



## Manuel Pastor (1956-Present)

Turpanjian Chair in Civil Society and Social Change and Professor of Sociology and American Studies and Ethnicity

University of Southern California

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*"If you do the stuff you think is really meaningful, you do your best work."* Manuel Pastor, 2010.

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### Overview

Dr. Manuel Pastor is Professor of Sociology and American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. As founding director of the [Center for Justice, Tolerance, and Community](#) at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Pastor currently directs the [Program for Environmental and Regional Equity \(PERE\)](#) at USC and [USC's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration \(CSII\)](#). He holds an economics Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and is the inaugural holder of the [Turpanjian Chair in Civil Society and Social Change](#) at University of Southern California. His research has generally focused on issues of the economic, environmental and social conditions facing low-income urban communities – and the social movements seeking to change those realities. Some his books include:

- *Equity, Growth, and Community: What the Nation Can Learn from America's Metro Areas*, University of California Press, 2015.
- *Just Growth: Prosperity and Inclusion in America's Metropolitan Regions* (with Chris Benner), Routledge Press, 2012.
- *Uncommon Common Ground: Race and America's Future* (with Angela Glover Blackwell and Stewart Kwoh), 2010, W.W. Norton, revision of a 2002 volume with a similar name.
- *This Could Be the Start of Something Big: How Social Movements for Regional Equity are Reshaping Metropolitan America*, with Chris Benner and Martha Matsuoka, Cornell University Press, 2009.
- *Staircases or Treadmills: Labor Market Intermediaries and Economic Opportunity in a Changing Economy*, with Chris Benner and Laura Leete. Russell Sage Press, 2007.

*This interview was conducted in 2015.*

## Early Life and Career

Manuel Pastor grew up in La Puente, California. He recalls the smog and toxic dumping grounds, “We were living in a place with lots of toxics, though we did not know it.” While growing up amidst the pollution and optimism of Southern California, Pastor’s involvement with the environmental movement grew out of his concerns for social and economic inequality. For Pastor, the environment was another way to demonstrate the inequality of the social structure in the United States. It was also a way to open conversations on the inequality of opportunities that exist in a variety of different spheres.

Pastor’s first job, which he took at the age of 16, was as a construction worker. Pastor recalls how this job was a good demonstration of how the labor market hierarchy works, “My job was to put up chain link fence along temporary construction sites. The pay was awful and we were treated terribly.” The experience confirmed for Pastor that he did not want to do this type of work – but also that he wanted to make sure that those doing such work would be treated decently. Pastor earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in economics and pursued an academic career. He graduated from the University of California, Santa Cruz with a bachelor’s degree in economics and creative writing in 1978. In 1984, he earned his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and was offered a position as assistant professor of economics at Occidental College.

The position at Occidental College afforded Pastor the opportunity to really explore his interests. He explains, “I was in a very supportive environment, particularly with regard to tenure. A lot of professors get oriented around tenure rather than what they are interested in. I was able to explore more of what my interests were.” Pastor found his interest in issues of social inequality and environmental justice. He found he was able to use his work to inform activism around these issues.

Finding his interest in environmental justice happened a bit by accident though. Pastor was working with a colleague, Jim Sadd, who had two students who wanted to work on issues of environmental justice. As Pastor recalls, “We told them that was fine as long as they worked on our stuff too.” However, the students started talking with a reporter at the Los Angeles Times and shortly thereafter, the front page of the local section had a headline reading, “Occidental College study alleges environmental racism in LA.” Shortly thereafter, city council passed a resolution creating an environmental justice task force in the city and the task force wanted to meet with the authors of the Occidental study. Pastor describes, “We kind of held off the city of Los Angeles while we figured out what the students had done.” The work also attracted the attention of environmental justice community based organizations and before they knew it, a new set of relationships had developed and they became environmental justice researchers.

The late 1980s were a transformation time for Pastor. In 1988, he applied for a fellowship from the Kellogg foundation to allow him the time to work on a project regarding minimum wage standards. Upon receiving the fellowship, one-quarter of his time for three years could be spent on his project of interest. For Pastor, this meant becoming involved in community organizing. This experience reshaped his vision of the progressive faculty member. One version of being a progressive faculty member, he says, means being on faculty and being progressive; another means really being engaged with community based organizations. He also notes that both Occidental College, where he was on faculty from 1984 until 1996, and the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he was on faculty from 1996 until 2007, were very open to this type of work as they maintain a very progressive tradition. However, he also firmly believes that, “If you do the stuff you think is really meaningful, you do your best work.”

Pastor is currently a professor of Sociology and American Studies & Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He directs the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE) and also co-directs USC's Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII). His research has generally focused on issues of the economic, environmental and social conditions facing low-income urban communities – and the social movements seeking to change those realities. His most recent book, *Just Growth: Inclusion and Prosperity in America's Metropolitan Regions*, co-authored with Chris Benner, argues that growth and equity should be linked, offering a new path for a U.S. economy seeking to recover from economic crisis and distributional distress. He is also a nationally renowned speaker, media commenter, and writer on issues including environmental justice, demographic change, inequality, and immigrant integration.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Pastor acknowledges the role of mentors in the development of his career. Specifically, he credits Dr. Sam Bowles, a graduate school advisor, as being a good advisor. Pastor says, “[Bowles] was a very good mentor. He was very smart and full of good ideas and very human. He told me, ‘The trick is to get a good job in a place where you really want to live.’ He also reminded me that it was just important to build relationships.” He showed Pastor that there is a role for people who are firm about their beliefs, but that it is important to express your beliefs in a way that reaches out and keeps people on board. Pastor also credits his dad as being an important mentor. He explains, “My dad had a sixth grade education. He was a person who was very handy and fixed a lot of things...When I was 16, he bought me a car that did not work and told me he would buy all of the parts I needed.” Experiences such as this instilled in Pastor an attitude that nothing is so complicated that one cannot figure it out.

While Dr. Bowles and his dad were important mentors, Pastor notes that there were not many Latino professors as he progressed through his academic career. As such, people his age who came through the academic pathway did not get a lot of mentoring and, in turn, are not the greatest at being mentors and he sees much room for improvement.

## **Mentoring Others**

Despite seeing room for improvement, Pastor has made sure to be a mentor to others. He began working with Rachel Morello-Frosch, currently an associate professor at University of California, Berkeley, when she was a post-doctoral researcher. A very talented scholar, she is now in a situation where she is thriving. Pastor also worked with Chris Benner, who is currently a tenured faculty member at the University of California, Davis. Pastor assisted Benner with securing his first large grant and they have since written two books together. Pastor has also served as an academic advisor, dissertation advisor, and co-author of many students.

Working in the environmental field allows Pastor to make an impact on the health and lives of real people. This opportunity to make a difference in people's lives has kept him in the environmental field. He cites his work on environmental disparities in Southern California that Communities for a Better Environment was able to use to reverse an emissions ruling. Pastor says, “It was the kind of rule that never gets reversed.” Another highlight was his recent work with 35 different environmental justice organizations in the Bay Area. “We put an editorial in the San Francisco Chronicle and, two days later, presented the paper at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting. We presented the

report in Richmond with community based organizations. It felt like a real highlight in terms of integration of academy and community,” he says.

Pastor also continues to work in the environmental field because of the endless opportunities to do interesting work. He explains, “Within this field, there are a lot of fascinating intellectual issues that are endlessly interesting from a nerd point of view, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and figuring out demographics and where pollution is going...We can explore our moral and social commitments while being like kids with toys. We are fascinated with statistical issues.” While intellectually and academically interesting, Pastor’s fascination and skill with statistical measures has also earned him tremendous credibility as an environmental justice researcher.

The credibility he has earned as an environmental justice researcher is one of Pastor’s most significant achievements, “The State of California takes environmental justice seriously. They do not always do what communities want, but the research is not disputed.”

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

For those who are considering a career in the environmental field, Pastor advises, “Do what you love and you will be good at it. Do not go into the field because you think it is the thing to do. Go into it because it moves you.” For minorities considering a career in the environmental field, he adds, “Be prepared. You might be one of the first people through. The extent to which the issues of environmental justice are not recognized can be irritating. We think the environment affects everyone, but it does not really impact people equally, and not everyone knows that.”

## **For More Information**

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