralised organisation, and emphasised the importance of organising networks. Many activists noted that one of the most promising achievements of the summit was its commitment to an organisational model that stressed diversity and non-hierarchical principles, in contrast to the technocratic managerial style of the mainstream environmental groups [Di Chiro, 1992: 105]. Richard Moore of SNEEJ

argued that the Summit was not about building an organisation, but rather 'building a movement. As a movement gets built, it starts from the bottom up. And those movements that we have seen develop from the top down are no longer there. So what we are about here is building a network, or building a net that works' [Lee, 1992: 19].

Recognising, drawing on, and formalising the loose links among activists and other neighbourhood, familial, or occupational ties of solidarity, recent networks have developed a unique relationship between their center and base. As Tarrow [1994: 146] argues, 'the strategy of drawing on existing structures of solidarity may weaken the ties between center and base, but, when it succeeds, the resulting heterogeneity and interdependence produce more dynamic movements than the homogeneity and discipline that were aimed at in the old social-democratic model'. Brecher and Costello [1990: 333] note the importance of multiple organisations and levels of coordination in distinguishing between new networks and old forms of organizing. The heterogeneity and dynamism discussed by Tarrow, and multiplicity and coordination noted by Brecher and Costello, are apparent throughout the grass-roots environmental justice movement. Rather than a singular, centralised, and formal organisation, the movement has stressed a network structure – bottom-up, informal, spontaneous, and multiple. All of the qualities that supposedly destroy organisation have served, in fact, to build and sustain a movement..

Both SNEEJ and the CCHW have developed organisational and decision-making structures that take these lessons and principles seriously.¹⁴ In SNEEJ, guidelines lay out the right of member organisations to be heard, respected, and involved in all aspects of the Network, including participation in committees and the coordinating council, in the decision-making process, and in resolutions for the annual gathering. SNEEJ guidelines insist that each individual and organisation that is part of the Network also has the right to self-control, autonomy, and self-determination [SNEEJ, 1993]. The ideals of the Network are based on the combination of decentralisation and solidarity."

The CCHW has recently changed their organizing model to further emphasise community networking. The 'New Deal' replaced field offices with an 'Alliance of Citizen Organizers' [Brody, 1994]. CCHW trains local groups who volunteer to help other groups and leaders in their area. But the individual Alliance groups are responsible for organising with, and offering specific technical assistance to, groups in their region. Alliance members also participate as strategists for the CCHW, meeting in Roundtable format on specific issues such as dioxin, sludge, and economic development. This new model puts primary emphasis on direct networking between groups, further strengthening the network rather than the central CCHW office or staff.¹⁶

A network, then, is not simply the connection between issues and groups, but is a particular method and practice of that connection as well. Function, in this case, follows form.

Diversifying Tactics and Resources

One of the other key strengths of networking is the use of numerous, yet interlinked, strategies and tactics. Networking allows for two types of strategic diversity in the realm of tactics. First is the use of various points from which the movement addresses an issue, from the local level up through the national and international. Local groups have been involved in front line struggles at plant sites and waste dumps. Groups have coalesced regionally and statewide, bringing a number of groups into a focused attack. And the movement has addressed national issues, including government and industrial policy as well as the practices and policies of the national environmental groups.

In addition, at each of these levels the movement has used a variety of tactics and strategies, both legal and extralegal. People have circulated petitions and talked to neighbours; they have attended local government meetings and organised their own accountability sessions for local officials, candidates, agencies, and companies. There have been innumerable legal demonstrations, rallies, marches; a few picketed shareholder meetings and creative street theater actions; and a variety of organised illegal sit-ins and blockades.¹⁸ There have also been numerous administrative complaints, citizen suits and tort actions [Cole, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c]. Finally, environmental justice groups and networks have pushed for changes in public policy, again from the local level up to the international.

All of these tactics are seen as useful to the progress and growth of the movement, and none is seen as an end in itself. Even those that focus on changing environmental policy and laws see the limitations of a focus on that singular strategy.¹⁸ The key to the success of the networking strategy is the simultaneous use of a wide range of tactics. A movement organised as a network has an inherent organisational flexibility. Groups can use the types of tactics suited to their own local situation while coordinating these actions with others. And individual groups can themselves try a variety of tactics as their struggle continues. At the CCHW, this is understood, in part, as 'flexibility' [CCHW, 1993: 36].

But it is also the respect for the importance of cultural and ideological diversity in the CCHW's network which leads to a respect for diverse tactical approaches:

Instead of trying to walk, talk and look the same we should celebrate how different cultures, ways of acting and approaches to fighting the

issues have involved many more people in our struggle and brought about change... Some communities protest in the streets and take over public meetings, while others hold prayer vigils outside public buildings and walks of concerns led by their religious leaders. It is allowing people to act in a manner in which they are comfortable, and retaining their cultural ways and values that keeps us moving forward. This diversity of people and cultures also keeps those in power from knowing what to expect and from controlling us. We should embrace our diversity as it is one of our most powerful tools [CCHW, 1993: 3].

In welcoming a variety of types of community participation in the movement, the CCHW demonstrates, once again, that inclusivity builds strength.

Networking also allows for a thorough and efficient pooling and mobilisation of resources. Local groups involved in a project, campaign, or action require a variety of resources. Groups need technical information, advice on, and analysis of specific issues. Assistance will be needed on organisational issues – structure, leadership, participation. Most will need either advice on finding funding or direct monetary support. More than likely groups will eventually have a need for legal advice and services. And there is always the issue of how to approach, use, and deal with the media. Networking makes for the possibility of the mobilisation of resources -both internally, by the sharing of the existing resources of the network, and externally, by linking with other groups or networks which can provide various resources.

The internal sharing of resources is one of the basic reasons for organising networks. The CCHW, for example, is seen as a 'support mechanism' that assists thousands of grass-roots groups around the country [Newman, 1993]. SNEEJ notes that part of its task is the provision of a broad base of support for local, state, and regional work. Both organisations provide education, technical assistance, training in leadership, assistance in obtaining funding from various sources, and help in attending and participating in actions and events from local to international. But resources flow not only from the centre of the network outward, for example, from the main offices of CCHW or SNEEJ, but from group to group within networks as well. One activist argues that the point of networking 'is that we can teach each other. And that is how you begin to pool resources, monetary, intellectual and strategy' (quoted in Lee [1992: 45]). Groups use networks to build on local knowledge of a particular issue, and then pass that information along to other groups. Networks also help in the exchange of ideas and the pooling of resources by helping local groups get in touch with other networks or groups (experts in law, government processes, or

particular areas of environmental research) who may specialise in a particular issue area. Grass-roots groups may also link up with larger, more established environmental groups, such as Greenpeace and the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC). Many activists argue that their campaigns would not have been possible without the resources of national organisations [e.g., *Calpotura and Sen, 1994: 2.55; Oliver; 1994: 90-91*]. This networking greatly increases the resources available to any one group that might have worked in isolation.

Here it is important, and interesting, to note that even with the grass-roots critique of the major environmental organisations many local environmental justice groups network with, and use the resources of, those same organisations. There is a long history of this type of synergy and co-operation, going back to the Environmental Defense Fund's work with the United Farm Workers and California Rural Legal Assistance on the issue of DDT in the late 1960s. More recently, a number of national groups have assisted in the development of the national environmental justice networks even as they have been criticised for policies, or their presence in local communities has created problems. EDF, for example, has been thoroughly criticised for its well-known hijacking of the McDonald's styrofoam campaign [*Dowie, 1995: 139-40*], and has been specifically accused of environmental racism in their support of pollution trading rights in the US (which gives permission, say critics, to older facilities in poor neighborhoods and communities of color to pollute over otherwise legal limits). Yet recently EDF has been of assistance to the National Oil Refinery Action Network (NORAN), which has filed an environmental racism suit against the California Air Resources Board for an emission trading scheme in Los Angeles [*Cone, 1997*]. Greenpeace has also been criticised by local groups in the past for being outsiders who hijack issues and campaigns, but the organisation has been active in key environmental justice battles in from the founding protest of the movement in Warren County, North Carolina to key victories in both Kettleman City and Los Angeles, California."

The central issue in relationships such as these is how the groups are to work together. Again, it is the *process* that is crucial to grassroots groups, and it is not surprising that issues of process are central to grass-roots criticisms of the major organisations. Grass-roots groups in the environmental justice network have been willing to work with the major groups (especially given their resources), but the emphasis is on the *with*. The movement has welcomed tactical alliances and meaningful partnerships, but have insisted on retaining local control over issues and campaigns. The national organisations are respected parts of a network as long as they *assist* in an issue rather than attempt to *direct* local groups. I will come back to this issue in evaluating the network form.

Confronting Changes in Capital and Politics

There are many who argue that the US environmental movement must continue its liberal organisational strategy – that differences in the movement must be smoothed over in order to present a united front as an interest group pushing for plausible legislation [e.g., *Norton, 1991*]. And there is no shortage of environmental pundits attempting to push the movement in one direction or another, with one singular ideology or another. The argument here, on the other hand, is that a political strategy of networking strengthens the movement with a mobilisation of diversity. Networking gives a movement many points of attack, positions from which to argue, and tactics to use, while helping to pool resources efficiently. Networks are also a countermeasure against changes in the understanding of power, changes in political oversight, and, most importantly, changes in the nature of production and political economy.

First, many theorists have discussed the relationship among various forms of power or control and the value of a diverse, and linked response. Foucault [1978, 1979, 1980] has argued that power itself is a network that needs to be examined in its extremities. Laclau and Mouffe [1985] have also asserted that there are numerous forms of power and antagonisms in the social realm, and networks can develop in response. Haraway [1985, 1991: 170] argues that an understanding of the web-like structure of power may lead to new couplings and coalitions. Networks develop, then, not just out of pre-existing social relations and responses to environmental problems, but also out of an understanding of, and alliance around, how power links issues. This is illustrated most forcefully by the fact that most local environmental justice organisations may begin with a single issue in mind, but most often begin to relate issues and various forms of domination.

Second, and perhaps most obviously, capital itself has taken on a more rhizomatic form which poses a problem for previous interest group strategies. Capital's expanding strategy includes flexibility in production systems, a geographical division of labour, a geographical dispersal of production, and an ethic of mobility which enables companies to take advantage of capital and employment conditions they judge to be most advantageous [*Harvey, 1991*]. In response, a number of recent works on grass-roots environmentalism [e.g., *Brecher and Costello, 1994b; Gould, Schnaiberg, Wienberg, 1996; Karliner, 1997*] have focused on the need to revise and update the political strategy of the environmental movement in the face of the transnationalisation of political economy. On one level, individual localities and states have less control (in terms of environmental and labor laws) over such mobile capital – and the trend is increasingly to *reduce* such controls in order to attract industry [*Gould, 1991*]. On another

level, neither national nor local organisations working alone can produce the pressure necessary to implement such controls. National environmental organisations simply do not have the political clout to impose restrictions on capital, and local groups working in isolation are up against the corporate promises of economic development (and political contributions). As Gould *et al.* [1996] describe, environmental protection is sacrificed in the face of the 'treadmill of production'. Increasing regimes of 'free trade' will continue this transition.

The necessary response to this treadmill, however, is the network. In that network organising makes it possible to respond in numerous areas simultaneously, it is a more formidable opponent to such structures and strategies. The response to transnational capital (and the translocal mobility of that capital) must, of necessity, be coordinated networks and coalitions."

Finally, though obviously related, the third type of change that networks are suited for is the evolving nature of the political sphere, especially when it comes to environmental oversight. Political decisions are made on more than just the national level. At the state, county, and local level, decisions on issues of growth, environmental regulation, and corporate incentive packages are crucial to both industry and citizens. On the other hand, however, the globalisation of capital also minimises the decision-making realm of the nation state as the market seeks to take its place. If the major environmental groups continue their focus on the national government, then they miss a host of relevant political decisions. Citizen action is necessary on the regional and local level, because that is where much of the control remains lodged; it is necessary on the global level because the institutions of governance there are so limited (and undemocratic). And it is necessary to network across each of these levels, as political power flows through them simultaneously. In their respective analyses of grass-roots environmental organising, both Szasz [1994] and Gould, Schnaiberg and Weinberg [1996] stress the importance, and strength, of coalitions under current political-economic conditions. For the latter, this form of resistance is necessary to counter the 'transnational treadmill of production' [1996:196].

Brecher and Costello [1994a, 1994b], have used the metaphor of Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians to describe the networking strategy. The little people used a web of hundreds of threads to capture Gulliver. Similarly, a variety of local actions, woven together, creates a network strong enough to tackle problems larger than those which any locality might be able to deal with on its own. The various threads that make up a powerful network come from numerous positions; the basis of network organising is to recognise, validate, and forge solidarity with these various positions. The emphasis is on both the importance of each and the strength in numbers of the numerous strands.

The argument here is that the environmental justice movement represents just such a Lilliputian, transnational, translocal, rhizomatic movement. It is a 'large' movement, but it is large because of the sheer number of local and small-scale groups that have interacted and intertwined as local concern with toxics, environmental inequity, and environmental racism has grown. Both the Movement, and its political success, have come with this linking.

The environmental justice movement is seen as a threat [Waxman, 1992; USEPA, 1991] because it merges both groups and issues. It brings environmental, economic, and democratic issues to the table, and refuses to break those issues down according to the lines of governmental authority – toxics issues to EPA, workplace issues to OSHA, participation issues to state legislators. Like the Lilliputians, the movement has worked together to combine forces, creating a network that shows numerous signs of success. The activities of the network have not only strengthened local groups and community resistance and attracted new grass-roots organisations, but they have been instrumental in identifying and addressing the larger problems that are shared, in numerous ways, across these diverse communities. In doing so, they have also affected environmental policy at both local and national levels. As Penny Newman argues [CCHW, 1993: 21], '[w]hen the networks of women of color and poor communities of the US and the networks from around the world merge into a cooperative network the reverberations will be felt in every corporate board room and governmental stronghold worldwide'. Ambitious, maybe, but actions and responses to date point to its plausibility.

Evaluating the Strategy

Up to this point, I have tried to lay out the motivation, design, and workings of the networked organisational structure in the environmental justice movement, as well as show its possible promise and effectiveness. But it seems suitable at this point to ask a simple question of network organizing: is it a thoroughly workable form? It is possible to list the numerous victories of the US movement – the closure of waste dumps and incinerators, the prevention of others, the establishment of an Office of Environmental Justice in the EPA, President Clinton's Executive Order on Environmental Justice, and others.²¹ But I want to evaluate the network strategy by examining three issues that may be the greatest weakness of the form: the problems of longevity, relationships over distance and difference, and the lack of an overall alternative vision.

First, networks by their very definition are mobile arrangements. Local groups often dissipate when their concern has run its course – after either

victory Or loss. Projects and campaigns begin and end, and individuals and groups burn out. Sustained resistance is rare. What happens when some of the Lilliputians drop their strings? The problem with this lack of staying power is that both governmental agencies and corporations are influenced by longevity; while they can often wait out sporadic protests, they have a much more difficult time ignoring community organisations and networks that have become established and coordinated.

But one strength of the network form is that the contact remains, even if informal. Groups which pull back, or even dissipate, will often be ready for new mobilisations. In one example, a local group in the Southwest US was very active in the Campaign for Responsible Technology (CRT) until it dropped out of the network in order to pursue more specific issues of the indigenous peoples of the region. One organiser of the CRT noted the sense of loss that came with this departure, and the effect of the loss of that one link in the larger network. But as the CRT developed a project on the water use of the high tech industry [*SWOP/CRT, 1997*], the group which had dropped out offered input specific to the effects on indigenous populations.

In addition (and related) to the issue of longevity, networks must constantly keep up relations across both distance and difference. Difficulties of this sort come in a number of forms. When very different communities, or groups within communities, come together some may see themselves becoming part of a larger movement, while others remain most firmly associated with their most pressing particular issues. Within networks, solidarity is understood differently by different groups. Hence, a group working on indigenous issues might not see themselves completely aligned with a network which addresses the high tech industry, even if their respective foci overlap in numerous places.

Within a varied network like SNEEJ, other difficulties arise. Activists have complained that the resources of the network go to those groups or communities which 'cry loudest', which often happen to be the groups or communities which already have some resources at their disposal. And, of course, networks or coalitions that form within specific geographical areas, like a large city, face race and gender issues. A white member of an active group in a Western city told me that all the media, government, and foundation attention is paid to groups primarily of people of colour, which were, in his mind, neither as broad nor as effective as his own group. Elsewhere, some minority activists have pressured white activists and academics to leave the articulation of issues of environmental justice solely to people of colour [*Epstein, 199.5: 7*]. Obviously, these attitudes – and it is difficult to determine whether they are minor or widespread – hamper the development and longevity of environmental justice networks.

Yet another tension in the development of network relations over

distance and difference is the relation between the grassroots and the major and/or mainstream environmental organisations. As noted previously, while grassroots groups are often very critical of the major groups, they have often turned to these groups – and their resources – for alliances on specific campaigns and actions. Differences certainly remain between local groups, major organisations, and all that fall in between. The major groups often continue to ignore localised issues, and refrain from participating in them even when asked by locals. But a number of the major groups have learned that, while grass-roots groups and networks are suspicious of the mainstream, they do appreciate their assistance, as long as it is offered within a respectful process. Hence, the mainstream groups that work most successfully with the grassroots are those that work with the local groups, listen to their concerns, and do not make major moves without consultation with, and direction from, those locals. Generally, and as discussed by Gould et al. [*1996:195–6*], the most successful efforts are made when alliances are formed between grassroots and larger regional or national organisations. Conversely, local mobilisations are often short and unsuccessful if the national groups 'countermobilize' against them.

Finally, it could be argued that any political struggle or movement that took on the rhizomatic form and decentralised functions of a network would simply become an amalgamation of numerous *decentered* struggles, incapable of dealing with the 'big pictures' of power, political economy, or the globalisation of many environmental issues. On the contrary, the assertion here has been that multiple, localised oppositions are a tactical strength. The key is the application of diverse critiques, approaches, and styles in various places of action.²² Environmental degradation is not simply the singular product of a lone 'mega-machine' which can easily be unplugged in one place or with one singular changed practice. The targets of the environmental movement are varied; and so the movement itself is necessarily decentred and multiple. The issues and abuses that form the motivations for political action need to be targeted at the local level, in the multiplicity of places where they emerge. The multiplicity of experiences, issues, and resistances that have developed in the environmental justice movement call for and exemplify diverse approaches to change in varied venues. The basis of the movement is this composite character, and the plurality of levels of attack.

The criticism of all of this, of course, is that the focus is on resistance, and not on large-scale visions of global alternatives. On the contrary, the argument here is that solidarity across locally-based groups creates movements that reach and connect beyond the local and particular. Obviously, there are similarities among different communities and experiences. Issues of the power of capital, the market imprisonment of

policy, the exclusion of effected populations from policy-making, the desire for participation and democratisation, and a focus on political process as a way to address both a lack of equity and recognition come up time and time again in the movement. Environmental justice networks, based even as they are on resistance, have shown themselves quite capable of flexing fairly large-scale— even global — muscles. Recent cross-border movements around NAFTA and GATT, World Bank policy in the Amazon, ozone policy, and the ownership of indigenous knowledge serve as examples.

In addition, it is important to recognise the politics and process of the environmental justice movement as a form of prefigurative politics [Epstein, 1988]. The form of the movement itself, and its development of this form out of critiques of past social movement organising, is a living articulation of an alternative form. Networks are not simply a means to an end — and a defensive end at that. They are an example of an attempt at an alternative political structure. In this sense, the movement counters many social movement theorists and left activists who argue that only a unified movement organised around a singular agenda can accomplish significant social change.

Conclusion

Networking and alliance-building have become a major tactic in environmental organising in the US, especially among grass-roots activists and groups. This move has been in response to the limitations of past models of organising as well as the changing nature of the structures and practices of capital and politics.

Networks begin at the level of the community, with bases in everyday relationships at home, church, work and play. The organisation of networks takes these local realities seriously, and continues the recognition and validation of diverse experiences, even as it links the multiplicity of peoples and issues into alliances. While they may restrict themselves to a local alliance around a local issues, these alliances may also take on a larger, and often more rhizomatic form. Networks expand the notion of environmental locality, as they expose the similarities shared by communities in disparate places.

Networking also goes beyond organisational form; it becomes the mode of organisational function. Decentralisation, diversification, and democratisation drive networks, as opposed to the centralised and hierarchical practices of past movements and present mainstream organising. Finally, these networks display a strength and resilience one might not expect from such a decentralised organisation. The plurality of a movement, its diverse tactics, and its numerous resources are understood as strategic advantages in organising.

What the development of networking shows, especially as it has been used in the environmental justice movement, is a new form of movement organising that is based on the strength of diversity. Dismissed is the conventional organising model, which sees difference as a hindrance. Instead, these networks and alliances have recognised the reality and importance of diverse experiences, validated multiplicity, and created a solidarity that has become a dynamic and effective environmental movement in the US.

NOTES

1. Previous versions of this research have been presented at the Western Political Science Association conference in Portland, OR, March 1995; an on-line conference on Environmental Cultural Studies sponsored by the American Studies Department at Washington State University, June 1997; and *Environmental Justice: Global Ethics for the 21st Century*, University of Melbourne, Oct. 1997. The author is grateful to John Dryzek, David Carruthers, Irene Diamond, Dan Goldrich, Noel Sturgeon, Nathan Teske, and Doug Torgerson, in addition to editor Chris Rootes and two *Environmental Politics* referees, for comments on various incarnations of these ideas. An expanded version of this essay appears as a chapter in *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism: The Challenge of Difference for Environmentalism*, Oxford University Press, 1999.
2. See Dowie [1991, 1995] and Gottlieb [1990, 1993] for discussions of these complaints. From within the movement, see Bullard (1994). Montague [1995], Cockburn and St. Clair [1994]. For a fascinating account of the limits funding organisations put on the movement, see Rozek [1994].
3. The Big Ten consists of Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Policy Institute, National Wildlife Federation, Environmental Defense Fund, Izaak Walton League, Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, National Parks and Conservation Association, Wilderness Society, and Friends of the Earth. For criticisms from an environmental justice perspective, see various essays in the collections edited by Bryant [1995], Bullard [1993], and Hofrichter [1993]. Numerous environmental justice organisations and activists signed two key letters to the mainstream leaders listing these complaints [Shabecoff, 1990].
4. Diani's work, especially his definition of social movements as networks [1992], has certainly aided this trend in the sociological literature.
5. See Breines [1989] and Miller [1987] on the new left. and Freeman [1975] and Sirianni [1993] on the feminist movement.
6. Ruffins's [1992] account of the summit includes a discussion of the effect of bringing together Native American and Hawaiian activists with more urban-based African-American activists. After years of bitter feeling about the white environmental community's focus on wilderness and animals rather than the urban environment, indigenous activists helped him to experience, for the first time, 'the moral imperative of protecting animals and trees and land' [1992: II].
7. Examples abound. Much has been written of the importance of extended families and community networks in the activism of working-class and African-American women [e.g., Havwood, 1990; Krauss, 1994; Naples, 1992]. The emergence of individuals in social networks also played a key role in determining participation in the civil rights movement [McAdam, 1988]. Churches have also been a source of activism around civil rights issues in African-American and Latino communities.
8. One of my favourite examples of the use of preexisting social networks in environmental justice organising is the transition of the Newtown Florist Club, in Gainesville, Georgia, from a group that began by collecting money to buy flowers for ill residents to one organizing to learn about and fight against toxics released in the community [Kerr and Lee, 1993, 13].

9. CCHW has recently revised its name to 'CHEJ: Center for Health, Environment, and Justice'; I will continue to refer to them as CCHW throughout this study.
10. One of the most impressive examples of such an alliance was built between Latinos and Hasidim in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York [Greider, 1993]. El Puente and United Jewish Organisations worked together against a storage facility of low-level radioactive waste and a massive garbage incinerator the city planned for the neighbourhood.
11. Deleuze and Guattari [1987] spawned the use of the rhizome metaphor. Their first three characteristics of a rhizome are the principles of connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity [1987:7-8]. For other discussions of the metaphor in environmental politics, see LaChapelle [1994], and Kuchls [1995].
12. Appropriately, this is the name of the newsletter of the CCHW.
13. See, for example, the discussion by SNEEJ co-ordinator Richard Moore in Almeida [1994].
14. The environmental justice movement does not hold a monopoly on this type of organizing in US environmentalism. Bron Taylor [1995] discusses this type of 'solidarity activism' in both Earth First! and the Rainforest Action Network. For a thorough picture of networked solidarity in Earth First!, see Ingalsbee [1995].
15. This is not to assert that relations in the network actually work this way all of the time. The point here is the attention to these principles in the establishment of a grassroots network. I will return to a discussion of some of the limitations of the network form.
16. The model also, not coincidentally, conserves scarce resources.
17. For specific examples, see various issues of some of the newsletters of the movement, such as *Everyone's Backyard; Race, Poverty and the Environment; Crossroads: New Solutions: and Voces Unidas*.
18. Mililani Trask, an attorney active in environmental justice and sovereignty issues in Hawaii, argues that the legal realm is a valid one, but warns against a singular faith in the image of legal justice: '[D]o not put your eggs in the basket of the blind white lady. We must try other approaches' [Lee, 1992: 38].
19. Greenpeace has recently imploded in the US, closing field offices, firing canvassers, and shutting down most of its active projects, including environmental justice.
20. The CCHW specifically suggests networking as a method of thwarting industry tactics. Waste companies looking for a site will choose a half-dozen or so communities that would be potentially suitable; they then sit back and watch how the communities react, moving into the one that is least resistant. In these cases, the CCHW suggests a meeting of groups from each target site to form a 'non-aggression pact' and unite around the principle of 'not in anyone's backyard' [Collette, 1993: 5].
21. See the list of general successes compiled by Freudenberg and Steinsapir [1992].
22. This mirrors, for example, Foucault [1978: 96].

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