11.368: Response Paper 5

As I already discussed Pulido's concept of two "racial projects" in my response last week, I will focus here on three criticisms she makes related to the conceptualization of racism under both projects as well as one of her recommendations. She criticize the popular understanding of racism as discrete actions; the failure to view racism as ideology; and the denial of multiple forms of racism. I find the first criticism compelling in that in our society, looking at racial effects in "isolation" is impossible. By saying that we must examine race in light of our political economy—including, I would assume, a historic view of the legacy of slavery—structural disenfranchisement by race is inherently confounded with other variables. In terms of ideology, I must admit that in my mind, I always differentiated between *racism* as the deliberate act of people and institutions, and *structural disenfranchisement* as some sort of byproduct of historic or current racist practice, though I see now that that line of 'deliberateness' is quite unclear. A state or a set of institutions can clearly have a racist ideology. Her third critique reminds us that racism is not a simple mechanism and that racist actors, their motivations, and their targets are diverse. She notes that this presents a challenge to EJ, as a united movement of the marginalized, and makes a call to researchers to support diverse grassroots movements.

One of Pulido's recommendations is a call for more qualitative research to complement existing quantitative studies. The latter, she claims, may often rely upon "monolithic constructions of race", artificial binaries, and examinations of causality that search for distinct acts of racism. As a person interested in qualitative methods, ethnography, and organizational history, I found this recommendation intriguing. She critiques current analyses as being uniformly directed towards arenas of law and policy, and calls for qualitative methodologies because of their applicability to "movement building" and radical politics. But can qualitative research inform mainstream policymaking and/or be a part of institutional learning as well? I suppose these methodologies carry the imprint of their authors' values more explicitly than regression analyses do, and their conclusions aren't as pat as a percentage or p-value, so those might be obstacles to their use beyond academia. But when I reflect on my own experiences with what drives decision-making within institutions, noting the power of both anecdotal knowledge and field experience, I wonder if there is not a role for wider-scale, qualitative documenting of EJ to inform policy and practice.

The piece on public health offered a number of tangible strategies for improving health-related EJ research. From connecting existing databases, to collecting more community baseline data, to developing better biomarkers (of exposure, susceptibility, and effect), to examining residential exposures: these first strategies deal with documenting exposure and measuring health effects of that exposure. I would hope that there is a rich literature on these issues and that public health researchers are turning their attention towards it. My own interest lies in community health impacts and how epidemiological tools can be used for EJ. The paper identifies the challenge of studying small populations with multiple exposures for which there is a general lack of data. It also notes the critique by some groups of the continued use of "race" as an independent variable, despite the biological heterogeneity within that category. Finally, the paper closes with a call for participatory research to help with data collection, early identification of potential negative effects, and community empowerment. It also notes the challenges of participatory research including time costs and the difficulty of partnerships between mainstream and marginal groups.