

Re-Examine the Connotation and Nature of NIMBY

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Abstract: NIMBY is a common phenomenon in the field of environmental protection. Scholars have different understandings of the connotation and nature of NIMBY. In a narrow sense, NIMBY means that some residents resist a facility near their habitat when it has not been built or has not polluted the environment. In a broad sense, NIMBY refers to the resistance of some residents to the proposed facilities near their habitat or the facilities that have polluted the environment. NIMBY in a narrow sense belongs to precautionary environmental protest. NIMBY, broadly defined, can be both remedial and precautionary environmental protest. By tracing the history of academic research on NIMBY, this paper finds that the NIMBY studied by scholars in the early stage was a narrow sense of NIMBY, which mainly studied the conflicts caused by the location or construction of public facilities such as waste treatment facilities. This makes many scholars have long believed that the nature of NIMBY was the conflict between community interests and public interests. The narrow sense of NIMBY is usually understood by the academic and practical fields. The nature of NIMBY depends on the attributes of NIMBY facilities, the rationality of facility planning and design, the procedural justice of site selection process and other factors. Re-examining the connotation and nature of NIMBY will help all sectors of society to view the phenomenon of NIMBY more fairly, pay more attention to the interests and environmental rights of community residents, and avoid one-sided labeling of NIMBY. This study will contribute to environmental protection and sustainable development.

Keywords- NIMBY, environmental protection, precautionary environmental protest, facility siting, pollute.

1. Introduction

NIMBY is an important phenomenon in the field of environmental protection. Since the 1970s, NIMBY has emerged in many countries, so that the so-called NIMBY movement has been formed. NIMBY movement is usually a grassroots environmental protection action. On the one hand, the emergence of the phenomenon of NIMBY has promoted environmental protection and environmental governance, on the other hand, it has also attracted many disputes. Some critics believe that NIMBY is to put community interests above public interests in the name of environmental protection. We need to re-examine the concept and nature of NIMBY.

The problem of NIMBY is a major focus in the academic and practical circles, which has been widely concerned by scholars in many disciplines such as public management, environmental sociology, political science, journalism and communication. The research results on NIMBY can be described as voluminous. The existing research mainly focused on the causes, characteristics, evolution process, formation mechanism and governance countermeasures of NIMBY. [1-5] However, the researches on the connotation and nature of NIMBY are still relatively weak. Many scholars tended to define or understand NIMBY as the relevant residents protesting the construction of certain facilities, but in the course of the study, the resistance to the facilities that have already produced pollution was also regarded as NIMBY. [6] Many scholars didn't clearly define the concept of "NIMBY" when using the concept of "NIMBY". Intentionally or unintentionally, they regarded the remedial environmental protest as NIMBY, which leads to the ambiguity of the connotation of the concept of NIMBY, which is not conducive to deepening the relevant academic research.

A few scholars have specifically reflected on the applicability of the concept of NIMBY. For example, Wolsink has pointed out that the concept of NIMBY was not sufficient to explain or describe public attitudes and behaviors against certain facilities. [7] The concept of "NIMBY" has encountered multiple stigmatization from groups such

as governments, experts, and the public. Zheng once analyzed the applicability of the concept of NIMBY, pointed out that “NIMBY” has problems such as semantic ambiguity and insufficient explanatory power, and proposed the alternative concept of “precautionary environmental protest”.[8]

In general, the academic community lacks in-depth research on the connotation and nature of NIMBY, and there is less reflection on the concept of NIMBY. This has led to differences in the academic community’s understanding of the connotation and extension of NIMBY, and even led to some misunderstandings. Therefore, in order to promote the academic research and environmental protection practice, this paper will re-examine the connotation and nature of NIMBY.

2. The Connotation of NIMBY

As early as in the 1970 s and 1980 s, Western scholars paid close attention to the issue of facility siting disputes and land use plans that were rejected by local residents. [9] Most American scholars believe that the term “NIMBY” originated in the United States, and it has appeared in publications before the late 1980 s. [10] The concept of “NIMBY” literally means “Not in my backyard”. For example, according to Sellers, NIMBY was used to “describe the attitudes of people in communities who do not want certain facilities located near their residences or towns”. [11] The meaning of the word “NIMBY” seems simple, but in fact it is vague and general. Generally speaking, the concept of NIMBY is divided into broad sense and narrow sense. NIMBY in a narrow sense refers to the opposition of some residents to the construction of certain facilities near their habitats (mainly residential and workplace). This opposition often appears in the facility location stage. NIMBY in a narrow sense belongs to precautionary environmental contention. [8] The relevant protesters are against facilities (often unbuilt facilities) that have not yet caused substantial damage to their rights and interests. Western academia generally uses the concept of “NIMBY” in a narrow sense.

In the 1980s and 1990s, many Western scholars used the concepts of “LULU”, “NOOS” and “NIMBY” to study the resistance caused by the issue of facility construction. For example, in 1984, Portney used the concept of “NIMBY” to describe the resistance encountered in the location of hazardous waste.[12] Dear argued that NIMBY was the idea that residents of certain communities wanted to protect their turf and opposed some development projects.[13] Dear’s paper studied the facility location problem and precautionary environmental protest, which was widely cited by scholars in many countries. The “NIMBY” defined by Dear actually refers to the attitude and behavior of residents around a facility before the facility has been built or the environment has not been polluted. Burningham’s definition of “NIMBY” was highly consistent with Dear’s. Burningham believed that the term “NIMBY” was used to describe people’s opposition to the local setting of new projects. [10]

In short, the concept of “NIMBY” was originally used to describe plans by residents of some communities to resist the construction of facilities near their habitats. These boycotted facilities have not yet been built and have not yet damaged the environment.

The concept of NIMBY used by the early scholars is narrow. In other words, the NIMBY phenomena studied by early scholars were all precautionary environmental protest. Since the 21st century, western scholars still use the concept of NIMBY to describe the opposition of residents in some places to the construction of facilities. [4-5] So far, the concept of NIMBY used by most scholars is a narrow sense of NIMBY, and the NIMBY problem studied is mainly precautionary environmental contention.

In a broad sense, NIMBY refers to residents’ opposition to facilities near their habitats (including operating facilities, unbuilt facilities, built but unoperated facilities). It is a remedial environmental protest for the residents around the facilities to oppose the facilities that have produced pollution. The broad concept of NIMBY actually includes two different types of environmental contention: precautionary environmental protest and remedial environmental protest. A few Chinese scholars adopt the generalized concept of NIMBY. For example, Qiu believed that opposing facilities that are still being planned and opposing facilities that have generated pollution are NIMBY conflicts. [14]

In general, the NIMBY problem studied by the academia is usually the attitude and behavior of residents near the facility to oppose and resist the facility before the relevant facility has not yet been polluted (usually not yet built). Some Chinese scholars believe that NIMBY can include not only precautionary environmental protest, but also remedial environmental protest (environmental protest caused by facilities that have polluted the environment). If we regard the remedial environmental protest as NIMBY problem, then most of the current research conclusions on NIMBY will not be valid. There are many important differences between precautionary environmental protest and remedial environmental protest. It is not appropriate to confuse precautionary environmental protest with remedial environmental protest. Remedial environmental protest means that the relevant residents are defending their rights and interests such as health rights and property rights that have been substantially damaged. Precautionary environmental protest means that the health rights and property rights of the relevant residents have not been substantially damaged, but only face the risk of damage. There are significant differences between precautionary environmental contention and remedial environmental protest.

Therefore, it is better for us to respect the original connotation of the concept of NIMBY and the general understanding of the connotation of this concept in Western academia. In other words, it is better to define NIMBY as the attitude and behavior of some residents around the facility to oppose the construction of the facility when the facility has not yet been built and has not produced substantial pollution, and exclude the environmental struggle (remedial environmental protest) caused by the environmental pollution of the facility from the extension of NIMBY.

3. Nature of NIMBY

Scholars have different views of the nature of NIMBY. NIMBY includes two parts: NIMBY attitude and NIMBY behavior. This paper mainly studies the NIMBY behavior. Many scholars tend to think that NIMBY behavior is a selfish behavior that violates the public interest. This view was the mainstream view in the 1980s.[15] For example, Kunreuther and Kleindorfer argued that the root cause of NIMBY was that related facilities are beneficial to society as a whole, but add some burden to the residents around the facilities.[16] Until the 1990s, scholars generally regarded NIMBY as a conflict between local interests and public interests, and viewed NIMBY actions as short-sighted, narrow, and self-interested behaviors, giving the concept of NIMBY a clear negative connotation. [17] For example, Lake believed that the essence of NIMBY was the conflict between social interests (public interests) and community (local) interests.[18] Government, facility builders and other practitioners also tended to regard NIMBY as a manifestation of selfishness. [19] Many people in the U.S. economic and political fields also believed that many NIMBY behaviors were selfish behaviors regardless of the public interest.

There are also some scholars who hold a more neutral position on the nature of NIMBY behavior. The occurrence of NIMBY was closely related to residents' cognition of facilities and builders. Some people believed that the essence of NIMBY was people's subjective perception of facilities. Saint et al. believed that people's perception of the project was the essence of the NIMBY problem, regardless of whether this perception reflects objective facts; people's judgment on the quality of the project is often subjective, often related to political values and environmental cognition.[20] Some scholars believed that people's NIMBY behaviors are caused by many factors.[21] The occurrence of precautionary environmental protest or NIMBY is often caused by a variety of factors such as conflicts of interest among relevant subjects, residents' defense of health rights, distrust of the government, and improper government disposal. Some scholars also believe that NIMBY actions contained both rational and irrational components. Yung-Jaan Lee, a famous research expert on NIMBY, believed that NIMBY means the conflict between the community and the capitalists and the state. [19] The occurrence of NIMBY conflicts may be closely related to local economic interests, dietary preferences, and cultural identities. [22]

With the deepening of research, some scholars gradually realized the positive significance of NIMBY. Some scholars believed that the impact of NIMBY was more beneficial than harmful. Although it may bring some negative results, it can help to stimulate citizen participation in public affairs decision-making and environmental protection. Citizen participation triggered by NIMBY psychology may not only lead to an increase in decision-

making costs, but also may be conducive to the improvement of relevant decisions and facility builders.[15] Hager and Haddad not only regarded NIMBY as a reasonable response to a flawed policy process, but also as a potential and beneficial political participation. [23] Some Chinese scholars also believed that, from the perspective of public management, NIMBY conflicts were the inevitable result of the conflict between public interests and local interests; from the perspective of the theory of environmental justice, the essence of NIMBY conflicts was a movement of environmental justice in which citizens safeguard their own living environments and strive for equal living environments, and it has a sufficient legitimacy and moral foundation. [24]

In general, it is a common view in the academia to attribute the nature of NIMBY behaviors to the conflicts between local interests (or community interests) and public interests. This is largely because the NIMBY conflicts studied by most scholars in the early stage were mainly caused by the construction of public facilities. When the NIMBY phenomenon emerged in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, almost all of the NIMBY facilities that attracted the attention of scholars were public facilities (the most common and most concerned facilities were those related to garbage disposal). [18, 25] In the 21st century, when Western scholars study the NIMBY problems, the NIMBY facilities involved were mainly facilities that are in the public interest or facilities that are needed by the society as a whole.[26-27] Most of the NIMBY facilities studied by Chinese scholars were also facilities with public interest attributes. Garbage disposal facilities, mobile communication infrastructure, transmission facilities and other public facilities were the earliest facilities boycotted by the Chinese people, and also the earliest NIMBY facilities studied by the Chinese academia. This has led many Chinese scholars to generally regard NIMBY facilities as facilities representing public interests when studying NIMBY issues. Many scholars believed that NIMBY facilities were facilities that were beneficial to the public interest, but may have negative externalities (negative effects on a few people). For example, Yung-Jaan Lee believed that “NIMBY facilities refer to facilities that ‘serve the people in a large area, but may pose a threat to the living environment, residents’ health and life and property, so that residents wish not to set up facilities near their homes.” [19]

This paper argues that NIMBY behavior belongs to environmental behavior. Once it is associated with public authorities, it belongs to political participation behavior, reflecting the relationship between individuals, communities and the state. In most cases, the protesters act in order to safeguard their own interests. Even if many protesters may overestimate the potential risks of related facilities, we cannot simply assert that NIMBY behavior is irrational. Whether the nature of the NIMBY behavior is a selfish behavior that violates the public interest or a legitimate and reasonable rights protection cannot be generalized, but should be determined according to the specific situation.

First of all, the nature of NIMBY behavior depends largely on whether the facilities resisted by residents belong to public facilities (or quasi-public facilities). If the facilities that are boycotted by nearby residents are public facilities (e.g., public hospitals, state-owned transportation facilities, vulnerable groups relief centers, military facilities, landfills, garbage transfer stations, crematoriums, etc.), then the nature of the NIMBY is a conflict between local and public interests. If the facilities that are resisted by nearby residents are facilities that are contrary to public order and morals (e.g., facilities that provide illegal services such as pornography and gambling), the nature of NIMBY behaviors is that the residents are defending their legitimate interests and public interests. In real life, some NIMBY facilities are facilities that violate ethics. For example, in a cross-country survey in the early 21st century, casinos were one of the most likely NIMBY facilities to be boycotted in the United States, Britain and Canada. [20] We should not think that facilities such as casinos and brothels are facilities that are in the public interest. In reality, there are many facilities that can meet certain social needs and are planned by private enterprises. The NIMBY behavior against such facilities is largely a conflict between the special interests of the relevant community residents and the special interests of private enterprises. Some scholars believed that the essence of NIMBY was the interest game between local residents and project developers. [28]

Secondly, the nature of NIMBY behavior is related to the technical rationality of facility planning and design. The NIMBY facilities opposed by some local people are unreasonable in design and lack of environmental protection

facilities, so they are likely to pollute the environment after completion. One of the main reasons for these people's opposition to the construction of the facility was to worry about, question the unreasonable planning and design of the facility, and even question its failure to comply with relevant environmental regulations. We should not consider that a profit-making facility with an unreasonable design is likely to pollute the environment is in the public interest. Even if the construction of public facilities (such as state-owned waste incineration power plants), if its design does not comply with the relevant environmental protection laws and regulations, it is likely to pollute the surrounding environment and affect the health of nearby residents after completion, then the residents near the facility boycott the construction of such facilities should not be regarded as selfish, narrow, contrary to the public interest behavior.

Finally, the nature of NIMBY behavior is related to procedural justice in the process of facility location. The failure of some local governments to fully protect the public's right to know and participate in the process of facility location decision-making and approval is one of the important reasons for the public's resistance to facilities. The decision-making process of community residents' absence from projects is one of the important reasons for community residents to exclude related projects. Rabe pointed out that facilities developers (enterprises or governments) did not fully respect the views of the people when making project decisions, which was an important reason for many NIMBY conflicts. [29] A recent study showed that the procedural justice of facility location is very important to overcome the NIMBY problem.[30] Even if the planning and design of public facilities meet the technical requirements and legal norms, the right to know and some form of participation of residents near the facilities should be respected. After all, new facilities may bring negative externalities that experts, governments and facilities builders ignore.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The NIMBY phenomenon studied by Western scholars in the early days was to resist the construction of public facilities when the relevant public facilities had not polluted the environment. With the passage of time, more and more scholars have studied the grassroots environmental protection movement. The conflicts caused by the construction of private facilities have gradually attracted the attention of scholars. Conflicts caused by facilities that have polluted the environment have also been regarded by some scholars as NIMBY conflicts. As a result, scholars have different understandings of the connotation and nature of NIMBY. The academic community later has at least two understandings of the connotation of NIMBY. NIMBY in a narrow sense refers to the exclusion of some residents from a facility near their habitat when it has not yet been built or has not polluted the environment. NIMBY in a narrow sense is a precautionary environmental struggle. In a broad sense, NIMBY refers to the exclusion of some residents from facilities near their habitats. The narrow sense of NIMBY is a typical NIMBY. The generalized NIMBY includes both precautionary environmental contention and remedial environmental protest. Generalized NIMBY and narrow NIMBY have significant differences in connotation and extension. Different understandings of the connotation of NIMBY will lead to different understandings of the nature of NIMBY. Relief environmental protest usually has legal basis and sufficient moral basis, and is usually not regarded as a manifestation of selfishness. Some precautionary environmental protests or NIMBY behaviors were suspected to be selfish or contrary to the public interest.

The academic concept should have a clear connotation and extension, so as not to cause unnecessary differences in academic circles and waste of academic resources. It is necessary for us to examine the alternative concept of "NIMBY". "NOOS" and "LULU" are very similar to the connotation of "NIMBY" and are often used to replace "NIMBY". However, they also have some defects. "Precautionary environmental contention" was a concept proposed by Chinese scholars. The literal meaning of this concept has nothing to do with spatial distance, which more accurately reflects the psychology and behavior of some people against certain facilities. Therefore, we can use "precautionary environmental contention" as an alternative to the concept of "NIMBY".

In-depth study of the connotation and nature of NIMBY will help countries to promote environmental protection, coordinate the relationship between environmental protection and economic development, and balance public

interests and local community interests. This study helps to promote green development and sustainable development.

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