

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN US HISTORY: LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

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**Roosevelt Institute for American Studies
Middelburg, The Netherlands**



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The Roosevelt Institute for American Studies (RIAS) is a graduate school, library, research and conference center for the study of US history in the modern era. The Institute is located in the southwestern part of the Netherlands, in the historic town of Middelburg. The RIAS research profile is framed around the idea of the *Rooseveltian Century*, which focuses on the progressive leadership of Theodore, Eleanor, and Franklin Roosevelt and how their legacies have shaped both the US and its relations with the rest of the world. From 2022, the RIAS has expanded its research agenda to include a major focus on environmental themes. Hence, the RIAS is interested in promoting studies that explore the overlaps between diplomatic, transnational, and environmental history to better understand the impacts of the US power on the global ecosystem. As part of this ambitious goal, the RIAS is organizing its 2022 annual conference around the theme of Environmental Justice, in order to assess the state of the field, identify some of its most fruitful developments, and lay out some challenges for the future.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Warren County controversy, which scholars and activists tend to characterize as the starting point of a modern environmental

justice movement. The complaints of residents in North Carolina against the US Environmental Protection Agency, which had authorized the construction of a landfill site for the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls (the infamous PCBs), became a broader campaign for social and racial justice. Civil rights organizations joined forces with local citizens, bringing new protest tactics, funds, expertise, networks, and organizational capabilities to the campaign. Soon, the Warren County protests outgrew the boundaries of the local community and put social, economic, and racial justice at the center of the national environmental debate. Such a debate gave rise to a series of cross-sectional studies that established a direct link between racial and economic marginalization and environmental exploitation, like the well-known *Toxic Wastes and Race* report, a nationwide analysis compiled by the United Church of Christ in 1987.

In the following years, environmental justice issues moved to the forefront of many popular campaigns in the US and abroad. These struggles developed into a more comprehensive transnational call to liberate marginalized communities from toxic pollution and from long-standing disparities in many parts of the world. In about a decade, environmental justice activists built networks and connections worldwide, further validating and reinforcing their work and legitimacy at domestic and international levels. These efforts resulted, for instance, in the adoption of a series of shared principles and recommendations highlighted in the final declaration of the 1992 Rio Global Summit.

In the last two decades, the work of environmental activists and indigenous leaders have pushed national and international institutions to recognize the rights of disadvantaged groups and communities more and more. In a world that has grown painfully aware of the implications of the environmental abuses perpetrated in the last two centuries to uphold its most dominant paradigms of development, the safeguarding and promotion of environmental justice and health have become unavoidable issues in domestic politics and global affairs. As a result, concepts such as environmental

democracy, equity, and sustainability have also expanded significantly. Yet, uprooting the causes of discrimination has proven far more elusive – and remedying the situation even more so. In many cases, environmental injustice resulted from a long and complex legacy of social, political, cultural, and economic factors hard to disentangle or act against.

The study of these issues – and how the United States has affected them – has generated an extensive interdisciplinary body of research in both humanities and social sciences. Historians, sociologists, political scientists, and many others working on questions of environmental justice have produced eye-opening accounts of the conditions in which many American communities lived (and continue to live) and their struggle for recognition and inclusion. These efforts to understand the complexity of the historical processes that determined past and present (environmental) inequalities are even more important today now that, after four decades of mobilization, the country faces urgent calls to change behavior and protect the global environment.

This conference aims to gather contributions discussing theories and practices of environmental (in)justice in American history from a wide range of perspectives. We welcome original and innovative research providing insight on environmental justice issues and their interplay with a variety of subjects, including:

- Gender, race, and class;
- US values, cultures, and identities;
- US political institutions and grassroots mobilization;
- Political extremism, radicalism, and anti-Americanism;
- Indigenous activism and leadership;
- US diplomacy and foreign policy;
- Imperialism and (toxic) colonialism;
- US capitalism, industrialism, and modes of production;

- Economic growth and human health;
- US militarism and military power;
- Scientific and technological change;
- Bordering processes;
- Dynamics of global integration and anthropogenic modifications;
- Waste and natural resource management;
- Narratives of development and modernity;
- Corporate regulatory law and corporate compliance.

Keynote Speaker: We are most delighted to announce Professor Ellen Griffith Spears (University of Alabama) as our keynote speaker. Professor Spears will present a paper on *Tidal Currents: Rooseveltian Legacies, Transnational Environmental Justice, and Reinvigorating Democracy*.

Professor Spears is a leading environmental historian and her newest book, *Rethinking the American Environmental Movement Post-1945* (London: Routledge, 2019) reconsiders the history of US environmentalism in the context of broader social justice activism. She is also the author of the award-winning book *Baptized in PCBs: Race, Pollution, and Justice in an All-American Town* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

If you are interested in attending the conference as a speaker, please send **a CV and 300-word proposal** to info@roosevelt.nl. The deadline for proposals is **31 March 2022**.

To support a culture of diversity and inclusion, we strongly encourage proposals from scholars that reflect the diversity of our field in terms of gender, ethnicity, and disability. A selection of papers will be considered for publication after the conference.

We plan to hold the conference in person in Middelburg. A hybrid option for online participation will be provided if required due to contingencies stemming from the COVID pandemic. A small travel grant program may be available to facilitate participation from PhD students and early career, non-tenured scholars.

For any further information, please contact the conference coordinators using the addresses below:

Dario Fazzi, d.fazzi@roosevelt.nl

Gaetano Di Tommaso, g.di.tommaso@roosevelt.nl