

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

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Chicago through environmentalist eyes

It is great to back in the 'Burg — my home for the past eight years. From mid-January to late May, I spent the majority of my time in Chicago during my sabbatical — a "leave" of absence every seven years taken by professors to give them time (usually absent of teaching) to focus on aspects of their professional work. Though I had visited the Windy City on occasion over the years, I have never stayed there for an extended period. Though a newcomer to the "City by the Lake," I decided to locate there (rather than in Costa Rica, which was another option for me) because, after considerable thought, getting to know my regional environment was deemed more important than learning about distant lands. Chicago had a lot to offer an environmental thinker and I was happy to have the opportunity to be an observer as well as participant during my stay. In the following remarks, I will elaborate on a few of my observations. Perhaps some of them will provoke and prompt readers to reconsider what urban environments have to offer and where some of their challenges remain.

While in Chicago, I dedicated most of my time to an environmental justice organization located in a community about 5 miles southwest of the downtown area. This volunteer work constituted my new 9-5 job (usually more like 10-5, as it was sabbatical, remember) three to four days a week. My evening hours in Chicago (say 7pm to 1am) involved carrying out additional research on many of the subjects that have piqued my interest recently (e.g., the food industry, nutrition, air quality, alternative energy forms, and national sex ratios). This research resulted in several *Zephyr* essays, a book review, website contributions, and substantive changes to my yet-unpublished book. When not "working," I definitely spent a good deal of time studying and playing Scrabble® as well as writing a puzzle book for enthusiasts of the game. Otherwise, sadly to some, little of my Chicago experience was spent in characteristically "cultural" centers — such as, playhouses, coliseums, museums, or cafes. Nevertheless, I had a very fruitful experience and one that rejuvenated me for the long trek ahead before my next opportunity to explore.

Transportation. For more than half the time that I was living in Chicago, my car was in Galesburg. Thus, I availed myself of the public forms of transportation (PFTs) — bus and subway (run by the CTA, Chicago Transit Authority), and train (know as the Metra) — and walked a great deal as I navigated myself to, through, and in many of Chicago's 77 official communities (neighborhoods). Prior to my Chicago stint, I had had a great deal of experience riding subways and buses (more of the former) while growing up in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. However, I had only ridden the Chicago subway system a few times and I never had taken a bus or the Metra there. Upon reflection of my nearly one-hundred hours of riding PFTs in Chicago (in addition to a fair bit of experience attempting to get around in my car), here are my conclusions: (1) In terms of transit time, PFTs, in general, often take longer, perhaps twice as long as personal vehicles. During "rush" hour, PFTs may often provide faster service because highways are often backed up and city streets are nauseatingly stop-and-go as well. This delay in PFTs has more to do with a lack of trains and train spatial coverage than due to anything inherent to public transportation.; (2) In terms of quality of life concerns, public transport is preferable. Trains and buses are clean and less nerve-racking than cars that tailgate and/or weave in and out of traffic or trucks and SUVs (of all shapes and sizes) that dominate the roadways. Also, while on

a train or bus, I was able to do an immense amount of reading and thinking, something not possible in the "heat" of traffic; (3) the plethora of trucks and oversized personal vehicles make it virtually impossible to use bicycles (despite their being the most efficient form of transportation known to humans); (4) aspects of Chicago's PFTs are decidedly discriminatory. Recently efforts by the CTA to reduce fraud resulted in eliminating the paper transfer method (which enabled passengers needing more than one bus or train to use paper transfers to continue on their route). Now, for those that don't have a credit card, a PFT rider has one of two choices — buy cards that can only be recharged at a limited number of locations (fewer in poor neighborhoods) or pay cash. But here is the catch. The paying cash option, which is by far the easiest, least invasive method forces riders to pay an extra quarter to ride a bus (than the card holders) and, worse yet, forces them to pay full fare each time they transfer. And since the "cash" users tend to be the poorest and recently immigrated residents of the city, it hurts those that are least able to afford it. Additionally, an effort is underway to reduce subway service to communities of color by way of diverting service to communities that are gentrifying, i.e., getting richer and whiter. "Public" hearings held by the CTA to assess the needs of communities are public only in the sense that regular people can be seen but few are heard; so much for a working democracy; for more on this issue visit: www.lvejo.org/restoringCTA.htm.

Environmental Organizations. Working with the Chicago Clean Power Coalition (CCPC; www.chicagocleanpower.org) provided me an opportunity to witness firsthand how environmental organizations vary from one another. Large organizations, which have thousands of members nationwide, tend to focus their attention and energy on persuading state and national politicians to support a particular position, platform, or policy by providing cogent, well-supported arguments. They appeal to their membership primarily for monetary support. On the other hand, smaller, grassroots, community-based organizations attempt to educate local citizens in hopes that they, once enlightened, will organize, "take-to-the-streets," and force politicians to support policies and platforms that protect residents immediately. Each of these two strategies has its strengths and weaknesses. In short, the larger organizations are often forced to settle for a compromise position and can be corrupted by a political system that cajoles them to negotiate in the first place. They will get something done but the "something" may be a weak position. Additionally, large organizations also often forget which communities are most impacted by their recommended changes; hence, it is imperative for the organizations involved find out what the local people really want, rather than figuring out what is best for them independent of their voice. On the other hand, the grassroots groups often expend a lot of energy building a movement (albeit locally) that may or may not materialize. When a movement forms, it can be very influential in eliciting significant change. Grassroot organizations also reflect the spirit of democracy in a very tangible way — people becoming educated, participating in decision-making, and demanding progress. As a member of a coalition consisting of both types of environmental groups, at times, I found it painstaking to get these groups to work together. Yet, the CPCC was able to accomplish some things and its efforts over the next few months may determine the future of clean air in Chicago and elsewhere.



Photograph by José Mora/Chicago Tribune

Air Quality. As I detailed in my last *Zephyr* column, Chicago air has much to be desired. Air pollution is an everyday problem (although the "warnings" are only issued when things really get out of hand). Sources for pollution abound, from the thousands of cars, buses, and trucks that weave through (or sit endlessly in) traffic, from the numerous industrial emitters in and around the city, and from the two coal power plants located just a few miles from the Million Dollar Mile (i.e., Michigan Avenue downtown). Chicago also gets a fair bit of pollution from Joliet (located only 33 miles SW) where one of the largest coal power plants in the state operates (along with hoards of other industrial factories; Will County, where Joliet is located, ranks 6th worst — out of 80 rated counties — air pollution producer in the state; Cook County, where Chicago is located, is ranked 2nd worst; Knox County is ranked 40th worst).

Yet despite this situation, many people I spoke with (outside of my coworkers) didn't seem to think much about the danger they face each and every day just by breathing. Contrastingly, the fear these same folks expressed on the issue of violence was substantial. However, according to the American Lung Association of Metropolitan Chicago, more people die each year because of the filthy air in Chicago than do because of all forms of homicide. Apparently such statistics haven't yet registered with the public. If they did, we might have thousands of EPA officers in the streets of Chicago writing citations and making arrests of polluters. Wouldn't that be something that we could benefit from?

And not all communities or people face the same pollution levels. Those that live on the south and west side of Chicago have much greater exposures to pollution. Whether from a large manufacturing plant, a giant landfill, a steel drum cleaning and processing plant, a bus depot, or even a facility that culls the "valuable" recyclables out of the public waste stream, people living in low income neighborhoods must endure much more by way of stench and poisonous fumes. If clean air is a human right, then there are many, many violations of human rights occurring among the nearly three million residents of Chicago.

Immigration. Over the past few months, this country has witnessed some of the largest marches in its history. While anti-war protests have been numerous and sizeable, recent Pro-Immigration marches, especially in Chicago, have even been larger. On May 1, 2006, at least 400,000 people peacefully walked through the streets of Chicago demanding that immigrants be treated with respect and humanity (nationwide, participants in similar marches numbered over 2 million that day). Fortunately, I had

a chance to witness and participate in this event and as a result came to the following conclusions.

Immigration has occurred on this continent for millennia. Most American citizens today descend from immigrant families that came to the United States after its founding. Currently, ~69 percent of the population growth in the United States stems from newly arriving immigrants (both legal and illegal) and the children that they give birth to while here. Yet surprisingly, in 2000, only 10.4 percent of the U.S. population consisted of immigrants, whereas in the first three decades of the 20th century, the proportion of immigrants were a few percentage points higher. In summary then, this country was (and is being) built with the backs and the sweat of immigrants, something that will likely continue in the future.

When we think of what compels people to come to the United States now, especially from countries to our south, it is imperative we consider the impact of NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement). Starting in 1994, NAFTA has resulted in the growth of larger industrial farms across the border which has forced (by economic necessity) many farmers to seek work in urban metropolises (such as Mexico City). Finding little work there (due to the rapid increases in population size), some of these agriculturalists (and their families) have decided that it is worthwhile to take the substantial risk involved in entering the U.S. rather than continue to face NAFTA-induced economic hardship in their country of origin.

As a worker in a largely immigrant community — Little Village on the southwest side of Chicago — I was able to interact with recent immigrants on a regular basis. I found them to be hard working, moral, and family-oriented people. Watching them function in new surroundings was heartening to me because I often wondered what life was like for my great-grandparents (on both sides of my family) that came to the New York area in the early 1900s from Eastern Europe. I am grateful that my ancestors found refuge here and were able to build a life that I am currently benefiting from. Thinking that they might have been sent back home on their ship (or worse) because this country would have deemed them "superfluous" (pick another pejorative term) seems outrageous. Obviously we must come to recognize the social and economic pressures that exist on the planet today (in part due to environmental damage and excessive takings of resources) which creates the situation that we find ourselves in. Bigger walls, more guards, better sharpshooters or booby traps may appear to be the easy solution, but certainly one that ignores the