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# Narratives and practices of environmental justice

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The ecological crisis and its impacts regularly make it into the headlines with accounts of incredible destruction after natural hazards such as wildfires, driving bans for diesel cars, or an ocean of plastic. These stories raise questions about how our societies adapt and transform while nature is changing. Yet, all these headlines can also be narrated as examples of environmental (in)justice: a relatively small and wealthy section of the global population pollutes and destroys marine and terrestrial habitats by claiming an ever-increasing share of the planet's resources. And those groups who are especially negatively affected by these developments are least responsible for them. Moreover, many of the dominant policies at the global, national, or local scale are based on market-driven efficiency logics, transferring the burden to those places with lower opportunity costs, fewer participation opportunities, and weak political influence (e.g. McAfee 2012). In short, our ecological crisis is rooted in unjust social conditions.

## The roots of environmental justice: social movement(s)

The concept of environmental justice began as a popular narrative of advocacy groups fighting for the fair distribution of toxic facilities in the US and from there has subsequently traveled around the world (Martin et al. 2014). By strategically employing collective action frames and narratives, social movements

have marked human-nature-constellations as unjust, therewith mobilizing political support for their respective causes (Sicotte and Brulle 2018: 29; Walker 2009; Pezzulo 2001). Robert Bullard (1994: 284), a scholar-activist and one of the early protagonists of the US environmental justice movement, traces the origins of the movement to student and worker protests that took place in the late 1960s. Initial struggles were fought in Warren County in North Carolina, where mostly African Americans protested against a new PCB landfill, and in the state of New York around the contamination of the Love Canal (Bullard 1994; Schroeder et al. 2008). In the following years, grassroots movements emerged across the USA supported by civil rights activists, church leaders, and a handful of scholars (Bullard 1994; Cutter 1995) who, shortly after the events in North Carolina, published their first empirical studies on issues of environmental injustice (Flitner 2003: 141). These initial studies showed that landfills and toxic waste dumps were frequently located in municipalities with a large share of African American residents. A study by the church-based Commission on Racial Justice, for example, used postal district-level data to analyze the distribution of toxic facilities. It came to the conclusion that municipalities with a large share of African American and Hispanic residents are significantly more likely to host toxic facilities than the American average (ibid.).

Today, environmental justice is a global movement (Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier 2014; Sikor and

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Newell 2014; Pulido and Lara 2018; and Hafner this volume), although one without an “umbrella global organization representing the voices of many residents, community leaders, and the NGOs that support them” (Anguelowki and Martinez-Alier 2014: 167). The very diverse global and local struggles against environmental injustices reflect a specific form of environmentalism which is substantially different from mainstream environmentalism pursued by large environmental NGOs such as The Nature Conservancy, WWF, and Conservation International. These organizations are dominantly white middle-class organizations concerned with the preservation of far-away biodiversity hotspots and market-based solutions such as environmental offsetting and green consumerism (Castree 2006; Luke 1998; McAfee 1999; Schlosberg 1999). Environmental justice activists instead focus on environmental problems and risks of immediate concern in the close environment (Schlosberg 1999). They have a lot in common with what Martinez-Alier and Guha (1997: 3) have framed as “environmentalism of the poor”. This concept is used by activists and academics to describe struggles that emerged all over the post-colony in the context of large-scale investments in agricultural land, slum removal programs, toxic facilities, destruction of forests, or green enclosures.

In Germany, the situation is notably different. In contrast to the USA and to the post-colonial part of the world, environmental justice has remained mostly an issue of concern for scholars and political institutions such as the Federal Environmental Agency (Umweltbundesamt) (Preisendorfer 2014). Even the German green party gives only scant attention to issues of environmental injustice (ibid.). Contemporary German environmentalism is, like US mainstream environmentalism, a predominantly middle-class movement that emerged out of two different currents. The earlier current focused on landscape and nature conservation and developed in the context of industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, while a more recent one is predominantly associated with the political left and emerged out of protest against nuclear power plants in the 1970s (Leh 2006; Preisendorfer 2014). These two currents are reflected in the two largest German environmental organizations. The NABU (Naturschutzbund Deutschlands) as a member of Birdlife International is mainly a nature conservation organization whereas the BUND (Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz) is a member of Friends of the Earth and considers itself a driving force for sustainable development in Germany (BUND 2019). Recently,

both organizations have picked up environmental justice narratives and stress the social function of conservation, in particular in urban areas (NABU 2011). A few smaller and more radical organizations such as Robin Wood clearly state environmental justice and the individual right to a healthy environment as objectives of their campaigns (Robin Wood n.d.).

However, in addition to traditional environmentalists, in Germany and elsewhere new actors have started to engage with environmental injustices. Labor unions, for example, which traditionally focus on social justice, promote concepts such as ‘just transition’ (Stavis and Felli 2015; Swilling and Annecke 2012). In this context, German unions have contributed to the formulation of policies that promote renewable energy production and climate change mitigation (Snell and Fairbrother 2010). Furthermore, since the early 2000s, a new globalized environmental justice movement has emerged: the climate justice movement. It aligns diverse actors from many sections of society (Garrelts and Dietz 2014) including established environmental organizations like Friends of the Earth, human rights organizations, labor unions, the peasant organization La Via Campesina, as well as indigenous rights organizations such as the Coordination of Indigenous Peoples Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA). More recently, two forceful global and decentralized grassroots movements – Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion – have entered the scene calling for climate justice.

### The scholarship of environmental justice

Since environmental justice scholarship is rooted in the US American civil rights movement, it initially focused on *distributional* aspects, more specifically on the spatial distribution of so-called environmental goods (e.g. green urban space) and to aspects of *procedural justice* and *recognition* (Schlosberg 2004; Walker 2009; and Baasch in this volume). Procedural justice raises questions about the ability of actors to access environmental information, to participate in decision making, to pursue court proceedings, and to share power in meaningful participation (Walker 2012). Justice of recognition is concerned with the acceptance of individuals and specific social groups such as ethnic minorities as full and equal partners in social interactions (Fraser 2000). Misrecognition, according to Fraser, can be

considered as “an institutionalized relation of subordination” (Fraser 2000: 113). The integration of recognition and political participation as dimensions of justice in their own right helped to identify the diverse causes of injustice (see also Hafner this volume). In all its three dimensions, environmental injustice is ultimately rooted in the broader political economy and associated structural inequalities since “[...] greater inequality in the distribution of power and wealth is likely to engender greater environmental inequality” (Faber 2017: 62).

In the 2000s, the academic field further diversified as a number of scholars developed relevant extensions. Concepts such as “just sustainability” (Agyeman and Evans 2004) and “just transition” (Swilling and Annecke 2012) aligned debates on place-specific environmental problems to broader societal transformations and criticized the “equity deficit” (Agyeman 2005: 44) in sustainability studies. A more recent attempt to ‘politicize’ sustainability studies and to integrate justice concerns into concepts of socio-ecological transformation has recently been formulated by Blythe and colleagues (2018) in an opinion piece published in the journal *Antipode*. Fruitful contributions to environmental justice debates also came from Marxist urban political ecology (Padawangi 2012; Leitner et al. 2017; Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003) and the debate on the politics of scale (Sze et al. 2009; Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Towers 2000). Urban political ecology stresses the justice implications of urbanization and its effects on processes of uneven socio-material transformation (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003). The consideration of scale allows for an investigation into the spatial and scalar dimensions of protest against environmental injustices. According to Towers (2000: 26), grassroots organizations construct specific “scales of meaning” to underpin their protest and thereby challenge dominant “scales of regulation” (ibid.: 26).

Considering the existing body of academic literature on environmental justice, two emerging frontiers of research turn out to be particularly promising. The first was opened by Donna Haraway’s claim that “there can be no environmental justice or ecological reworlding without multispecies environmental justice” (2018: 102) and by scholars who engaged with more-than-human approaches (Agyeman et al. 2016; Yaka 2019; Zwarteween and Boelens 2014). In her contribution to this special issue, Yaka develops the notion of socio-ecological justice as a translation

of “relationality between river waters, and the non-human environment in general, and human life into the vocabulary of (environmental) justice” (Yaka in this volume: 168). A second emerging frontier relates environmental justice to debates on epistemic justice, i.e. a situation in which someone’s world view or interpretation of things is unjustly neglected or misrepresented (Fricker 2007), and ontological politics (Blaser 2013; Carolan 2004). Building on the conflictive case of a new hydropower dam in the Brazilian Amazon, Weißermel and Chaves (this volume) illustrate how the unraveling of epistemic and ontological dimensions can help to identify the underlying causes of environmental injustices.

In German-speaking geographical academia, research on environmental justice has only played a minor role so far. The research field has mostly been dominated by sociologists (e.g. Elvers 2007) and public health scholars (e.g. Bolte et al. 2012). Flitner (2007), one of the few exceptions in geography, analyzed the noise pollution of the binational Basel-Mulhouse airport and developed a conceptualization of environmental justice that combines aspects of distribution and recognition with ideas on scales of meaning and regulation. However, although to date only a few departments and scholars have explicitly engaged in the field of environmental justice, many geographers have already worked for a long time with concepts, problems, and cases that broadly intersect with it. Their background includes Political, Urban, Rural, and Social Geography, Geographical Development Research (German: Geographische Entwicklungsforschung), as well as more recent fields such as Geographical Transformation Research and studies on the Geographies of Degrowth. But perhaps it is the discipline of Political Ecology with its explicit focus on power-laden human-environmental relations and its normative perspective that exhibits the strongest commonalities with the field of environmental justice.

New promising contributions may arise from ongoing debates in German-speaking geographical academia on spatial justice (e.g. Redepinning 2013; Redepinning and Singer 2019). Spatial justice in Germany is mostly debated under the heading of ‘equivalence of living conditions’ which is one of the main objectives of German spatial planning (Mießner 2017). Redepinning and Singer (2019) argue that aligning the three dimensions of justice (distribution, recognition, and representation) could facilitate the development of place-based frames that allow for more just spatial development.

### The contributions of this special issue

This special issue compiles discussions from the first international workshop of the Enjust-Network for environmental justice that took place in Kiel, Germany from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> June, 2019. Broadly speaking, the articles fall into two categories in that they either deal exclusively with theoretical and conceptual issues (*Hafner, Baasch and Ott*) or tend to advance new ideas by working with empirical case studies (*Thaler, Doorn and Hartmann, Yaka, Weißermel and Chaves, Tittor and Toledo López, Moneer and Chavez-Rodriguez, Lomas and Curry*). However, drawing a sharp distinction between theoretical and empirical work makes little sense in the field of environmental justice, since empirical material is always used to advance conceptual foundations and theoretical ideas are generally grounded in empirical findings.

*Hafner* provides a broad overview of environmental justice scholarship, placing special emphasis on the distinct ‘thought styles’ that characterize its different approaches. He identifies five conceptual challenges for dealing with questions of environmental justice (human-environment relations, understanding of justice, transdisciplinarity, semantics, and (non)openness of conflicts) and develops the Environmental Justice Incommensurabilities Framework (EJIF) as a meta-conceptual tool to map and categorize the multifaceted academic field.

*Baasch* extends the conceptual toolkit of environmental justice to include theories from psychology. She emphasizes the role of cognitive processes of evaluation and of emotions in understanding the way that justice is actually experienced. Against this background, she argues for greater awareness of justice-related issues in participatory processes whose main function should be the fair representation of all interests in a planning process.

Applying arguments from analytical ethics, *Ott* provocatively challenges the idea of justice as equality against the background of natural heterogeneity. On the one hand, he questions the assumption that equality is a value in its own right. On the other hand, he urges scholars of environmental justice to think more carefully about the question of what exactly is meant by calls for equality. In a world that is characterized by the heterogeneity of natural conditions, environmental justice as equality can conceivably only relate to something more abstract than the immediate

physical living conditions of people. He proposes political and legal equality, levels of sufficiency, and obligations against victimizations as analytically viable dimensions of equality.

*Thaler, Doorn and Hartmann* approach the issue of environmental justice from a legal perspective. They look at different mechanisms of compensation for landowners in the context of spatial flood risk management and analyze the relationship between different legal procedures and their actual outcomes. Comparing the Netherlands, where a clearly defined formal procedure is adopted, with Austria, which follows a more flexible approach and promotes open negotiations between landowners and the state, they conclude that each procedure has its own strengths and weaknesses in terms of distributional and procedural justice.

*Chavez-Rodriguez, Lomas and Curry* analyze the intersection between urban mobility, gender, and environmental justice by looking at recent urban planning initiatives in Monterrey, Mexico. Using critical discourse analysis they peer behind high-minded slogans like ‘sustainable mobility’ or ‘urban renewal’ and unveil the actual patterns of exclusion that are ingrained in the hidden fabric of these plans. They advocate a ‘queering’ of the city by prioritizing the periphery as well as transparency, gender, and the bodily scale in urban planning.

*Moneer* looks at the Egyptian social movement against coal and identifies four strategic narratives that the movement employs to mobilize support and to link environmental preoccupations to social and political grievances. These are coal as an environmental disaster, coal and health risks, coal and environmental injustices and socioeconomic costs, and fossil fuel versus renewable energies. By applying this framing analysis to Facebook, she gets a better understanding of how political groups without access to mass media use social media as an epistemic tool that enables them to shape and promote their own counter-narratives.

Likewise, *Tittor and Toledo López* look at strategic narratives used by the anti-ethanol movement in Córdoba, Argentina. They focus on the role of expert knowledge and socio-technical controversies in environmental conflicts and stress the importance of critical epidemiology that is able to question the dominant green narrative of renewable energies as a silver bullet in

sustainable development. In so doing, they refer back to the very beginnings of the environmental justice movement as it mainly investigated evidence of negative health impacts in the vicinity of industrial plants.

*Weißermel* and *Chaves* also examine a political movement that struggles for the rights of local people in the face of 'green' energy production. Their case study is situated in the Brazilian Amazon and deals with local resistance against a huge hydropower dam. They are interested in what they call the "coloniality of power" (page 158) that is manifested in the persistence of patterns of dispossession and epistemic injustice. Drawing on the works of Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and Miranda Fricker, they analyze the power of categories and mechanisms of domination that tend to exclude certain groups from consideration thereby reducing them to 'bare life'.

Finally, *Yaka* expands the scope of environmental justice to the realm of the more-than-human. While she also deals with resistance to hydropower dams – this time in Turkey – she is more interested in the way that they touch on dimensions that go beyond distributional, representational, or participatory justice. She rejects any sharp distinction between humans and their environment or between culture and nature. Instead, she argues for a greater focus on the corporeal continuity of the body with its environment. Being related to our environment by touch, sound, and smell constitutes a central part of our wellbeing and is crucial to leading a fair and decent life. She provides the notion of "socio-ecological justice" (page 175) in order to translate this corporality and relationality of our being-in-the-world into the vocabulary and logic of environmental justice.

### Call for further research

The articles in this special issue display the variety and vividness of the current academic discourse on environmental justice. Hopefully, they can also show the strength of this academic field. In general, working on issues of environmental justice fosters a greater and more nuanced awareness of the underlying assumptions on which any critically minded geography is grounded. It compels geographical research to be more transparent about its normative presuppositions and to engage in a critical dialogue on their validity and appropriateness. Distinguishing between distribution, recognition, and participation as three

distinct and sometimes incommensurable dimensions of justice, for example, can bring more clarity to recent debates about social resilience and the social effects of global environmental change (*Klepp* and *Chavez-Rodriguez* 2018). Such 'normative maturity' seems to be particularly relevant to geography since, at closer inspection, the question of justice turns out to be at the heart of so many fields of research in contemporary human geography.

Moreover, a look at the current state of research on environmental justice can also give some clues about promising avenues of future research. Here, we only want to hint at two of them. Firstly, in many contributions, the role of the state appears to be highly relevant and contradictory. The state presents itself as an actor in conflicts over environmental justice while being at the same time an arena in which these struggles are played out. A deeper understanding of the state, its dynamics, its actors, and its internal fractures could provide studies of environmental justice with a valuable conceptual background. Secondly, while the articles in this special issue show a great variety in their diverse theoretical approaches and their empirical settings, they, nevertheless, all turn out to be quite traditional in their methodological design. However, working on questions of justice offers many opportunities for experimenting with new methodologies that might reveal new dimensions of reality and normativity. One example could be participatory methodologies that engage more intensively with the primary objects of social research, turning them into subjects, and involving them in the co-production of knowledge.

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