Description: In this project, I examine the disappointing pace of environmental regulatory agencies’ “environmental justice” (EJ) programs and policies as a case through which to understand why, despite reducing air and water pollution for the nation overall, agencies have not protected the communities who suffer the most. Other scholars have shown that material factors outside the control of agency staff – budget cuts, limits to regulatory authority, industry pressure, and underdeveloped analytical tools – constrain the possibilities for EJ reforms to regulatory practice. This project builds upon that work, focusing instead on demonstrating how agencies’ EJ efforts are also undermined by elements of regulatory culture. Through extensive interviews with and observations of staff at numerous environmental regulatory agencies across the United States, I show that agencies’ EJ efforts are undermined by ways in which staff strive to defend what they think the goals and priorities should be of the regulatory organizations they work for and to which they feel very committed – with some staff outright rejecting proposed EJ reforms, and others promoting “environmental justice” in principle but in way that deviate from key tenets of the EJ movement.

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