



Dr. Robert D. Bullard

Father of Environmental Justice

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Keywords

Environmental justice · Environmental racism · Urban inequality · African Americans · Blacks

1 Introduction

Dr. Robert D. Bullard was born on December 21, 1946, in Elba, Alabama. When asked about his earliest childhood memory, in 2011, Bullard remembered his sister taking him by the hand and walking him to his first day at Elma Colored Elementary School. He remembered his first and favorite teacher Ms. Cox. It was a racially segregated school, in a segregated town, but “it was a good experience, and school was great,” he recalled (Bullard 2011). His family lived in Mulberry Heights, a Black neighborhood where almost everyone owned their homes, and though initially there were no sidewalks, streetlights, nor paved roads, “it was still a relatively quiet and safe area, neighborhood where you didn’t have to, you know, lock your doors” (Bullard 2011). He grew up helping his mother in their vegetable garden, which provided a lot of the food his family consumed. He would also help his father maintain their well-manicured yard, as well as the family timberland that his

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formerly enslaved great-grandparents managed to purchase in 1875. It was the revenue from harvesting timber from his family's land that would eventually send him and his four siblings to college.

In 1964, he started studying at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, the historically Black university where his older brother was already a student. He majored in history and government and minored in sociology. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, one month before graduation, Bullard was in the student center. As the news swept across campus, students started to gather, and their gathering gave way to a march off campus and down the highway and back again. After graduating college, he taught history at Beaumont High School in St. Louis, but several months later he was drafted into the US Marine Corps. He served almost two years on a base in North Carolina before he was honorably discharged to pursue graduate study in sociology at Atlanta University, where he earned his M.S. degree in 1972. While still writing his thesis, in 1971, he moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where he got a job working for the city as an urban planner. He was also accepted to the Ph.D. program in the Department of Sociology at Iowa State University. After completing his doctoral thesis, which focused on how a government program could successfully improve the lives of residents in Des Moines, he attained a faculty position at Texas Southern University, a historically Black university in Houston, Texas.

Since then, he has held faculty and administrative positions at various universities in the USA, and he has served as director of several research institutes. Over the course of his academic career, he has published over one hundred scholarly manuscripts, including 19 books, on a range of topics, such as the Black urban experience, housing, land use, transportation equity, disaster response, and environmental justice. In addition, his work has carried forth the tradition of engaged scholarship that he always admired in figures like W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1991, he helped to organize the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, which was the first attempt to bring various communities together to discuss the problems of environmental injustice across the country. This summit resulted in drafting and adopting 17 principles of environmental justice. Three years later, in 1994, Bullard's would prove monumental in President Clinton's signing of Executive Order 12898, which directed federal agencies to (1) identify and address the disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of their actions on minority and low-income populations; (2) develop a strategy for implementing environmental justice; and (3) promote nondiscrimination in federal programs that affect human health and the environment (Exec. Order No. 12898 1994). In 2011, Bullard cofounded the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Climate Change Consortium, an effort to raise awareness about the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalized communities and to develop HBCU student leaders, scientists, and advocates on issues related to environmental and climate justice policies, community resilience, and adaptation, with a special emphasis on vulnerable communities in the southern USA.

For his research and continued efforts on this front, Bullard is known widely as the father of environmental justice, and his life's work has garnered appreciable

recognition through awards and honors. To name but a few, he received the Federal Wildlife Federation's Conservation Achievement Award in Science for his book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* in 1990, the William Foote Whyte Distinguished Career Award in 2007, and the United Nations Environment Program's Champions of the Earth Lifetime Achievement Award in 2020.

2 A Lifetime of Exposing Environmental Racism and Articulating Environmental Justice

In 1978, just two years into his academic career at Texas Southern University (TSU), his wife, Linda McKeever Bullard, an attorney, asked him for help with a lawsuit she was working on. Linda had filed a temporary restraining order with the federal district court to stop a municipal landfill from being built in a middle-class Black suburb of Houston. Along with ten students from his social research methods course at TSU, he embarked on a study of all landfills, incinerators, garbage dumps, and waste sites in the city, from 1930 to 1978. Their research found that even though Black people made up only 25% of the population of Houston, "82% of all the garbage waste that was being disposed over that period of time was disposed in black neighborhood" (Bullard 2019:237). The following year, in 1979, they took the case to federal court, in what would be the first lawsuit to challenge this form of environmental racism using civil rights law. In the end, this legal challenge was unsuccessful because they could not prove intent. However, his experience with the case, and the research support that he and his students provided for it, lead him to explore the issue further.

Bullard's work on issues of environmental equity built upon his earlier emphasis on the issues facing Black urbanites in the American South, a region known for its history of racial oppression, from slavery to Jim Crow. In fact, his first book was an assessment of the housing assistance program in Houston that was prepared for the Housing Authority of the City (Bullard 1977). Moreover, Bullard's (1987) second book, *Invisible Houston: The Black Experience in Boom and Bust*, examines the formal and informal policies and actions that shaped the Black experience in the city. Across the book's ten chapters, he explores the dynamics of housing and housing discrimination, policing and law enforcement, economics and Black business development, and the environmental quality of Black neighborhoods.

Building on this work, one of his earliest publications on racial discrimination and environmental inequality was a case study of Houston and its municipal waste sites. His study revealed that 80% of incinerators, 66% of mini-incinerators, and 100% of landfills in Houston were located in Black neighborhoods and closer to Black schools (Bullard 1983). He argued that institutional discrimination in the housing market, the lack of zoning, and the racist decisions made by public officials all contributed to Black Houstonians living in the "dumping ground" for the City's solid waste. Over the next several years, Bullard published many other articles, often with collaborator Beverly Hendrix Wright, about the environmental assault on Black communities across the country (Bullard and Wright 1986, 1987, 1990).

In 1990, Bullard published *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, a pivotal text in the emergence of environmental justice studies. Here, Bullard (1990:xiv) argues that Black communities in the South “have been routinely targeted for the siting of noxious facilities, locally unwanted land uses, and environmental hazards” because of their economic and political vulnerability. Chapter 1 focuses on the limits of mainstream environmentalism given how the “environmental ‘time bombs’ that are ticking away in [Black] communities are not high on the agendas of mainstream environmentalists” (Bullard 1990:19). Overall, the chapter provides the theoretical foundations for understanding Black mobilizations against the deliberate toxification of their communities, while chapter 2 focuses on the historical, social, political, and ecological changes that have fueled uneven development in the southern region of the USA. In chapter 3, Bullard provides five case studies from across the rural and urban American South, including Northwood Manor (Houston, Texas), West Dallas (Texas), Institute (West Virginia), Alsen (Louisiana), and Emelle-Sumter County (Alabama), to demonstrate “the economic and political dynamics of environmental decision making and impacts on minority communities” (p. 24). Chapter 4 presents survey results about the movement for environmental equity, which lead Bullard (1990:102) to conclude that “Black protest against environmental threats can be seen as rational collective action that emerged out of preexisting social structures and institutions within the racially segregated and politically oppressed black community.” The final chapter of the book summarizes the lessons learned from his research as well as action strategies “to enhance the larger environmental movement in areas of social justice and equity” (Bullard 1990:103). As stated in the conclusion of *Dumping in Dixie*, “There can be no environmental justice without social justice” (Bullard 1990:117).

Bullard would go on further articulate the underlying principles of environmental justice across numerous articles and books. In 1993, in addition to publishing numerous articles on environmental racism and environmental justice (Bullard and Wright 1993; Bullard 1993a, b), he edited a groundbreaking anthology, *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, which grew out of the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in 1991 (Bullard 1993c). “The quest for environmental justice,” he argues, “extends the quest for basic civil rights” as the actions taken by grassroots activists aimed “to reduce environmental inequities [in ways that] are consistent with the struggle to end the other forms of social injustice found throughout society – in housing, education, employment, health care, criminal justice, and politics” (Bullard 1993c:30). For Bullard, environmental justice was the solution to the problem of environmental racism. He defined environmental racism as “any environmental policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or [color]” (Bullard 1999:5). Whereas, environmental justice was defined as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all peoples of regardless of race, colour, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (Bullard 1999:7). By fair treatment, Bullard meant that “no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socio-economic groups, should bear a

disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local and tribal programmes and policies” (Bullard 1999:7).

Over the next several decades, Bullard would go on to publish books on residential apartheid (Bullard et al. 1994), suburban sprawl (Bullard et al. 2000), transportation (Bullard and Johnson 1997; Bullard et al. 2004), smart growth and just sustainability (Agyeman et al. 2003; Bullard 2007a), Black urban life (Bullard 2007b), racism and governmental responses disasters (Bullard and Wright 2009, 2012), in addition to environmental justice (Bullard 1994, 2005). With collaborators Julian Agyeman and Bob Evans, in 2003, Bullard published *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*, another groundbreaking anthology, which brought the concepts of environmental justice and sustainability into closer dialogue. In the introduction to the volume, Bullard and co-authors contend that the book’s chapters “contribute to an important and emerging realization that a sustainable society must also be a just society, locally, nationally, and internationally, both within and between generations and species” (Agyeman et al. 2003:3).

3 Summary

Dr. Robert D. Bullard’s work over the past four decades – in scholarship, advocacy, and service – has provided crucial foundations for environmental justice studies and grassroots organizing. Bullard has made pivotal contributions to understanding the Black urban experience in the South, transportation and housing discrimination and justice, sustainable development and smart growth, disaster response, how racial and class-based inequality shape the quality of our environments, and environmental justice as a solution to environmental inequality. Subsequent generations of scholarship have challenged and/or extended Bullard’s conceptualizations of environmental racism and environmental justice (Pulido 1996; Pellow 2018). Nevertheless, Bullard’s oeuvre remains an important resource for environmental justice research and organizing, as well as for making sense of the importance of racial discrimination in determining the quality of environments in which people live, learn, pray, and play.

4 Cross-References

- ▶ [Background on Environmental Justice and Racism](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Injustice and Hazardous Waste Disposal in Africa](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Justice in Asia](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Justice in Europe](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Justice in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)
- ▶ [Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice in North America](#)

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