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Theorising environmental justice: the expanding sphere of a discourse

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Environmental justice has been a central concern in a range of disciplines, and both the concept and its coverage have expanded substantially in the past two decades. I examine this development in three key ways. First, I explore how early work on environmental justice pushed beyond many boundaries: it challenged the very notion of 'environment', examined the construction of *injustice* beyond inequity, and illustrated the potential of pluralistic conceptions of social justice. More recently, there has been a spatial expansion of the use of the term, horizontally into a broader range of issues, vertically into examinations of the global nature of environmental injustices, and conceptually to the human relationship with the non-human world. Further, I argue that recent extensions of the environmental justice frame move the discourse into a new realm – where environment and nature are understood to create the conditions for social justice.

Keywords: justice; environmental justice; climate justice

Introduction

The idea of environmental justice has been a central concern for academics in a range of disciplines, and both the concept and its coverage have expanded substantially in the past two decades. Clearly, the discourse of environmental justice has been broadening and expanding in scope far beyond its initial application to inequities in the distribution of environmental risk, and here I examine this development in three key ways. First, I explore how the early work on environmental justice pushed beyond simple boundaries. The idea of environmental justice challenged the very notion of 'environment', examined multiple reasons for the construction of *injustice*, and illustrated the potential of varied and pluralistic conceptions of social justice. More recently, there have been numerous ways in which the discourse has expanded. As key reflections have argued, there has been a spatial expansion of the use of the term, both horizontally into a broader range of issues and vertically into examinations of the truly global nature of environmental injustices (Sze and London 2008, Walker 2009).

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I discuss those here, and examine the potential of further extension of environmental justice discourse to communities and, crucially, to the human relationship with the nonhuman world.

This expanding sphere of the environmental justice discourse has, I argue, been extended further with the application of the frame to climate change and climate justice, as well as growing concerns and movements around local food and energy that have become the centre of some environmental justice organising. Climate change has pushed environmental justice to more broad considerations of both environment and justice. The turn to a growing focus on sustainable materialism illustrates a sophisticated analysis of power and injustice on the part of environmental justice movements and an important development in transformative politics and practice. Both trends extend a conception of environmental justice into a new realm – where environment and nature are understood to create the conditions for social justice.

Finally, while I have previously argued (Schlosberg 2004) that theories of environmental justice, and academic work on the concept in general, were often detached from the innovations of both movements and theory, the broadening and deepening work on environmental justice in the past decade shows much more thorough engagement with these innovations. I close with a discussion of the evolving relationship between environmental justice practice and academic theorising.

Theorising environmental justice – early approaches

The earliest academic reflections on environmental justice originally focused on the existence of inequity in the distribution of environmental bads. The concept was used to illustrate that some communities received more environmental risks than others. Those environmental bads were simply another example of social injustice. In the United States, early studies linked exposure to such risks and bads to both class and race – it was not only poor communities receiving a range of environmental bads, but communities of colour as well.[1] While there were methodological arguments about such studies, equity was a key frame in the initial consideration of environmental injustice. That early focus on inequity quickly expanded to include a range of issues from the generally unequal nature of environmental protection to the distribution of a range of environmental goods as well as bads (such as green space, public transit, and fresh food). Yet for all of the focus on the reality of these inequities, environmental justice was never *only* about such maldistributions. The study of the concept, and the movement, of environmental justice quickly expanded, and theorising on the topic developed in three key areas: the definition of ‘environment’, the factors behind the production of environmental injustice, and the pluralist conception of the ‘justice’ of environmental justice.

As for the first, early in the history of the conception of environmental justice, critiques of the limitations of conceiving of environment as wilderness and the ‘big outside’ were combined with a recognition of the much more broadly defined conception of environment as 'where we live, work, and play' (Novotny 2000). The importance of this shift cannot be understated; while there is a long history of concern with urban environmentalism and the environmental conditions of everyday life (Melosi 1980), this aspect of environmentalism was woefully underemphasised by the major environmental organisations in the United States.[2] Environmental justice advocates insisted on bringing attention to the environmental conditions in which people are immersed in their everyday lives.

It should be noted that this broadening of the concept of 'environment' did not mean that environmental justice wholly ignored concerns having to do with endangered species or landscapes. From the start, the environmental justice movement brought indigenous perspectives on the relationship between human beings, non-human nature, and culture into conversation; the very first principle of environmental justice affirms the 'sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity, and the interdependence of all species'.[3] Later, Julian Agyeman's (2003, 2005) work moved to bridge the differing ideas about environment and justice into a conception of 'just sustainability'. This focus on policies and practices that take into account both everyday environment and the larger natural world persists in writing and policy recommendations around environmentally just and green cities – and in the turn to issues of climate change, food, energy, and sustainable materialism to be addressed later in this essay.

Another major focus of environmental justice scholarship has always been a move beyond the simple description and documentation of inequity into a thorough analysis of the underlying reasons for that injustice. Initially, the central explanatory focus was racism. Environmental justice wasn't simply about establishing the fact that more environmental bads and risks were being put on minority communities – it endeavoured to explore the question of why those communities were devalued in the first place. One of the original popularisers of the term environmental racism was Benjamin Chavis, then head of the United Church of Christ's Commission on Racial Justice – the organisation that published the influential study of *Toxic Wastes and Race*. The practice, and experience, of racism has been at the heart of environmental justice discourse in the United States – so much so that Getches and Pellow (2002) once made the argument that the term, and movement, should actually be limited to communities of colour. Pellow's (2004, 2007) work has clearly extended an analysis of racial discrimination, and connected it to the practices of capital. Following that analysis, Mohai *et al.* (2009) lay out three interrelated causal factors for environmental injustice. First, economic considerations address both the impoverishment of impacted populations and the reasoning for industrial externalisation of social and environmental costs. Second, industry and government seek the path of least resistance to development, and poor and racial minority communities make easier targets. Finally, a distinct form of racism simply associates communities of colour with pollution. Any and all of these cultural and institutional structures contribute to the construction of inequity, misrecognition, exclusion, and the generalised injustice confronted by communities and movement organisations. Still, the central idea is that generalised social injustices are manifest in environmental conditions, among other ways.

Third, and one of the major themes of my own recent work (Schlosberg 2003, 2004, 2007, Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010), is that the diversity of concerns in environmental justice movements has been reflected in the broad and pluralistic definition of justice used. Equity has always played a part, but with racism and other forms of disrespect came a concern with recognition. Participatory justice – speaking for ourselves, or a seat at the table – has also always been part of environmental justice discourse. Beyond this, what movements have meant by the 'justice' of environmental justice encompasses not only equity, recognition, and participation, but, more broadly, the basic needs and functioning of individuals and communities. A capabilities approach to justice, which encompasses a range of basic needs, social recognition, and economic and political rights, has offered a broad framework with which we can understand the array of demands of environmental justice movements.[4]

Many others have also argued for a pluralistic understanding of the conception of justice in the movement. Pellow, for example, examines multiple causes and frames of injustice. Similarly, Sze and London (2008) argue that one of the key recent developments in environmental justice theory has been the refining of the understanding of the various mechanisms and processes of environmental injustice. Generally, one of the key directions of environmental justice research in the past few years has been based on an acknowledgement of the plurality of environmental (in)justice experiences; this type of 'investigation of environmental justice as a contested, complex discursive frame has just begun – and needs to continue' (Holifield *et al.* 2010, p. 17). One of the rewarding aspects of my own work in developing a framework of environmental justice is the way this plurality – as well as the focus on recognition, participation, and, more recently, on basic needs, capabilities, and functioning – has spread across the growing literature.

Expanding the space of environmental justice discourse

While this all illustrates that the movement, and academic reflections on the term, have a history of challenging and redefining conceptual boundaries, that trend has continued. Environmental justice as a discourse has rapidly expanded its influence, and has been applied to both a broadening range of issues, and, increasingly, a global level. While these extensions are crucial, I also want to address the potential of extending the discourse beyond individual human beings, to conceptualisations of community-level justice and justice beyond the human.

Horizontal and vertical expansion

If there has been a single major development in the framing of environmental justice in the past decade, it has been the way the use of the concept, as an organising theme or value by a range of movements, has expanded spatially (Sze and London 2008, Walker 2009). While there has been a continued focus on the original core of environmental justice issues in the distribution of toxins – or environmental bads more generally – in the United States, environmental justice discourse and literature has been extended in both topical and geographic scope. As Sze and London (2008) note in their important overview, environmental justice has seen the expansion into new issues and constituencies on the one hand, and new places and spatial analyses from the local to the global on the other. They celebrate this expansion, arguing that this attention to the expanding spatial realm of environmental justice has been the focus of many crucial researchers in the field, from politics to sociology to geography.[5] This expansion has been more than simply an exercise in academic interdisciplinarity – it has led to a broad extension of the foci of environmental justice scholarship.

Environmental justice may have been originally focused on the inequity of the distribution of toxics and hazardous waste in the United States, but it has moved far beyond this. Perhaps, however, such a broadening is not new, but a longstanding characteristic of the movement. Cole and Foster's (2001) now classic study of the movement discussed the various 'tributaries' that make up the environmental justice movement. They included the civil rights and anti-toxics movements, but also indigenous rights movements, the labour movement (including farm labour, occupational health and safety, and some industrial unions), and traditional environmentalists. Faber and McCarthy (2003) added the solidarity movement and the more general social and economic justice movements. We could easily add immigrant rights groups and urban environmental and smart growth movements, as well as local foods and food justice movements, to the list. Environmental justice as an organising frame has been applied not only to the initial issues of toxins and dumps, but also analyses of transportation, access to countryside and green space, land use and smart growth policy, water quality and distribution, energy development and jobs, brownfields refurbishment, and food justice.[6] Questions of the role of scientific expertise, and the relationship between science and environmental justice communities, have also been examined.[7] There has also been more thorough examination of the roles of under-examined groups in the environmental justice movement, or exposed to environmental hazards – indigenous peoples, Asian and Latino workers, women and youth,[8] illustrating the broadening range of foci of environmental justice scholarship in the United States. I do not mean to imply that all of these studies offer similar or unproblematic analyses of the issues, but simply to note the longstanding and continuing trend of the expanding topical space of the environmental justice frame.

In addition to the expansion of issues, there has been a push to globalise environmental justice as an explanatory discourse. There are two distinct moments to this expansion: the application of the frame to movements in a variety of countries, and the examination of the globalised and transnational nature of environmental justice movements and discourse. Walker (2009) sees this development as both a horizontal diffusion of environmental justice ideas, meanings, and framings, along with the vertical extension of an environmental justice frame beyond borders, and into relations between countries and truly global issues. As for the first, the applications of my own theoretical framework of environmental justice have been more broad than I would have imagined, including cases of postcolonial environmental justice in India, waste management in the United Kingdom, agrarian change in Sumatra, nuclear waste in Taiwan, salmon farming and First Nations in Canada, gold mining in Ghana, oil politics in Ecuador, indigenous water rights in Australia, wind farm development in Wales, pesticide drift in California, energy politics in Mexico, and many more.[9] In addition, there have been collections on environmental justice focused on issues and movements in Latin America, South Africa, Canada, and the ex-Soviet Union.[10] Walker (2009, p. 361) lists no fewer than 37 countries in which the environmental justice frame has been applied. Clearly, the discourse of environmental justice has expanded horizontally, and been engaged by both activists and academics involved in issues across the globe.

The vertical extension of an environmental justice framework is evidently illustrated by the use of environmental justice as an organising theme by a number of global movements, such as food security, indigenous rights, and anti-neoliberalism (Schlosberg 2004). This global approach has been thoroughly analysed in Pellow's (2007, 2011) enlightening work on the global toxics trade and both local community and global non-governmental organisation (NGO) resistance to it. Offering both a thorough analysis of the international production of waste, and keen observation of the transnational movement(s) that have risen in response, Pellow's work brings attention to the global potential of environmental justice analysis. The essence of transnational networks, he argues, is found in their critique of environmental inequities, the disruption of social relations that produce such inequities, and the articulation of ecologically sustainable and socially just institutions and practices (Pellow 2011, p. 248). Such an analysis focuses on both the nature of the injustice and the creative and crucially networked response on the part of movements. Mohai *et al.* (2009) note a number of additional transnational issue networks that have environmental justice as an organising theme, from those concerned with e-waste to the movement for climate justice. Carmin and Agyeman (2011) bring both of these elements of expansion together in a recent collection that focuses both on specific issues and movements and a larger global framework of analysis. Clearly, environmental justice analysis continues to expand in scope and scale.

Community

From my own perspective, environmental justice discourse has crossed or subverted two other spatial barriers. The first is the link between individual and community. While the traditional, liberal frame of reference for the conception of justice is purely individualist, environmental justice movements address injustice at both the level of the individual and the community. Just as the experience of environmental injustice pushed the reflection of the concept beyond a singular focus on equity, that experience also illustrates that the conception of justice used in the movements addresses impacts on, and limitations to, individuals and their communities simultaneously.

The case of Hurricane Katrina helps to illustrate this key point. The impacts of the disaster were, certainly, disproportionately experienced by poor African Americans. Many lost their homes, their jobs, their belongings; many were left behind or made invisible by the racism inherent in the city – and those that remained often experienced exclusion from the plans to rebuild. But the understanding of those impacts goes far beyond injustice to individuals. In the seminal set of reflections on the environmental justice implications of Katrina edited by Bullard and Wright (2009), a wide range of impacts is discussed. From transportation, employment, health, housing, and economic opportunities to broader issues of social disrespect, community diaspora, and political and economic participation, the authors reflecting on the disaster address a range of basic needs and functions that were undermined, and that would have to be restored in a just recovery. These needs are not simply about individuals, but neighbourhoods, communities, and the city itself. Ultimately, the question of environmental justice in the wake of the storm is about the very functioning of New Orleans, its neighbourhoods and communities.[11]

Environmental justice battles focusing on issues ranging from asthma in New York (Sze 2006) to biopiracy against the San in Southern Africa (Vermeylen and Walker 2011) have never only been about individual illnesses or impacts, but always also about the impact on the social cohesion and functioning of the community. Movement groups frame their concerns in both individual and collective senses. This more communitarian conception of injustice is confronting to liberal individualist notions of justice, but it is a rather straightforward thing for environmental justice communities to experience, and to articulate. My own work has attempted to argue this point in relation to recognition and capabilities approaches to environmental and social justice. We can, for example, see community-based articulation in demands for environmental justice that emphasise and defend the basic needs and very functioning of indigenous communities (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010, p. 13). Similarly, the protection of the ability of social reproduction – community functioning, not simply individual exposures – is central to many environmental justice movements (Di Chiro 2008). The spatial barrier between the concern for individuals and that of communities has been thoroughly crossed, and expressed, in movements. This is an area ripe for further exploration.

Beyond human

Finally, one of the remaining border challenges of environmental justice theory is to make important connections with the environment itself. There is a reason that we discuss *environmental* justice – the issues involved are about how, exactly, we are immersed in the environment, and the manipulation of nature, around us. Yes, most of the discussion is about environmental bads and injustices to human beings, but the origins of environmental injustices are as much in the treatment of the non-human realm as in relations among human beings. The shift suggested here is one from environmental conditions as an example or manifestation of social injustice to one where justice is applied to the treatment of the environment itself.

A number of analysts have made these connections. In the notion of just sustainability, Agyeman (2005) insists on a conception of environmental justice that goes beyond socio-cultural impacts alone to the interactions between social and environmental communities. Post-Katrina, many reflections have involved not only the conditions of the people in the city, but also consideration of the ecological damage done to surrounding ecosystems that have led to greater vulnerabilities for both human and non-human communities (Ross and Zepeda 2011). Sze *et al.* (2010) have continued their innovative work on environmental justice in the Sacramento (California) delta region by engaging this element of the socio-natural context. They see the examination of the relationship between the manipulation of nature and people for economic gain as a crucial component of an environmental justice analysis.

I have been making the argument that a capabilities approach to justice is a crucial tool for addressing the relationship between environment and human needs and, potentially, the functioning of ecosystems themselves (Schlosberg 2007, 2012). A capabilities approach could enrich conceptions of environmental and climate justice by bringing recognition to the functioning of these systems, in addition to those who live within and depend on them. In this approach, the central issue continues to be the interruption of the capabilities and functioning of living systems – what keeps those living systems from transforming primary goods into the functioning, integrity, and flourishing of those that depend on them. When we interrupt, corrupt, or defile the potential functioning of ecological support systems, we do an injustice not only to human beings, but also to all of those non-humans that depend on the integrity of the system for their own functioning. It is the disruption and increasing vulnerability of the integrity of ecosystems that is at the heart of the injustice of climate change, for example, both in terms of its impact on vulnerable human communities and non-human nature. The treatment – or abuse – of human and non-human individuals and systems is based on the same loss of the ability to function.

This application of a capabilities approach to non-human nature brings both benefits and potential conflicts. The first benefit is that a focus on the needs of non-human systems would entail that human beings actually recognise the link between environmental conditions and the basic needs of both human beings and the non-human. In other words, extending a capabilities approach to non-human environments entails recognition of the value of the processes and provisions of natural systems. The second benefit is a discursive one, as a capabilities approach applied to both human and non-human can serve as a bridge between conceptions of social justice and a wide range of environmental concerns.

The main problem with this approach, of course, is the potential for conflict between the capabilities and functioning of human beings and those of the natural world (Cripps 2010). Fully addressing this issue would take more space than is available here, but I would simply note that any conception of justice, as it is applied to actual issues and injustices, would entail potential conflict. One of the major problems of ideal justice theories is that they seek to eliminate the potential for conflict – at least in theory. But such theorists are mistaken to believe that the elimination of such conflict in theory makes for more harmonious application to social policy or practice. Conflicts of justice arise, whether in the human realm, or, in this example, between human beings and the nature in which they are immersed, no matter what the ideal. Actual problem solving entails the negotiation of different conceptions of (in)justice in and across different participants, from community or stakeholder groups to corporations or states; it requires recognition, conceptions of disadvantage, and political engagement. This is where potential conflicts can be addressed, and ways of life attentive to the creation and experience of disadvantage and disabled functioning – human and non-human alike – can be negotiated and designed.

One of the clear developments in the past decade, then, has been a thorough expansion of the scope of the environmental justice frame. Against the early warnings of some in the US environmental justice community that the term should remain limited to the experience of racial discrimination, my suggestion has always been that environmental justice has the potential to be an integrative and empowering framework for a variety of movements and concerns (Schlosberg 1999, 2007). Likewise, Sze and London (2008, p. 1332) have insisted that ‘instead of imposing a restrictive boundary around the concepts of environmental justice, scholarship in this emerging field should embrace its wide-ranging and integrative character’. Clearly, the trend of environmental justice in both theory and practice has been this expansion of the discourse into new spaces, and across many boundaries.

Framing new challenges: climate change and sustainable materialism

And yet, even with such a recognition of the broadening spatial scale of environmental justice, we are faced with key challenges and developments that continue to push a conceptualisation of environmental justice in engaging new directions. Here, I want to touch on two of those, the discussions of climate change and what some call ‘sustainable materialism’. This extension of an environmental justice frame is crucial. One of the arguments against incorporating non-human nature into the environmental justice discourse is that this shift is not embodied in environmental movements or public discourse.[12] But considerations of climate justice – in particular in relation to adaptation – and of sustainable materialist approaches to food and energy begin to address environmental conditions themselves as the basis for social justice. This is not only a spatial extension, but a conceptual shift – that a working environment is necessary for justice, and that justice entails creating human practices and material flows that do not undermine environmental processes and systems.

From environmental justice to climate justice

The notion of climate justice has been a key discourse in discussions surrounding climate change during the past two decades; increasingly, and especially with a shift to a concern with adaptation, that discourse has overlapped with, and yet vastly expanded, more traditional environmental justice concerns.

In early discussions of climate justice, and especially in those focused on the creation of climate change, efforts to prevent or mitigate emissions, or on allocating the costs of prevention and technology transfer in the South, the idea was based on a broad array of conceptions of social justice more generally. So climate justice theories focused primarily on distributive equity – such as arguments for distributive fairness (Shue 1993), historical responsibility and restorative justice (Agarwal and Nurain 1991), or a per capita equity approach to emission allowances (Jamieson 2001, Singer 2004). These approaches took existing conceptions of distributive and social justice and applied them to the climate debate. Likewise, rights-based notions of climate justice (Caney 2006, EcoEquity 2008) focus on the application of existing social rights to the problem of climate change. The point here is not to criticise such theories, but to contrast them with the way environmental justice concerns have developed into a conception of climate justice.

Many climate justice groups began not from ideal notions of social justice, but instead from environmental justice principles and the expected experience of climate change. The US Congressional Black Caucus (2004) prepared a report on the environmental injustice of climate change impacts, noting the disproportionate impact on African-American communities in the United States (especially in terms of heat and health), but also the potential benefits to such communities of a prevention strategy that included retrofitting for efficiency, new technologies, cleaner industries, and more stable energy prices for renewables. The Bali Principles of Climate Justice (2003), developed by a range of movement organisations brought together into an International Climate Justice Network, is not based on academic notions of global justice, though we may certainly read a sense of cosmopolitanism, for example, into them. Instead, these activist principles stem from the original principles of environmental justice, developed by communities of colour in the United States in 1991. For this and many more climate justice organisations, there was a direct link from battles for environmental justice in poor and minority communities to the construction of climate change, the experience of inequitable environmental devastation, and the exclusion from decision-making. As with environmental justice, these notions of climate justice arose from the experience and material conditions (now and anticipated) of local communities. Climate change was seen, at this point, as simply another, if broader, environmental manifestation of social injustice.

As with movement discussions of environmental justice, one of the key frames of climate justice addresses not only ideals but also how the fact and experience of *in*justice gets constructed. Concerns with the lack of recognition – of communities of colour, of indigenous communities, of the link between environmental conditions and everyday life for many – are central to movement considerations of climate justice. Theorists, representatives of impacted nations, and activist organisations have articulated a range of ways to understand the series of injustices embodied in the creation and experience of climate change. As with environmental justice, the conception of justice is broad and pluralist, more focused on understanding and addressing the problem than on constructing an ideal. And yet, the breadth of the understanding of environmental and climate justice here both includes and moves beyond local environmental conditions, to expand the environmental justice frame and engage broader conceptions of social and global justice.

But environmental justice is also turning much more specifically to the local experience of increasing vulnerability to climate change, and to conceptions of adapting to a life challenged by an altered climate; here, another shift can be seen in the framing of the concept. Environmental and climate justice activists and movements regularly address the actual material experience of changing environmental conditions, impacts on everyday life, and, crucially, the potential ways functioning and development are threatened. Stories of the potential health impacts of heat, of food insecurity due to drought or floods, the instability of housing and infrastructure, and the disappearance of tradition, culture, and place have become the norm. Adaptation discourse has focused, in part, on vulnerability-enhancing events, and on anticipatory responses to them. On the reconstructive side, movements are turning increasingly to adaptive responses to a changing climate – addressing, for example, urban heat, food security, or mobility. Overall, and increasingly, the discourse of climate justice is about vulnerabilities and the very functioning and resilience of communities.

But this focus is also much more explicit about the relationship between the way that natural systems and human communities function, and there is much more recognition of the way that those natural systems support the functioning of human communities. Hurricane Katrina, again, serves as an example. Before Katrina, the corridor between New Orleans and Baton Rouge – dubbed ‘Cancer Alley’ – was a major focus of environmental justice discourse. Oil refineries, chemical plants, vinyl manufacturing, and more were all linked to the disadvantage of poor and minority communities; again, environmental injustice was about social injustice being manifest in a host of environmental risks and bads. But after the storm, that approach was supplemented. It was not just that the hurricane exposed, once again, the dire state of social injustice – though it did that. The storm brought attention to the link between the vulnerability of the community and, to put it directly, the state of nature. Environmental justice advocates began to question a very different impact of the refining of oil they had been protesting for its impact on the human community; that impact was now also changing and undermining the climate system, which was then coming back to harm the community in another way. The link between ecological stability and community functioning – or climate instability and social disadvantage – became clear.

In other words, environmental and climate justice have become more embedded in an understanding of the way that environmental conditions provide for individual and community needs and functioning. This is another way that a capabilities approach to justice works in environmental and climate contexts – it can help address the relationship between environmental conditions and the broader justice aim of providing for basic needs and enabling the functioning of both individuals and communities. Examined in this way, as environmental justice extends into climate justice, it pushes beyond the qualifiers 'environment' or 'climate', and into an understanding that justice itself depends on a stable and predictable set of environmental conditions (Holland 2012, Schlosberg 2012).

Environmental justice and sustainable materialism

But it is not simply the rebound effect of climate change that has pushed a conception of environmental justice into broader engagement of the relationship between environment and social justice. The discussion of climate change illustrates the centrality of this connection between the condition of the natural world and the material experience of everyday life. This concern has led to another key development – a focus on more reconstructive material practices and sustainable relationships with the environment. While most well-known environmental justice battles have been reactions to inequity, threats to health or capabilities more generally, or responses to misrecognition and exclusion from decision-making, there has been a growth of groups using environmental justice and sustainability to design and implement more just *and* sustainable practices of everyday life. So we see the environmental justice movement making demands for investment in environmental technologies and jobs, food justice, and liveable communities more generally. The prominent green jobs and community-building work of Van Jones (2009), along with the 'just sustainability' frame of Julian Agyeman (2005), are examples of the potential of an environmental justice praxis that sees just communities as based on a working, sustainable relationship with the natural world.

This approach is especially obvious in movements for food justice and just energy development. These movements directly take on both unjust practices and institutions and unsustainable environmental processes. They are not satisfied with purely individualistic or consumerist responses to environmental concerns – it is not about simply installing one's own rooftop solar panels, or getting a Whole Foods in the neighbourhood. The focus is on building new practices and institutions for sustainability – practices and institutions that embody not only principles of environmental or climate justice, but a broader sense of sustainability as well. Call it a more reconstructive environmental justice, based on a conception of sustainable materialism.

In many communities, a growing focus is on resisting, rethinking, and redesigning basic institutions that embody problematic practices connected to our basic material needs. So the response to food deserts is not buying organic veggies at a natural foods megamart, but getting more involved in growing and sharing food in community supported agriculture, collective gardening, urban farms, farmers markets (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, Alcon and Agyeman 2011). The idea of the food justice movement is to transform our relationship with food, its production, transportation, and consumption. It is not simply about supplying a basic need; it is, in addition, awareness that such basic needs that supply the functioning of a community should themselves be sourced without creating injustices.

In terms of energy, many environmental justice communities are organising around the development of community-wide local generation and networking of solar and wind.[13] The idea of just energy transition is to replace destructive practices – for example, the damage done to the environment by coal mining and burning, and the abuse of local autonomy by mining companies. This concept of environmental justice shifts from resistance to reconstruction, aims to transform both dominating and unsustainable practices of production and consumption, and works to sustainably rebuild the material relationships we have with the resources we use every day. All while supplying a host of basic needs.

These trends can be framed in at least three important ways. First, such practices are clearly a Foucauldian form of resistance to the relations that contribute to the continued reproduction of unsustainable practices; movement groups simply want to step out of the processes where they themselves are part of the creation of injustice. Second, they represent practices of equity, recognition, participation, and the delivery of basic capabilities in just and inclusive ways. Third, they embody the institutionalisation of a new form of sustainable materialism and the direct involvement of groups in the development of institutions that re-imagine, and reconstruct, our relationship with the natural world. These new movements and efforts illustrate environmental justice moving toward a form of just sustainability that embodies not only a variety of themes of justice, but also a thorough engagement in everyday material life – the things that pass through our bodies, the practices we use to transform the natural world, and the institutions we can shape collectively (Gabrielson and Paraday 2010). Many environmental justice movements, in this way, have expanded beyond a reactive position to environmental conditions, and now refuse to participate in practices that create or circulate injustice, propose and create new counter-institutions and practices, and, crucially, embrace a more sustainable relationship between just communities and a working environment.

Theory and movements: environmental justice discourse and praxis

All of this, to me, illustrates how environmental justice in practice offers a rich form of politics and practice – one that academics in the field would do well to engage. One of the signature characteristics in much environmental justice scholarship has been a relationship between academic work and movement groups. The original articulation of an environmental justice movement came out of academic studies and conferences. The early history of the academic side of the movement was based on the work of Robert Bullard (1990, 1993) and early conferences, such as that organised by Bryant and Mohai (1992), that helped articulate and publicise findings of inequitable distribution of environmental goods and bads.[14] The relationship between academic studies and the environmental justice movement has been integral to its development and growth, and its discourses, in the past three decades. Sze and London (2008) see this relationship as one of the continuing elements of reflection in the recent literature, and one of the promising trends in the field.

In part, this relationship is about the idea of praxis – that theory and practice must inform each other (Sze and London 2008, p. 1347). As Holifield *et al.* (2010, p. 18) insist, there is ‘a need for environmental justice scholarship to actively work at its connections to activism and its engagement with those at the sharp end of injustice, however it is understood, and to bring theory to bear in meaningful ways into praxis and diverse forms of public engagement’. Theorising from movement experience works to expand our understanding of those movements; in return, those movements can and do inform theory in productive ways. There are numerous examinations of this intersection in the United States, from my own work on movement pluralism (Schlosberg 1999), to Di Chiro’s (2008) work on social reproduction in environment/feminist coalitions, to Sze et al’s (2010) examination of water politics in California, to the range of responses to community organising after Katrina (Bullard and Wright 2009). All of this illustrates the relationship between environmental justice as an academic idea and a social movement, to the benefit of each.

This focus on the relationship between practice and theory has also been central to my attempts to understand the ‘justice’ of environmental justice (Schlosberg 2004, 2007). Many attempts to define environmental or climate justice have been too detached from the actual demands of social movements that use the idea as an organising theme or identity. This does assume that there is a value to movement practice – that theory can, and should, actually learn from the language, demands, and action of movements. Why, the more purist academic or sceptic might ask, should we prioritise what activists believe or do? But the question should not be about who is the best judge of a conception of justice – activists or theorists. The point is that different discourses of justice, and the various experiences and articulations of injustice, inform how the concept is used, understood, articulated, and demanded in practice; the engagement with what is articulated on the ground is of crucial value to our understanding and development of the concepts we study. It continues to be unfortunate that there are those in the study of environmentalism, or in the theoretical realm, who simply cannot see the importance, and range, of these articulations at the intersection of theory and practice – especially when movement innovation is as broad and informative as it is in environmental justice.

Conclusion

There has always been something particularly salient about the term environmental justice. It simply fit the conditions many communities were subjected to, and expanded the conception of social justice into a whole new realm of inequity, misrecognition, and exclusion – that of environmental disadvantage. The idea of environmental justice reflected the lived experience of the reality of injustice on the ground, in the air, in one's food, at the workplace or school, and on the playground. It is the salience of those experiences that helped push the concept to be embraced more broadly, on an increasing array of issues across the globe. In doing so, environmental justice moved from being simply a reflection of social injustice generally to being a statement about the crucial nature of the relationship between environment and the provision of justice itself. The concept has pushed boundaries since its inception, and has expanded both spatially and conceptually. In its latest incarnation, environmental justice is now also about the material relationships between human disadvantage and vulnerability and the condition of the environment and natural world in which that experience is immersed. Like all iterations of environmental justice over the years, this focus has much to offer communities – both human and non-human – as well as academics.

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Notes

1. See, for example, United Church of Christ (1987), Bryant and Mohai (1992), and Bullard (1990).
2. And one should say among environmental academics as well, who were in the midst of the anthropocentrism/eco-centrism debate in the late 1980s when environmental justice began to grow.
3. Indeed, one of the very interesting things about the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991 was the engagement between urban African American and rural Native American activists, which was certainly the origin of this principle. See Lee (1992).
4. On capabilities in general, see Sen (2009) and Nussbaum (2011); on the application to environmental justice, see Holland (2008) and Schlosberg (2007).
5. In addition to Sze and London, see this spatial expansion in the work of, for example, Roberts and Parks (2007), Pellow (2007), Mohai *et al*. (2009), and Walker (2009, 2011).
6. See Agyeman (2002), Rowan and Fridgen (2003), Bullard (2007), Jones (2009), and Gottlieb and Joshi (2010).
7. Corburn (2005), Ottinger *et al*. (2011).
8. Di Chiro (2008), Sze *et al.* (2010), Whyte (2011).
9. In order, see Williams and Mawdsley (2006), Watson and Bulkeley (2005), McCarthy (2010), Fan (2006), Page (2007), Tschakert (2009), Widener (2007), McLean (2007), Cowell *et al*. (2011), Harrison (2011), and Carruthers (2007).

10. In order, see Carruthers (2008), McDonald (2002), Agyeman (2010), and Agyeman and Ogneva-Himmelberger (2009).
11. We will see the same set of community-based issues post-Sandy in New York and New Jersey.
12. See the discussion of a lack of overlapping consensus in Nussbaum (2011, pp. 164–165).
13. See, for example, efforts toward just energy transition on the Navajo nation (http://www.blackmesawatercoalition.org/ourwork.html [Accessed 16 January 2013]).
14. Then again, it is clear that there is a long and deep history of what we would now call environmental justice concerns in both race-based and environmental movements – environmental justice as a concern is not new, nor was it driven solely by academic concerns. See, for example, Dorceta Taylor's (1997, 2009) comprehensive histories.

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