

**Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution**

**in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980**

**Andrew Hurley**



**Class, Race,**

**and Industrial**

**Pollution in**

**Gary, Indiana,**

**1945–1980**

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For my parents,  
John and Frieda Hurley,  
and in memory of  
my grandmother,  
Clara Hurley

## Preface

It was no coincidence that the age of ecology was also an age of environmental inequality. Between 1945 and 1980, the United States witnessed the rise and maturation of a popular movement that promised to curb the environmental excesses of industrial and economic growth. Yet everyone did not benefit equally from the achievements of environmental reform. Despite the strength of organized labor, the rise of a civil rights movement, and a liberal political order that pledged itself to uplifting the nation's underprivileged, the political process and the dynamics of the marketplace gave industrial capitalists and wealthy property holders a decisive advantage in molding the contours of environmental change. Those groups who failed to set the terms—African Americans and poor whites—found themselves at a severe disadvantage, consistently bearing the brunt of industrial pollu-

tion in virtually all of its forms: dirty air, foul water, and toxic solid wastes.

Exploring this historical process requires a marriage of two scholarly fields: environmental history and social history. Still a relatively young discipline, environmental history explores the interrelationship between humans and the natural world: how environmental conditions have shaped human activity and how, in turn, humans have transformed the physical world around them. Although this approach to history has yielded many first-rate works, environmental historians have tended to neglect the importance of social divisions. More commonly, the field's practitioners have framed their analyses in terms of holistic economic and cultural systems. Many of the best works on the United States, for instance, have described the ecological transformations associated with the transition from the Native American subsistence economy to European capitalism. But social historians have taught us that capitalism, particularly industrial capitalism, involved social differentiation along the lines of class, race, gender, and ethnicity. Surely these divisions produced a variety of environmental experiences, objectives, and behavioral patterns. My aim, then, is to approach the process of environmental change as the product of competing environmental agendas forwarded by specific social groups.<sup>1</sup> Considering the intensity of environmental disputes since World War II, such an approach seems warranted.

Thinking about environmental history in terms of social divisions also invites us to reconsider the way we assess environmental change. Environmental historians are well aware of the pitfalls encountered in evaluating ecological change. Recently, ecologists have thrown the concept of equilibrium into question, thereby making it difficult for historians to measure environmental change against any objective standard.<sup>2</sup> The concept of social equity provides historians with an alternative. Thus, we can attempt to determine who benefited and who suffered when a particular society altered its relationship with the surrounding natural and built environment. Utilizing this approach to study one of the nation's most polluted cities, Gary, Indiana, I will demonstrate how divisions of race and class were instrumental in creating patterns of environmental inequality in recent urban America.

This argument is developed through a chapter organization that balances chronology and theme. Following a brief introduction that sets

the study in a broader historical context, we turn to Gary in the years just after World War II, exploring the interrelationship between social organization and industry's use of natural resources. The next three chapters focus on specific social groups—the white middle class, the white working class, and the African American community—examining how each defined and responded to its environmental predicament. The final two chapters, which concentrate on the 1970s, illuminate the interaction among these groups in the context of the environmental movement and a corporate-engineered environmental backlash. Chapter 6 charts the rise and fall of a multiclass and multiracial environmental reform coalition, while chapter 7 offers an assessment of postwar environmental change in terms of social equity. A brief epilogue carries Gary's story into the 1980s and traces its broader implications.

# Acknowledgments

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Over the years, many people have taken the time to read and critique individual chapters or the entire manuscript. Henry Binford, Michael Sherry, Lane Fenrich, and Catherine Sardo Weidner offered useful suggestions at the early stages, while Jan Reiff helped me muddle through the statistical data. More recently, Ken Goings and Eric Sandweiss offered critical advice on certain chapters. Marty Melosi and Ted Steinberg kindly read the entire manuscript and provided incisive criticism.

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Perhaps the most fulfilling aspect of this project has been the opportunity to interview some of the people who played a role in this story. To all of those who took the time to share part of their lives with me, I owe a debt of gratitude.

This book is dedicated to my parents and my grandmother, who have always been more than generous with their love and support.

**Environmental**

**Inequalities**

# Contents

Preface xiii

Acknowledgments xvii

- 1** Class, Race, and the Shaping of the Urban Landscape 1
- 2** The Perils of Pollution in the Steel City, 1945–1950 15
- 3** Opposition to Blind Progress: Middle-Class Environmentalism 46
- 4** Tired of Working in Pollution and Having It Follow Us Home: Working-Class Environmentalism 77
- 5** Rats, Roaches, and Smoke: African American Environmentalism 111
- 6** The Rise and Fall of an Environmental Coalition 136
- 7** The Social Geography of Pollution and the Politics of Sand 154

Epilogue: Gary and Beyond 175

Appendix 183

Notes 189

Bibliography 219

Index 237

# **Figure and Maps**

## **Figure**

- 20 1. Production Flow at Gary Works

## **Maps**

- 27 1. Gary Neighborhoods, 1950
- 31 2. Ethnic Parishes in Gary, 1950
- 52 3. Residential Movement in Gary, 1950–1960
- 127 4. Gary Neighborhoods, 1960
- 166 5. Abandoned Waste Sites in Gary, 1986

## Tables

- 128 5.1. Percentage of Black  
Population Residing in  
Midtown, 1950–1980
- 129 5.2. Census Tracts outside  
Midtown with Over  
50 Percent Black Population,  
1950–1980
- 157 7.1. City of Gary Ambient Air  
Quality: Suspended Particulate,  
1964–1980
- 158 7.2. City of Gary Ambient  
Air Quality: Sulfur Dioxide,  
1968–1980
- 160 7.3. Grand Calumet River Water  
Quality, 1945–1979
- 184 A.1. Infant Mortality and  
Particulate Pollution
- 185 A.2. Infant Mortality and Air  
Pollution, Controlling for  
Income, Race, and Housing  
Quality
- 185 A.3. Air Pollution Levels and  
Socioeconomic Variables
- 186 A.4. Proximity to Industry and  
Socioeconomic Variables
- 186 A.5. Air Pollution Levels and  
Socioeconomic Variables, 1950  
and 1980

# **Class, Race, and the Shaping of the Urban Landscape**

Georgia Jones awoke to the sounds of sirens on the morning of April 14, 1987. Several hours earlier, two storage tanks containing more than 27,000 gallons of hydrochloric acid had leaked their contents onto the premises of the Gary Products factory, engulfing the surrounding area in a cloud of toxic fumes. In response, civil defense officials organized a mass evacuation of the predominantly African American neighborhood, announcing the emergency with bullhorns and sending buses to remove residents. Upon hearing the news, Jones climbed out of bed, collected about a dozen neighbors, and drove off in a packed car to the Genesis Convention Center in downtown Gary. There she joined nearly 2,000 refugees who were biding their time reading, conversing, playing cards, and consuming the hamburgers and coffee that had been donated by McDonalds, Wendys, and Burger King.

Medical personnel were on hand to administer oxygen to several children who had either passed out or begun to hyperventilate because of the toxic fumes. For some adults, the effects of the spill were even more serious. Dennis Simpson had been painting the exterior of his house early that morning, shortly after the spill occurred. Exposed to a large dose of the acid fumes, Simpson became ill and was taken to nearby Methodist Hospital, where he received treatment for burning eyes and severe nausea. A total of 110 other residents required hospital care for breathing difficulties, skin irritation, and other minor ailments. Among the many disruptions caused by the industrial accident were the cancellation of classes at local schools, the closing of neighborhood stores, and the interruption of most operations at the northwest Indiana mail distribution facility, located only a few blocks from the Gary Products factory. Although Gary's postal workers had proven their commitment to delivering the mail in sleet and snow, they were not prepared to brave toxic fumes.<sup>1</sup>

How are we to decipher the meaning of this incident? Varying perspectives suggest alternative translations. For Gary Products, a manufacturer of cleaning solvents and antifreeze, the spill was a minor inconvenience, an expected cost of handling hazardous materials. For the afflicted population, the acid leak was one of many environmental mishaps that caused tremendous social dislocation and disruption, occasionally of tragic proportions. More striking, however, was the way in which the events of that April morning highlighted the hierarchy of environmental power in this manufacturing city. Here was a situation that occurred because the needs of industrial capital clearly took precedence over concerns for the quality of residential life. This skewed scheme of priorities may appear surprising given the fact that the previous half century had witnessed a labor movement, a civil rights movement, and an environmental movement, all of which in some fashion strove to cushion Americans from the harshest environmental consequences of industrial capitalism. Although all of these movements contributed to a reshuffling of environmental arrangements in Gary, this incident suggests that the city's African American and largely impoverished residents were powerless to prevent this sort of disaster from occurring. In this context, the accident at Gary Products makes an even more profound statement about the structure of power relations in recent U.S.

history. For, despite shifts in public debates and political agendas, what remained consistent was the influential position of private capital in ordering the urban landscape for its own ends.

Especially since the rise of industrial capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century, the urban environment, in both its natural and human-altered forms, has been contested terrain. While some have sought to control urban space for the purpose of accumulating profits, others have displayed more variegated motives, including habitation, recreation, and the assertion of social status. Of course, the competition over who would dictate the rules governing the urban environment did not take place on an even playing field. Historically, the ability to control others, through the political process and through the dynamics of the capitalist marketplace, gave certain groups a decisive advantage in the struggle to organize and manipulate the urban landscape. In other words, one's place in the social and economic hierarchy proved a reliable predictor of one's ability to advance and secure a set of environmental objectives.<sup>2</sup> For much of the history of the United States, this hierarchy was organized around divisions of class and race.

During the late nineteenth century, industrial capitalism molded urban society into two distinct groups: those who owned capital and those who sold their labor to the capitalists. Into the early twentieth century, this bifurcation corresponded closely to divisions of wealth and power. Although commercial capitalism had driven a sizable wedge between haves and have-nots much earlier in the nation's history, the limited skill requirements of mechanized manufacturing rapidly expanded and defined the laboring class by creating a virtual army of interchangeable workers with little bargaining power. The massive flow of European migration to U.S. cities between 1840 and 1917 contributed significantly to this split by creating a surplus of unskilled labor. With relatively meager incomes and foreign customs, the European immigrants who rolled cigars, stitched garments, stoked boilers, and tended machines lived a world apart from those who owned factories, shops, and banks. Indeed, when Robert Lynd and Helen Lynd visited Muncie, Indiana, to write *Middletown*, the classic sociological portrait of an American community in the 1920s, they emphasized the division of society into a working class and a business class as the fundamental cleavage governing virtually all aspects of cultural life outside the work place. Accord-



ing to the Lynds, “the mere fact of being born upon one or the other side of the watershed” largely determined where one lived, what products one purchased, with whom one socialized, where one worshipped, and even what time one awoke in the morning.<sup>3</sup> Also, despite the emergence of ethnic political machines that distributed essential services and jobs to working-class citizens in many industrial cities, it was the business class that most commonly held the reins of power in municipal governing structures.<sup>4</sup>

With the slowing of European immigration after the outbreak of World War I, manufacturers increasingly turned to African Americans to fill the lowest ranks of the industrial hierarchy, thereby adding a racial dimension to urban social arrangements. Eager to escape the oppressive sharecropping system in the American South, nearly 5 million African Americans migrated to northern cities between World War I and 1960 to work in packinghouses, auto plants, and steel mills. As a general rule, however, northern manufacturers hired African Americans only as a last resort. Thus, most black migrants who entered the industrial labor force ended up working in the least desirable and most dangerous positions. An even larger number of urban blacks were forced to settle for lower-paying jobs in the service sector, performing menial tasks such as washing dishes, waiting tables, carrying luggage, and operating elevators.

The influx of African Americans had the effect of splitting urban society along racial lines. Industrial corporations deliberately pitted white workers against black workers—for example, by hiring African Americans as strikebreakers—in order to quash any incipient working-class solidarity. Although industrialization did not create racism, industrialists’ hiring practices sustained and deepened it. The resulting racial animosities spilled over into community life, in which white residents systematically excluded African Americans from important civic institutions, social venues, and political structures.<sup>5</sup>

Further complicating the urban social structure was the emergence of a distinct white-collar middle class in the early twentieth century. Writing in 1951, sociologist C. Wright Mills observed that during the first half of the twentieth century, white-collar workers became the driving force behind the American middle class, shaping its mores, expectations, and cultural values. Whereas petty proprietors had once set the standards for appropriate social behavior and aspirations among those