

## Center for Poverty Research

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### Placing Environmental Justice and Opportunity in Rural California

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Welcome, you are listening to a UC Davis Center for Poverty Research Conference podcast. I'm Lisa Pruitt, a center faculty affiliate and the organizer of our November 2014 Poverty and Place Conference. This conference brought together scholars from across the social sciences to present and discuss new work on how space and place inflect various dimensions of poverty.

In this presentation, Jonathan London discusses his work on environmental justice in California's San Joaquin Valley. London is an Assistant Professor of Human and Community Development at UC Davis and a Center for Poverty Research faculty affiliate. He directs the UC Davis Center for Regional Change.

>> It's a treat to be part of this gathering and to really participate in this very stimulating process.

And I've noticed a theme as people are introducing themselves, that they tend to introduce themselves as outsiders, and that there may be some connection to a poverty conference and being an outsider. But I also feel somewhat like an outsider, by which I mean I'm bonding with you as an outsider.

So maybe I'm not an outsider anymore. But the outsider in this case is that I'm not gonna be talking specifically about poverty. I'll be talking about environmental justice, I'll describe what that is. And that certainly engages with questions of poverty, but it is not specific to that. And I'll be talking about a particular kind of place at regions, and the processes that are in play in developing regions.

And then, I guess the other thing that I would say is that I'll be doing some work to try to link a very praxis-oriented experience that went into developing the data with social theory. But, the practice came first. So this is somewhat of a challenging, but I think really useful, opportunity to try to connect these.

So, well, the pagination is a little different here. So I'm starting with a quote from Yeats, and I'll just read it to you. O body swayed to music, O brightening glance. How can we know the dancer from the dance? And I'll be unpacking and returning to this over time, as we go.

So I'm gonna be drawing on work that I've done with colleagues. I think Deb Niemeier is not here anymore, but was the respondent earlier. Deb, several post docs working with Deb and I, Alex Karner and Dana Rowangould, and Catherine Garoupa-White, and my colleague Chris Benner. So what I'm interested and I'll be sharing with you, is really trying to understand the place of regions, that the relevance of regions in environmental justice social movements.

And how to understand what is a region in this context, why does it matter? I'm going to be grounding that in a specific case in the San Joaquin Valley here in California. And really asking both how are regions produced in the praxis of these environmental justice social movements, and what difference does a regional approach make?

And then trying to use that case also to help illuminate a shift that some people are calling an environmental justice movement based on No, a prevention of harms, to a Grow social movement of creating greater access to opportunities. So the study design, as I mentioned, is a praxis-based intervention study.

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The center that I direct, the Center for Regional Change, has been working for many years in the San Joaquin Valley developing social equity tools. And I'll show a couple of those doing capacity-building with environmental justice social movements in the region. And so the research really has been a participant-observation mode.

And we're just now coming to the end of that work and are starting to do post-project interviews with a range of stakeholders. So I'm gonna argue that organizing regionally opens up new opportunities, but also dilemmas, for environmental justice organizations. And so, these are challenges and dilemmas around scale organizing across larger spatial territories with broader agendas, larger and more diverse alliances somewhat connected to Vickie and Sarah's work there, new kinds of technical expertise, and new sets of protagonists.

And I'm gonna draw on the quote from Yeats. I'm sure you were wondering, why did he just quote some poetry? In addition to it being 4 o'clock, and you need a little spirit there.

>> But I'm playing with this idea of scale dancing, and I'll describe a little bit what I mean by that.

But it's really in this middle place between dancer and dance is the region, something that is an ontological thing. Is it a process? Are players who are doing regional work the dancer or the dance? So I'm grounding this in a body of theory and work in political ecology, and understanding the place of regions in political ecology is a central one.

And it has to do with variability and the ways in which this variability produces different kinds of political economic injustices and unevenness. And in environmental justice, some of the original works also are really focused on this regional approach, in Dixie in Bob Bullard's work, and the Southwest in Laura Pulido's work.

So, why did I throw out the idea of scale dancing? Some of it is a recognition that a number of the imaginaries for scale and for region are inadequate. So some of these may be familiar to you, maybe you use these. They're hard to get away from. So there's the idea of scale, and the region is placed in scale in this sort of ladder from local to global.

This sort of concentric circle, as you move out from the local, out to regional, out to global. More colorfully, thinking about these matryoshka dolls. That these are not just concentric circles, but they sort of nest in each other. And some work more in feminist political ecology, people like Dianne Rocheleau and others thinking more about nodes and regions as sort of part of these webs of interconnection.

But I'm going to suggest that this is a picture of Yeats as a tree, and the dancer.

>> Google Images is such an amazing resource.

>> So to think about regions as things, so that's this sort of repertoire, this set of steps that cohere into some kind of dance.

They're the process, regions are processes that they sort of flow between steps. They're The repertoires of individuals or groups, the actual dancers, the practitioners, and you put in for dancers, politicians, social activists, academics, business, capital actors. They're also imaginaries, they're a creature of discourse, of esthetics, of interpretation, meaning, and there's also structure.

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The choreographer's thinking about the man behind the curtain, the captains of industry, the creatures of the state, and so on. Okay, so that's sort of the framework that I'm playing with. So, just briefly grounding us in place. So the San Joaquin Valley is both a heartland of the agricultural and agro-industrial machine that is California but it's also, and has this sense of abundance.

But as environmental justice activists rose in to Mitaco once told me, who lives in a place right around these trees that she actually hates when the blossoms come out because that's when the sprayers come and it triggers asthma and it triggers all these kinds of problems. So, this is the place that has huge incidents of asthma, childhood asthma and others.

I just put this picture on too. This is that's Teresa De Anda's body, that's her. And I put her on there because she was a long-time anti-pesticide activist, and just passed away early from liver cancer just a week ago. It's a place of significant pollution of drinking water, of pesticides, but its also a place of protest and solidarity across multiple domains that I'll talk about.

So as I mentioned briefly there's a shift to some degree from the harm and the engagement in trying to move away from harms to thinking about a grow environmental justice, so we know what we don't want but how do we build the kind of communities that we do want, and what is that look like.

What are the resources that we need? What are the kinds of alliances that are needed to bring economic development, and transit, housing, and food, and kind of broader solidarities together. So I'm gonna, for time, I'm gonna do this really, really briefly. But this is a tool for visualizing grow environmental justice that a number of colleagues and I put together called the regional opportunity index and it's actually an online system that I can show you the URL.

But it uses a wide variety of indicators of people and place opportunity. People opportunity are the attributes and you can call human and social capital of individuals. Place are the infrastructure, factors in the ground, on the ground. So we've mapped these for the San Joaquin Valley, and again, not gonna go into the details too much of sort of fetishizing the map, but generally here these are census tracts.

The eight counties of the central valley from San Joaquin County to Curren County, and the places that are in green have the highest levels of opportunity again across all of these different domains. And this is the people side. Green highest relative to the regional mean. Red lowest and you kind of see this north south gradient and this east west gradient.

When you look at the place opportunity factors, you see a significant sort of urban to rural kind of pattern which is not surprising given greater infrastructure access in urban areas. If you drill down more, which I won't do today, you can see a real patchwork within urban areas and places of disparity there as well.

Just to bring in some of the race and ethnicity, again without going into too much detail, but this is overall looking at place by race and ethnicity, and the sub-regions of the valley. So basically, if you're African-American or Latino, when you go north to south your overall well-being, you're gonna live in places with lower levels of resources, and you will have lower levels, as represented in a place and people.

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All right. So that's sort of the context here. So this grow environmental justice movement has taken the opportunity to intervene, to try to create these kinds of more livable more just communities. As presented in a piece of state legislation called SB, or senate bill, 375, which mandates regional planning to address climate change to basically lower vehicle miles traveled by creating more sustainable cities.

So just really briefly, that's the mandate. And these plans sustainable community strategies are the ways to achieve that. And it's shifted to some large degree, well, it's intended to shift, a local control planning context to a much more regional. So in some of the conversations that we've had about how well does this actually play out.

One of the board members for the regional and also the state air board talked about this issue of the big tent that this state policy was creating an opportunity to bring multiple constituencies that are often not connected. People who are doing transportation, land use housing, air quality, water quality, kind of bringing those together in one area.

So the sort of possibility for these kinds of alliances, advocates themselves have also seen the possibility to be able to address things that they've been trying to do at the regional level dealing with air quality and a basin that has some of the worst air quality. It vies for worst, the worst title with Los Angeles.

It's kind of a fierce battle, which you don't really wanna win. And unfortunately the valley does. So, the valley advocates have been working at the air quality issue for a long time, SB 375. This is giving them the mechanism to kinda bring it down to the context that's driving these kinds of air quality issues, land use.

So, advocates have created an agenda that they call seizing the opportunity, creating a platform that's for health, sustainability, and shared prosperity, bringing together these different values on economy, yeah. Economy at the family and the regional level, health, water pollution, air pollution an act protection. The planners who have been needing to implement this have really struggle and one regional planner that we spoke with whose tasked to create these sustainable community strategies in one of the counties in the valley, Fresno County.

Talked about the challenge of being in a poor county, she said. And her board, which are made up of elected officials from the cities and the county government, describes her interaction there with Being met by this statement, we are a poor county, therefore, we can't engage with social equity issues, so it's a really interesting kind of twisted logic I suppose, being able to address poverty is put in opposition to dealing with social equity.

And now one of the things that goes unsaid here, well, the discourses around poverty, the members of the board are largely bankrolled by industrialized agricultural, big oil, land development interests. So this sort of not veneer, but this discourse of poverty, both, as they say, plays with in a troubled way notions of equity and also obscure sort of behind a scrim, the larger political economic factors and players in the region.

So some of the ways that we've in the Center for Regional Change tried to assist social equity advocates and environmental justice advocates in the region to intervene in the development of the Sustainable Communities Strategies are creating a number of metrics, a way of visualizing equity, ways of representing the kinds of values that they're looking for.

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So there is, and I'll show you just a couple examples, environmental justice analysis, something that's called a Jobs-Housing Fit which Deveny Meyer showed based on the Bay area, work and health impact assessment methodology as well. And I don't have time to go into the details on this. So just really briefly, the environmental justice advocates have asked us, and we partnered with them over a number of years to push back on what's called sort of the Big Green Map.

And the Big Green Map is produced by the air quality district in the San Joaquin Valley. And they use a few very simple criteria and produce an analysis that shows that essentially the whole region is an environmental justice area. The good side of that is it elevates the issue.

The negative side is it's sort of a carte blanche or carte verte, using whatever you like, that allows the district to spend their money wherever they want and wherever they decide to put it. Whether it's putting electrifying ag pumps or changing out diesel facilities in one area that they're able to do that wherever they want, and it's difficult to have accountability.

So we work with the advocates to create a tool called the Cumulative Environmental Vulnerability Assessment, CEVA, that uses a range of social vulnerability factors and environmental hazard factors and maps those over. And basically shows the areas where the greatest concentrations of environmental hazards are, and who lives there, essentially the people with the least economic, political, social resources to prevent, to mitigate, to move away from those kinds of places.

And so the advocates have used this map in the SB375 work to direct the county-scale Sustainable Community Strategies to address these most vulnerable communities in ways that the standard Big green Map wasn't doing. A couple of others, and this is a pastiche here not having time to go into the methodology.

But we've used, as I say, the Jobs-Housing Fit, which is, in the background, a health impact assessment that looks at what are the projected health impacts, or health conditions, based on different kinds of land use and transportation scenarios, ways of looking at social vulnerability. And then the advocates have used that in sorta two ways that we've calling sort of an inside game and an outside game.

So in the inside game, they brought these kinds of tools in as basically into the formal public participation process and pushed the regional government to take these kinds of equity indicators as a way to develop these Sustainable Community Strategies and to assess the equity impacts. And then the advocates have also used it for an outside gain, using them to pressure the districts and potentially using them for litigation purposes.

So this kind of, as I say, kind of push pull. So what does this all lead to? And it leads to somewhat of an ambiguous set of outcomes. On the one hand, the advocates have been able to organize at a regional scale. They've brought these kinds of alliances that are sort of north to the south in the valley that are bringing different kinds of interest groups together by setting themselves that kinda regional scale template.

They've played these inside and outside games, working with the districts pushing and pulling them. They've had some examples of integrating social equity into these Sustainable Community Strategies, although limited for reasons I could talk about. But they have enabled in several counties, there have

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been examples where they've pushed the regional governments to develop grants programs to target the most vulnerable communities and to do other kinds of capacity building work.

But ultimately, the Sustainable Community Strategies that the advocates were pushing were not accepted as the final decision. A lot of the strategies, even those that showed kind of a higher equity outcome were focused on land use which the regional governments actually have no authority over and had essentially the same kind of transportation network.

So it was not necessarily a fig leaf but not quite the potent impact or tool that they had hoped. And a lot of the work although it was regional in scale of advocacy, it was really the county scales that these Sustainable Communities Strategies were operating in, so there was a mixed success there.

So just some final thoughts here. So I've tried to show how through practice, through organizations connecting again, across issues, across sectors, across space that they've actually created new visions of the San Joaquin Valley, representing those through their own alliances, the body of their work as well as some of these visual strategies.

They've also encountered these kinds of slippages and challenges in rescaling. And again, they've been able to touch and look at these kinds of drivers of poverty, of injustice in the region, but not necessarily the tools to achieve it. So with that, I will close my formal comments and look forward to-

>> I'm Ann Stevens, the Director of the Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis, and I want to thank you for listening. The Center is one of three federally designated poverty research centers in the United States. Our mission is facilitate nonpartisan academic research on domestic poverty to disseminate this research and to train the next generation of poverty scholars.

Core funding comes from the US Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the Center, visit us online at [poverty.ucdavis.edu](http://poverty.ucdavis.edu).