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Environmental Racism in Historical Context: The Robbins Incinerator Debate, 1980s-1990s

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INTRODUCTION

The town of Robbins, Illinois may not be one that typically garners much attention. As a small suburb of Chicago, it sits in the proverbial shadow of the much larger city. Robbins, however, boasts an intriguing history: when it was incorporated into Cook County in 1917, it became the first town in the northern United States to be founded and led completely by Black Americans. It has remained an all-Black town throughout the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first, and came to be known by many Black Chicagoans as an outpost of comfort and safety. As one of the North’s few all-Black towns, it has also been the site of interesting historical events that can shed light on the operation of race in the United States.

In the late 1980s, Robbins became the site of an intense political conflict. The trouble occurred over a not-so-glamorous but nonetheless important subject: an incinerator. A trash disposal company had decided that they would locate their new incinerator in Robbins, a choice which threatened to bring real health threats to the town’s residents. The plan immediately found resistance, including from many people who lived outside of Robbins in areas such as the Southeast Side of Chicago. Despite their best efforts, though, those who protested the incinerator came up against a vexing obstacle: Robbins’s Black mayor, as well as other officials and residents, fully supported the incinerator plan. As it turned out, Robbins was in such dire economic straits at the time that any sort of investment, even in the form of a trash-burning incinerator, was welcomed by many. These dynamics make the Robbins incinerator debate an incredibly powerful case study in environmental racism.

In this paper, I build on the work of sociologist David N. Pellow and geographer Laura Pulido, both of whom have advanced the scholarship on environmental racism. Pellow has argued that scholars have too often portrayed environmental racism as a phenomenon that occurs between a “perpetrator” and a “victim”, wherein one party unilaterally imposes harm on another. In order to fully capture the complexity of environmental racism, he proposes a framework that takes into account the role of history and stratification not only by race but also by class. I offer Robbins as an exemplary case study of how environmental racism operates through complex channels as a result of these forces.

Furthermore, Pulido offers a particularly apt theoretical framework is slightly more robust, containing four key points in total. The two others were not as relevant for this paper. See David Naguib Pellow, Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press Ltd, 2004), 7.
framing of environmental racism. She argues that industry and manufacturing require “sinks”, places to deposit their waste and pollution. Normally, land, air, or water serve as sinks, but when necessary, “racially devalued bodies” can serve the same role. This occurs, Pulido argues, because they lack capital and are thus unable to contribute to capital accumulation, meaning that industry makes these people useful by appropriating them as the absorbers of their pollution. However, I expand Pulido’s point by arguing that racially devalued people do contribute to capital accumulation, precisely through their role as sinks. This repositions nonwhite bodies as crucial to an economic system that consistently needs to find places to deposit its negative externalities. Through this lens, it becomes clear that environmental racism is deeply connected to racialized economic inequalities.

In what follows, I begin by sketching a brief history of Robbins, illustrating how a town with such a powerful claim to history has run up against countless systemic obstacles because of its racial composition. This provides the backdrop for the discussion on the incinerator debate, which largely revolved around competing claims of environmental harm on one hand, and economic gain on the other. Finally, I argue for three sets of historical and theoretical takeaways from the Robbins narrative: first, environmental racism can, in fact, be upheld and propagated by Black individuals; second, environmental racism in a post-racial U.S. operates not simply through face-value discrimination but more so through economic discrimination that uses race as a medium; and third, the Robbins case shines light on certain elements of the uniqueness of environmental racism as a form of inequality.

THE STORY OF ROBBINS AND THE INCINERATOR DEBATE

When Robbins was founded in 1917, it was expressly meant to become a beacon of Black self-reliance. Its founder, Thomas Keller, explained the spirit behind the founding of the town: “The real way to help colored people is to make it possible for them to help themselves. Give them housing and transportation and they will segregate themselves naturally.” For Keller and Robbins’ residents, being able to help themselves meant establishing entire political structures that would operate autonomously of white society. The beauty of Robbins was that it was a place where Black Americans could “hold their own elections, collect their own taxes, operate their own schools, maintain their own police and fire departments.”

Unfortunately, Robbins’ claim to history would also become one of the main sources of its troubles. Building and operating a racially isolated, Black-led town in the 20th century meant that residents struggled with various issues, such as health problems, lack of investment, and political neglect. In 1938 the Pittsburgh Courier noted that Robbins suffered from “poorly constructed homes” and “a lack of modern plumbing.” The town’s water system presented “the greatest possibility for spread of disease,” and the mayor at the time was attempting to get a drainage system built through the Public Works Administration.

Five years later, in 1943, Robbins was declared as one of two towns in the Chicago metro area with the most endangered water supply, causing cases of typhoid fever. When a flood hit the Chicago area in 1948, one Robbins resident wrote an editorial in The Chicago Defender, lamenting, “Nothing has been done…There are now over 5,000 people living out here with no water to drink, bathe in or for other uses as long as seven or eight days at a time.” In 1954, Chicago was hit with one of the worst rainstorms in its recent history, and Robbins was noted as one of the worst-hit communities.

Poverty and a lack of economic investment were perhaps the most glaring and constant challenges for Robbins. In

3 “CHICAGO BOASTS ALL-NEGRO TOWN: Robbins, Ill, Has Negro Mayor and Board of Trustees—Town’s Population Is 2500, with 11 Churches,” The Pittsburgh Courier, September 24, 1938.
4 ibid.
5 “Robbins, Ill. Says: ‘Give Us Housing And Transportation; We’ll Work Out Own Destiny,’” The Pittsburgh Courier, October 15, 1938.
6 “Polluted Water Perils Citizens Of Robbins, Ill.,” The Chicago Defender, April 10, 1943.
the late 1960s, the city’s leaders attempted to secure financial help from federal programs, but found themselves unable to compete with better-resourced towns and cities. In 1966, the mayor identified the town’s central problem as its lack of industry. He noted that Robbins largely was made up of low to moderate income residents, most of whom commuted to other areas for work. In other words, Robbins residents owned little to no capital resources, and the town struggled to attract outside investment to compensate. Mayor Marion Smith, who found himself facing the same issues in the 1970s, did not hesitate to disclose the underlying reason that his town was in such a dire state: “We invite industry to come look us over, but as soon as they see we’re a black village with black leadership, they look the other way.” Outside investors, companies and politicians expressly denied working with Robbins because it was a Black town, denying it the ability to develop true economic and political independence.

This was a systemic issue. Black mayors across Illinois reported that they struggled to attract industry and solicit state assistance. Their towns lacked jobs, with most residents commuting to other locations if they could find employment to being with. Many of these communities, not coincidentally, were also some of the poorest in the state; Robbins in particular ranked last in socioeconomic status according to one urbanologist’s 1975 listing of 201 Chicago suburbs. In 1917, Thomas Keller had imagined that Robbins would become “a thriving Negro center, banks, drug stores, department stores, in fact, a business district on a par with any other community its size in America.” But as hard as Robbins’ leadership and residents tried, they could not overcome the economic consequences that came with being Black in the U.S.

When Irene Brodie was elected mayor in 1989, she inherited these problems. The city had found some relief through community development block grants, becoming one of the largest recipients of the funds in Cook County after 1975. By the late 1980s, however, federal funding for block grants decreased as inflation rose, significantly reducing the amount that Robbins received. The town was eventually cut off completely as a result of evidence of governmental mismanagement before Brodie’s election. Brodie entered office with a debt seven times as large as the town budget. By the time this happened, the town had still not succeeded in attracting major industry. In the absence of government assistance, Mayor Brodie found herself facing pressure to bring any sort of investment or industry to the town.

In her search for ways to economically revitalize Robbins, Brodie felt that she had finally found an answer towards the end of the 1980s. In 1988, Illinois passed the Retail Rate Law, which provided a subsidy for companies to operate incinerators in the state. Attracted by this new legislation, a pair of companies, Reading Energy Co. and Foster Wheeler, began to look for a potential site in Illinois. The companies’ executives quickly found a willing partner in Brodie, who agreed to having their new incinerator built in Robbins. The deal they worked out was ideal for the corporations, which stood to gain $300 million over 20 years. Robbins, in turn, would gain 500 temporary construction jobs, 80 permanent jobs, and at least $750,000 a year in taxes, rent, and fees. These numbers were too appealing for Brodie to resist. Recalling his conversations with Brodie, one Foster Wheeler executive said, “They did more selling to us than we did to them… It was obviously a poor town. I think the leaders just saw that their town was dying and they wanted to do something about it.” Long-standing economic underdevelopment, fueled by racial discrimination, had left Robbins leaders and residents in a position where they would actively bring potential harm to their own bodies if it meant gaining some financial relief.

The plan, however, was immediately met with opposition by environmental justice advocates and residents of the Chicago area who highlighted the dangers of such a toxic facility. After the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency gave the project preliminary approval, 400 residents from the Southwest Side of Chicago protested the prospective construction of the facility. An investigation into the Chicago area’s other incinerators by the Chicago Sun-Times confirmed the dangers that incinerators posed:

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9 “Renewal in Robbins Bogged by Red Tape,” Chicago Tribune, October 6, 1968, sec. S.
12 Page, “Question of Confidence: Black Mayor Has Selling Job to Do”
18 Steinberg, “400 protest health risks of Robbins incinerator.”
contrary to claims that the facility would be harmless, research showed that other incinerators had consistently skirted environmental regulations and had been allowed to continue operating. In a public memorandum, People for Community Recovery (PCR), an environmental justice organization from the Southeast Side of Chicago, protested that these burdens consistently fell on communities of color. Furthermore, PCR and others pointed out that there were alternatives available to handle waste, such as recycling and composting.

Given that many protesters were environmental justice advocates from outside of Robbins, however, the town’s officials continued to press forward with their original plan with the support of many of their residents. At the heart of their counterargument was always the central assertion that the incinerator would be vital for the town’s economic recovery, which overrode any potential harm that would come from it. In a comment lodged at protesters of the facility, Brodie asked, “If incinerators are going to be built, why shouldn’t they be built in a community that needs the income?” At another point, she argued, “There’s always been environmental racism. We’re just making it work for us for once.” These comments reveal a certain resignation, an acknowledgement that though this may not have been the most preferred deal for Robbins, it was the best she felt they could get.

**HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL TAKEAWAYS**

The story of Robbins elucidates a few key aspects of environmental racism and how it is produced. First, environmental racism can be supported by Black leaders and citizens themselves, but they are fundamentally still the victims. Mayor Brodie was not a helpless political leader who had an incinerator sited in her town against her will. She actively advocated for this facility. However, her actions were the result of a much broader history of racism that had placed her in position where she felt that supporting environmental racism was the only avenue she had left in order to keep her town alive. In short, racist economic development in the U.S. has created perverse political incentives that can lead Black political leaders to support environmental racism.

Second, in the post-Civil Rights era of colorblind politics, environmental racism occurs not simply because of face-value discrimination but as a result of the interconnections between race and class. For most of the twentieth century, Robbins was denied investment because of explicit racial discrimination. By the late 1980s, this had been made illegal—but the damage had been done. Robbins was an unattractive place to invest not necessarily because companies held racial bias, but more so because past racial bias had given the town high unemployment and a low median income, factors which were simply bad for business. As a result, the only industrial project Robbins could attract was one which other neighborhoods with more choice—choice that they had gained through racial and economic privilege—could reject. Ultimately, the consequence was that Robbins residents would come to serve as sinks for the nation’s externalities; though they could not offer much income or capital, they could offer their own health.

Third, the tensions present in the incinerator debate unveil a specific element that makes environmental racism unique as a form of inequality. Ultimately, environmental racism results when economic gain and human welfare are explicitly pitted against each other and the former wins. It is a clear and public valuation of human—and usually, nonwhite—life. It can, of course, be argued that other forms of economic inequality impact people’s health. But in the case of the Robbins incinerator, the tradeoff of in-

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20 Ibid.
come for health was at the forefront of the public debate. It was a choice of which public officials, corporate executives, and town residents were made painstakingly aware.

CONCLUSION

The story of Robbins, Illinois is a powerful one. It was a town founded as a bastion of Black independence. But the racism that the town faced gave rise to a host of systemic problems which plagued it throughout the twentieth century. When the town finally found a project that might save it economically, it came with a dangerous cost: the physical welfare of its own residents. The public debate over the Robbins incinerator and the history that led up to it provide valuable lessons about environmental racism. First, history has the potential to place Black Americans in a position where they perpetuate environmental racism against themselves in an effort to gain economic relief. Second, a supposedly neutral free market without face-value discrimination will nonetheless breed racist outcomes because history has blighted majority-Black areas, making them poor areas to invest in even if officials or executives have no outright racist motives. Third, environmental racism is a particularly pernicious form in inequality because it results from a contest between human life against economic gain where the latter wins.

The Robbins incinerator was ultimately built in 1997, but was shut down three years later after the subsidy that was crucial to its funding was repealed. For years afterward, Robbins courted several other attempts at economic revitalization, all of which involved some measure of environmental disruption to the town. It is as if the incinerator story continues to repeat itself. Unfortunately, if left to the vagaries of the free market, it likely will.

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