

# **Bell, K. (2020). *Working-Class Environmentalism: An Agenda for a Just and Fair Transition to Sustainability*. Palgrave Macmillan.**

**Review by Jennifer Westerman**

The silhouettes of 29 coal miners are etched into the long, black granite memorial in the community of Whitesville, West Virginia. The miners stand alongside one another, some with their arms draped across the shoulders of others. Shaped like the contours of the Appalachian Mountains along its top edge, the Upper Big Branch Miners Memorial is a tribute to those workers who perished in an explosion in the Upper Big Branch Mine in nearby Montcoal. The verse ‘Come to me, all you who labor, and I will give you rest’ is inscribed in unadorned lettering across the base of the monument. Prior to the 2010 Upper Big Branch Mine explosion, more than 1,000 safety violations had occurred in the mine since 2007; federal health and safety regulators had shut down operations 60 times in 2009 alone.

I was reminded of this haunting memorial when I started reading the opening chapter of working-class scholar-activist Karen Bell’s book, *Working-Class Environmentalism: An Agenda for a Just and Fair Transition to Sustainability*. Bell describes the devastating 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in the Lancaster West Estate social housing complex in north Kensington, west London, which resulted in the deaths of 72 mostly working-class residents, recounting a series of misguided decisions and management oversights and years of residents’ health and safety concerns that had gone unaddressed. As with the Upper Big Branch Mine, working-class people were seen as disposable, replaceable, or simply not seen at all. ‘In the UK and around the world,’ Bell argues, ‘working-class people are killed and injured through living and working in toxic and dangerous environments every day, largely invisibly, out of public sight and awareness’ (p. 2).

Bell, whose research examines the political, geographical, and environmental dimensions of working-class studies and environmental justice, has for more than a decade written about environmental classism, and through her work, amplified the voices of working-class people. A senior lecturer in the Department of Geography and Environment at University of the West of England, Bell was previously a community development worker and environmental justice campaigner who has lived on council estates in the UK throughout her life. *Working-Class Environmentalism* is, in many ways, a remarkable culmination of her life’s work so far.

Bell’s primary aims involve thoroughly and thoughtfully defining environmental classism and working-class environmentalism, a discussion that is rich with nuance and purpose and made even more meaningful by the inclusion of insights from 27 working-class interviewees and Bell’s personal experiences in environmental and social justice activism. Although workers and working-class experiences in the UK on council estates and other working-class and working poor areas figure prominently in the book, Bell’s articulation of environmental classism as both socially

produced and preventable is deeply relevant to anyone who has considered who benefits and who pays when working-class people are left out of environmental decision-making and so often dismissed as anti-environmental.

Of particular significance to the field of working-class studies is Bell's discussion of class as both an analytical category and as lived experience in the context of environment and development, with emphases on intersectionality, disparate environmental burdens, and health disparities and outcomes. Bell demonstrates throughout *Working-Class Environmentalism* that 'using a framework that focuses solely on any single issue will not be sufficient to capture the form and extent of injustice that most working-class people experience' (p. 19). Bell's emphasis on intersectionality illuminates the fact that 'class cannot be experienced outside of other identities' (p. 15). Defining class thus involves the interplay between and among education, occupation, and intergenerational economic and social mobility; the material distribution of wealth and income; the concerns with how class origins shape life chances and opportunities; the unequal distribution of environmental harms; and the intersection of 'recognition,' status, and valuing (pp. 30-5).

According to Bell, 'environmental classism' results when working-class lives are devalued and dehumanized and when these conditions are connected to environmental inequality; indeed, 'working-class people carry the environmental burdens of society' (p. 72). Ange, one of the interviewees, put it this way: *'I heard the rubbish that come to [local area] has come from London. Why do they put the rubbish on a train and bring it here? There could be anything in it. If it is safe, why don't they burn it in London? Why do they bring it here where we live?'* (qtd. in Bell, p. 89). As Bell notes, environmental classism 'could not happen without the wider inequalities in society that produce social class' (p. 171). Ending environmental classism will require a more inclusive environmental movement, Bell asserts, one that seeks out, values, and is shaped by working-class experiences.

Bell inspires readers to take this knowledge and awareness and actively use it to disrupt patterns of injustice, unproductive divisions between social classes, inequitable institutional structures, and mainstream environmental policymaking and capitalist practices that are rooted in the separation of working-class people and their labor from environmentalism and environmentalists. The arc of *Working-Class Environmentalism* mimics this trajectory as Bell moves from foundational theories on class to environmental classism and from awareness of environmental attitudes, practices, and policies that leave out working-class people, to a call for embracing a working-class environmentalism that would challenge existing unjust systems and institutions and uphold environmental human rights as the measure of a just and sustainable society. This welcome social justice perspective on environmentalism and environmental policy-making highlights the ways in which working-class people and the working poor experience and respond to environmental inequalities. Bell calls on her readers and others to build a more inclusive environmentalism that will 'benefit, include, and respect working-class people' (p. 138). Learning from the environmentalism of the world's poor, efforts by trade unions to address environmental problems, and social movements for worker health and safety will enable a radical socio-ecological transformation. Bell asserts: 'we must build alliances between social and environmental movements and extend these movements to support the widest scope of humans and ecologies possible' (p. 232).

While the finality of the Upper Big Branch miners' lives is cast in solid stone, the debate over the right way to memorialize the Grenfell Tower victims is ongoing. The fire-ravaged shell of Grenfell Tower is wrapped in white sheeting with a banner hanging at the top that reads 'Grenfell Forever in our Hearts,' a sacred, yet impermanent, memorial. The building rises higher than those surrounding it, standing in stark relief against the sky. In this way, Grenfell is a symbol of Bell's purpose in writing this book: to call attention to landscapes of injustice for working-class and working poor people. 'Grenfell,' Bell writes, 'made classism visible' (p. 2).

### **Reviewer Bio**

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