

Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana: A Historical Analysis (1945-1980)

Gary, Indiana, emerged as a major industrial center in the early 20th century, but its rapid growth concealed a dark underbelly of environmental degradation and social inequality. This article delves into the intricate relationship between class, race, and industrial pollution in Gary during the period 1945-1980.



Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980 by Andrew Hurley

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Historical Context

Following World War II, Gary experienced an industrial boom as factories producing steel, chemicals, and oil refineries sprang up. This economic growth attracted a large workforce, including many African American migrants from the South. However, this prosperity came at a steep environmental cost.

Gary's industries emitted massive amounts of pollutants into the air and water, creating a toxic environment for residents. Air pollution from smokestacks and steel mills caused respiratory problems, while water pollution from industrial waste contaminated the city's waterways. These environmental hazards disproportionately affected African Americans, who occupied the most polluted neighborhoods.

Class and Environmental Injustices

In Gary, class played a significant role in determining exposure to industrial pollution. Wealthy residents could afford to live in less polluted areas, while working-class and low-income families were more likely to reside near industrial facilities. African Americans, who faced systemic economic discrimination, were concentrated in the most polluted neighborhoods.

This residential segregation was not simply a matter of choice. Racist housing policies and practices, such as redlining and blockbusting, prevented African Americans from moving into less polluted areas. As a result, they were forced to bear the brunt of environmental hazards, enduring higher rates of respiratory diseases, cancer, and other health problems.

Environmental Activism and Grassroots Movements

Despite the systemic oppression they faced, African Americans in Gary organized and fought for environmental justice. In the 1970s, a coalition of community groups emerged to challenge industrial pollution and advocate for cleaner air and water.

One notable organization was the Concerned Citizens of East Chicago and Vicinity (CCECTV). Led by Shirley Murray and other African American activists, CCECTV documented the extent of industrial pollution in their community and pressured government and industry to take action.

These grassroots movements played a crucial role in raising awareness about environmental injustices and pushing for regulations to limit pollution. However, their progress was often met with resistance from industry and government officials, who prioritized economic development over public health.

Legacy and Impact

The legacy of industrial pollution in Gary is still felt today. Despite improvements in environmental regulations, many African American communities in Gary continue to face higher rates of environmental hazards and health problems.

The history of Gary serves as a cautionary tale about the intersection of class, race, and environmental justice. It demonstrates the insidious ways in which systemic racism and economic inequality can compound the effects of pollution, harming the health and well-being of marginalized communities.

The case of Gary, Indiana, provides a poignant reminder of the deep-seated environmental injustices faced by African Americans in the United States. By examining the complex relationship between class, race, and industrial pollution, we can gain a better understanding of the historical and ongoing challenges of environmental justice.

Only through continued activism, policy changes, and a commitment to addressing systemic inequality can we create a more just and sustainable future for all.



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