

Book Review Essay

Environmental Justice

Gabriela Kütting

Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans and Rachel Stein, eds. 2002. *The Environmental Justice Reader*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press.

Agyeman, Julian, Robert Bullard and Bob Evans, eds. 2003. *Just Sustainabilities: Development in an Unequal World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Martinez-Alier, Joan. 2002. *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Westra, Laura and Bill Lawson, eds. 2001. *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*, 2nd edition. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield.

The subject of environmental justice has received increasing attention in the field of global environmental politics in recent years, both as a social movement to be studied and also as a conceptual issue. Although there is no literature in IR as such dealing with environmental justice, it has permeated the field as a concern in the study of ecological security, in critical global political economy/globalization writings and in theoretically and conceptually oriented texts. None of the books reviewed here are IR texts, but they all have an important message for the study of global environmental politics and offer a challenge to the recent slowdown of conceptual advancement in the discipline.

The study of international environmental politics has essentially split into two camps: those dealing with institutions and the actors behind institutions and those dealing with changes in the global political architecture in terms of the rise of new actors and changing social relations. The books reviewed here have something to offer to both camps. To the institutionalists, they offer food for thought and show that although institutions are undeniably important, the

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issue of environmental racism shows, for example, in an exemplary fashion that political organization is about power even at the grassroots level. The study of environmental justice shows that there are certainly disempowered groups out there whose health and environment suffer as a consequence. This is a challenge that has to be addressed by institutionalists because it shows weaknesses in the ability of institutions to address questions of equity and justice.

Likewise, the notion of environmental justice has implications for the study of new social movements, critical approaches to global political economy, and environmental violence. However, the books reviewed here give ample starting points for bringing the notion of environmental justice more explicitly into this body of literature as it is a foundational concept that unites these writings: a concern with the distribution of, and access to, resources, knowledge, power, representation and a clean, healthy living environment.

In order to address the challenges to all schools of thought in global environmental politics, we need a definition of what constitutes environmental justice. None of the books reviewed here engage in a conceptual or theoretical or legal discussion of what constitutes justice—or indeed, as I will argue below, whether environmental justice is the best term for such a concept. Rather, the subject matter is addressed in an empirical setting. However, a common concern with equity permeates all the books. Thus the notion of justice is rather loose, which is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because there is a concern with real-world problems at the grassroots level and thus a focus on what equity and justice problems actually are about and what challenges policy-makers are facing. It is a weakness because these problems are typically discussed in an anecdotal fashion, with no attempt to conceptualize the socially constructed, culturally and politically determined definition of what justice is or ought to be. Thus some of the readings generate a sense of outrage but do not actually help to generate analysis and understanding.

This becomes clearest in Adamson et al.'s *Environmental Justice Reader* and Westra and Lawson's *Faces of Environmental Racism*. Both books are a composite of case studies, some of them found in both books. They address the same concerns but one book uses the term environmental racism while the other talks about environmental justice. Both books focus largely, but not exclusively, on case studies within the United States and the notion of environmental racism/justice in this setting but the lessons can be extrapolated to the global level. The notion of environmental racism seems consequential at first sight. It is generally well known that exposure to toxic substances and waste is greater in the lower income brackets and that socio-economic background and quality of living environment are intrinsically related. Therefore it follows that if a substantial number of non-white citizens and residents come from the lower income brackets that they will also suffer an above-average degraded living environment. Thus race and environmental degradation seem indirectly rather than directly linked. But two studies quoted widely in all the books reviewed here, the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice 1987 report and a 1992 inves-

tigation by the National Law Journal of the Environmental Protection Agency demonstrate clearly that racial inequality goes far beyond a correlation between socio-economic background and environmental quality. Both studies show that the dumping of waste and toxic waste facilities affect non-white communities disproportionately more than the lowest income white communities. Conversely, fines for infringements in white communities are several hundred percent higher than in black communities. Thus the case for the existence of environmental racism, or environmental injustice, is convincing. Both books give ample examples of such cases and explore this from a sociological, anthropological and community perspective. Although these explorations are fascinating and emotionally powerful, they do not offer much to the political scientist at first sight except a study of admirable community activism. However, they suggest that institutions, the rule of law and the forms of political representation used as poster children for democracy have very clear shortcomings, and that these shortcomings are the real challenge of the 21st century—be it within national societies or global society.

Environmental justice as discussed in these two volumes is seen as an intra-society rather than a global society issue. Westra and Lawson's *Faces of Environmental Racism* has a section in which justice, racism and also urban problems are addressed within the parameters of the subject at hand and then follows with one section on environmental racism in North America and a short section on racism in Africa. Thus it is primarily concerned with the way the black community fares in environmental politics and is affected by environmental degradation. It delivers shocking evidence that the term environmental racism is an accurate description of many environmental policies. Although this book politicizes environmental racism, it does not analyze it in a political science context.

The same goes for Adamson et al.'s *Environmental Justice Reader*. It is not exclusively focused on the academic audience and is divided into three sections—politics, poetics and pedagogy. The *Environmental Justice Reader* is primarily an account of many grassroots activist voices engaged in environmental justice projects and who share their experiences. As such it gives a unique insight into the problems, obstacles and opposition that people concerned with environmental justice face and mixes this well with a reflexive account of identity, literary fiction as a source of reference and interviews/roundtable discussions. Thus it highlights the shortcomings of current forms of political organization painfully well but does little to take this subject matter into political science analysis. Because of their perspective, both these books are good background sources for any global environmental politics researcher concerned with the notion of environmental justice, but they are not direct contributors to the more immediate debates within environment and IR.

Just Sustainabilities, edited by Agyeman, Bullard and Evans, falls in between the IR literature and the two books discussed above. It takes a very patent global perspective and thus speaks directly to the IR person. It then goes back to the

local and provides community-based studies, some of them of the same communities addressed in the books above. The fact that the same case studies appear in all three books shows that literature on the subject is limited and that maybe the environmental justice movement is not as big a social movement as it is made out to be. Some case studies in *Just Sustainabilities* make a connection between the local and the global; the majority, unfortunately, do not, despite the unique opportunity for this book to have provided the ideal conceptual setting for such an endeavor.

Undoubtedly, the strongest part of *Just Sustainabilities* and the part of most interest to the global environmental politics researcher is the conceptual part covered in the first four chapters. McLaren's chapter on environmental space, equity and the ecological debt addresses the relationship between sustainability and equity by using the environmental space approach. It is a succinct and well-organized summary of the environmental space argument, but only briefly makes the connection between global institutions, globalization and environmental space/just sustainability. It provides a good starting point for any IR and environment researcher who would like to take up this topic and develop it. Faber and McCarthy's chapter takes up from where McLaren leaves off, making an explicit connection between northern consumption and southern degradation in the context of neo-liberalism, then illustrating the diversity of the environmental justice movement with case examples. Faber and McCarthy see the root cause of a lack of environmental justice and ecological democracy in the way business externalizes social and ecological costs in their production and operating processes. Businesses are not only economically efficient but also politically expedient. Thus, the less political power a community has, the fewer resources it possesses to defend itself against this assault (resources here includes material, knowledge, organizational resources). Thus the most politically oppressed are 'selectively victimised' to the greatest extent (pg. 39). This trend can be observed globally, for example as seen with toxic waste dumping in Africa, and again, within the US as discussed above. This chapter offers the analysis of economic and political organization underlying such trends that was missing in the first two—although it does not offer any new insights that have not already been discussed in the critical globalization literature. However, it provides an excellent summary for the interested reader.

Blowers' chapter on inequality and community offers a good discussion of the ecological modernization debate and its contribution to sustainable development as well as its shortcomings. Blowers argues that although ecological modernization is a useful concept for some industries, it cannot be applied to economic organization in a blanket way. For example, there is simply no way to remove the environmental threat in the nuclear case. Ecological modernization does not take a holistic view in that it ignores the impact of externalities and the complexity of ecosystems. Most of all, the consensual style of political participation is supposed to herald a new style of democracy but in effect it furthers ex-

clusivity, elitism and a lack of representation. Thus, it does not address issues of inequality and removes political decision-making processes even further from the least represented in society. Like the institutionalist literature in IR, it presents a carefully sanitized view of social, political, economic and environmental organization that is devoid of moral and ethical issues, thus asserting a particular moral and ethical view that is introduced as a 'given' and not part of the analysis or political process to be studied. However controversial this view is, it raises issues that cannot be ignored within the IR and environment or the sustainability discourse and is a criticism that needs to be addressed by both ecological modernization writers and the institutionalist/regime theory school of thought.

Finally, Dobson argues that social justice and environmental sustainability are incompatible and that there are no grounds for the assumption that social justice is a prerequisite for environmental sustainability. Both social justice and environmental sustainability are contested terms with no determinate meaning—for example, in the liberal view an unequal distribution of social goods and bads is perfectly acceptable as long as such an unequal distribution is fairly arrived at. Thus it presupposes inequality as a starting point. Even with a broadly egalitarian view of justice, it does not follow that environmental sustainability will follow social justice. For example, if toxic waste dumps in the US were more evenly distributed between black and white and rich and poor communities, would that lead to environmental improvement overall? Thus the environmental justice movement campaigns for better treatment of their communities but an overall environmental improvement is a different issue. (Although of course you could make the tongue in cheek argument that once policy-makers and senior company executives have to suffer from the effects of pollution in the same way, more energy would be channeled into cleaner production processes). Thus this chapter raises important political theory arguments for the environmental justice debate. Overall, these four chapters are a very valuable contribution to the environmental justice literature while the rest of the book is more geared towards particular case studies, some of which are excellent reading while others are too general to make any meaningful contribution.

Martinez-Alier's *The Environmentalism of the Poor* is also a book that is divided into a conceptual and empirical part. Again, in the case study section, many of the examples given are also found in the other books discussed here. However, the conceptual part takes a different view and makes a unique contribution to the debate. Martinez-Alier's background as one of the foremost ecological economists introduces this dimension into the debate. Thus Martinez-Alier uses the notion of ecological conflict rather than environmental justice as the starting point for his writing. His mastery of a wide range of international sources makes it evident that the terminology of environmental justice is maybe not the best term for the issues described and problematized.

He sees the clash between environment and economy as the root cause of ecological conflict. Fundamentally, the incommensurability of values between a social system based on accumulation of wealth and economic efficiency with the aim of unlimited growth is incompatible with a complex ecosystem. The economic system is organized as if it was not located within these specific ecological constraints. Martinez-Alier is concerned with cases where this incommensurability has led to social conflict over environmental degradation resulting out of this incommensurability. Thus the book summarizes the ideologies underlying environmental movements and then juxtaposes this with a brief summary with the principles of ecological economics and political ecology, leading on to case studies. It does not suggest any reforms of political and economic organization or policy tools for overcoming the fundamental incompatibility of economy and environment and it is not entirely clear how he sees the role of environmental movements. He may accord them importance because he sees them as the only political tool for bringing about change or because he sees them as the main actors in situations of ecological conflict. This is not clear and for the political scientist this dimension is under-explored in Martinez-Alier and an analysis of the social relations underlying the incommensurability between economy and environment would make his work a very influential work in environmental politics. As it is, it adds a vital dimension to the debate which should inform any work on environmental/ecological conflict, justice or security.

What these books on environmental justice show is that this is a subject that needs to be addressed more in International Relations and global environmental politics. The disproportionate distribution of environmental goods and bads is a dimension of study that has not received the attention it deserves in our discipline. This is not so much only a moral or ethical issue but also a rational one: every western political discourse is dominated by values of democracy and the idea that everybody is equal before the law is the cornerstone of what is considered good government. Clearly, if there is hard evidence that this equality exists in institutional terms only but not in practice, then this is one of the biggest challenges for our society, both national and global, as it undermines the foundations of our political system.

However, I am not sure if we should use the term environmental justice for addressing this challenge. The term is firmly embedded in the environmental justice movement within the United States but for a conceptual analysis of this problem, environmental equity might actually be a better term as it neatly side-steps the socially constructed nature of the term justice and the need for legal and political theorizing on the nature of justice. This is not to say that equity is a value-neutral, objective term but that its parameters are more clearly defined than justice. Thus the books reviewed here provide a good starting point for widening the remit of global environmental politics research.

For teaching purposes, the conceptual part of *Just Sustainabilities* provides a good introduction to the issues relating to equity in IR to the advanced under-

graduate or postgraduate while *the Environmentalism of the Poor* would offer good readings for political ecology students. For the teacher looking for case studies on environmental justice, both *The Environmental Justice Reader* and *Faces of Environmental Racism* offer ample material although the material is presented in a more accessible way in the latter.