

City Limits

Looking for Environment and Justice in the Urban Context

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Abstract

As cities have overtaken the countryside as habitat for most of humanity, their environmental politics have become all the more critical. However, the contours of urban environmental politics—their discursive frame and ultimate aims, their authorized cast of actors, and modes of action—often have little to do with ecology *or* justice. Why is this so? This chapter argues that the power to define and address an issue as an “environmental problem” is unequally distributed. Social location and cultural capital shape interpretive frameworks and capacities to act. Selective and superficial framings of environmental issues derive from urban inequality. Indeed, the urban environment poses a peculiar perceptual problem because it does not seem to be composed of commonly understood features of “nature.” That is, the predominantly artifactual aspect of the urban environment complicates understandings of ecological issues based on the template of rural environments. Historically, urban environments have been managed in terms of securing spatial and social order. This logic continues to dictate environmental politics in the city, to the detriment of ecology and justice.