

Political scientist shoots holes in environmental justice theory

By **VICKI FERSTEL**

Suburban writer

Political scientist Christopher H. Foreman Jr. argues the environmental-justice theory is a poorly-defined issue that has little to do with real health risks to the poor and minority communities and even less to do with justice.

Foreman's scathing critique of the environmental-justice movement, "The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice," will be published this fall by the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based think-tank.

He has already published numerous articles based on his research.

"I'm a black, liberal Democrat — I voted for Clinton, twice — which is why I agreed to take on this issue. I'm immune to name-calling," said Foreman, a senior fellow of governmental studies at the private policy research institution.

"The thing that bothers me most is you get low-income and minority people stirred up about these allegedly toxic sites," he said, "then you can't get their attention for the stuff that matters on public health issues."

Foreman became interested in the environmental-justice issue after completing a book on the politics involved in health issues such as AIDS and toxic-shock syndrome. ("Plagues, Products and Politics: Emergent Public Health Hazards and National Policymaking," Brookings Institution, 1994.)

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Christopher H. Foreman Jr.:
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A New York Times article about President Bill Clinton's 1994 environmental-justice executive order piqued Foreman's interest.

"I was going to do a little scholarly book about the impact of the executive order on the rest of the executive branch," he said.

An economics analyst at the Brookings Institution expressed surprise. "He asked me, 'With all the things that plague these communities, this is what you want to focus on?'"

As Foreman read more studies and attended meetings on the issue, he said he "became very, very concerned that this whole thing was headed in the wrong direction."

He said the emotionalism he encountered at the meetings disturbed him.

"What you hear is a lot of fear, anger and unfocused rage," he said.

What he said he didn't hear was hard and fast proof that industrial pollution was the major cause of health problems rampant in minority and poor communities.

Foreman contends the focus on pollution as a health issue is a distraction from what he said are more serious health problems for those communities: an alarming rise in teenage smoking, low birthweights, inadequate prenatal care, substance abuse, violence, hypertension and heart disease linked to "an epidemic of obesity," AIDS, glaucoma, asthma and lead-poisoning in children.

"Environmental justice activists talk a lot about risk. They will use this mantra of multiple, cumulative and synergistic risk," he said. Risks, he claims, are unprovable.

Foreman also dismisses much of the early academic research on environmental justice.

"The best thing you can say about it is, 'The work is unsophisticated.' The worst thing you can say is, 'It's complete junk.'"

Foreman faults environmental-justice activists for their vague descriptions of what constitutes a "minority" community, which the proponents generally define as areas with greater percentages of minority residents than city, county and parish, state or national averages.

"The range of arguably significant environmental equity comparisons is so broad that some doubtless cut the other way: many Native Americans, for example, breathe cleaner air than urban Yuppies and live further from hazardous waste than New Jersey's white ethnics," Foreman wrote in a Brookings Review article.

He said the fatal flaw for environmental-justice activists is their inability to define the ultimate outcome of the policy except in the vaguest of terms.

"What they're not willing to do is answer tough questions like, 'What is an example of a community that thinks it has an environmental-justice grievance, but actually doesn't?'

"The position they tend to end up taking is 'Everyone should have a voice' and 'No one should suffer or be placed at risk.' Essentially, what it comes down to is NIMBY — not in my back yard — with race politics mixed in," Foreman said.

"No one is able to give you a hard definition as to how you know when justice has been served."

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