

BLOG

The Missing Puzzle: Environmentalism in An Era of Identity Politics

Skyler Wang — April 15, 2016

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Volatile public discourses and common sights of organized demonstrations capture the zeitgeist of social resistance in the western world today. Buttressed by the democratizing powers of the internet and an increasingly connected network of impassioned citizens, social change instigated by collective activism are no longer few and far between.

That said, perusing recent streams of activism that have either gained widespread media attention or engendered policy or structural level changes (#blacklivesmatter and marriage equality movements in the United States immediately jump to mind) might have you asking: **why are environmental concerns and movements not generating the same amount of buzz as their queer and racial counterparts?**

Perhaps the answer to this inquiry lies in the ways in which society has historically hierarchized our connections to social issues by impelling us to always ask: how am I personally implicated by [insert problem]? Issues that impact us on a more direct, personal and tangible level are unequivocally going to draw in more interests and mobilizing efforts than troubles that manifest on a more distant, global scale. The trials of climate change, for incidence, are always going to feel more remote, impersonal and non-urgent to us than rising oil prices. We are simply not programmed to reconsider our apathy until the ramifications of melting icebergs start wetting our front porch.

But more than that, the most important significance behind interrogating the 'I question' is that it illuminates us to collective activism's proclivity for prioritizing identity politics. When we look at the decays of society and how they affect our lives and the lives of those whom we care about, we immediately turn to the different facets of our individual identity for answers. We ask—how has my gay / black / female / immigrant identity hamstrung my ability to achieve what I wish to achieve in life? Who we are as individuals, alongside the numerous intersections that lead to experiences of deprivation, can operate like a trigger that galvanizes us into political life participation.

This strange and yet intricate tie we have to our self-identity, as I would argue, is the missing puzzle that frustrates the success of environmentalism today. Identity-based social movements allow people to participate either by claiming membership of a particular wronged identity or proximity to those who possess that identity (for example, picture the unremarkable sightings of straight allies at a gay rights rally). Environmentalism, on the other hand, often deals with problems that transcend identity politics, and hence is unable to leverage the strengths of collective identities. There exists no 'environmental' tag equivalent to how we associate ourselves with gender, race or sexuality identifiers, making it immensely difficult for individuals to commit themselves to environmental activism [sertraline tablets](#). This fact alone reveals an interesting set of dialectics that mark the environmentalist's torment: the very doors that make environmentalism accessible are what that cause people to turn away.

So you may ask, what can we do? Personally, I believe that changing the discourse around environmentalism requires us to first dismantle environmental apathy. On a structural level, we need schools and educators to teach our younger generations not only to become more cognizant of climate change issues, but also to take up active citizenship in their everyday lives. Seeds of compassion need to be planted early and can serve as an instrumental approach in mitigating future adult apathy. On a personal level, we need to engage in hard and critical conversations with those around us about environmental issues and do what we can to change attitudes that fuel inaction. As always, there exists no panacea in resolving a complex issue like this, and while the journey ahead may seem arduous, it is nevertheless important to remember that all revolutions start with small changes. As a final reminder, and in the eloquent words of Niccolo Machiavelli: "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."










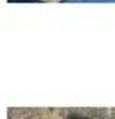
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