

Book Review: Achieving Environmental Justice: a cross-national analysis by Karen Bell

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*This book is a valuable and revealing snapshot of current local and global environmental justice issues in a variety of countries, writes **Paulo Rui Anciaes**. **Karen Bell** assesses the extent of, and reasons for, environmental justice/injustice in the United States, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Sweden, China, Bolivia, and Cuba, and explores ideas of race and class discrimination, citizen power, industrialisation processes, and the role of capitalism.*

Achieving Environmental Justice: a cross-national analysis.
Karen Bell. Policy Press. 2014

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The concept of environmental justice has become very broad over the years, to the point that it now includes aspects that many people would not classify as “environmental”. [Karen Bell's](#) *Achieving Environmental Justice* helps us to clarify the concept, but without going into lengthy theoretical discussions about what environmental justice is.

Instead, it starts with a list of pre-determined criteria for achieving environmental justice and analyses the extent to which a group of seven countries meets these criteria. The list of criteria goes beyond the usual understanding of environmental justice as distributive justice (achieving equitable distribution of environmental “goods” and harms for all social groups), also including aspects of substantive justice (achieving a healthy environment for all) and procedural justice (fair, participatory, and inclusive environmental decision-making).

The central hypothesis is that capitalism is the main driver of environmental injustice. Starting from the most capitalist/market-based and ending in the most socialist/state-based country, the book analyses environmental justice issues in the United States, South Korea, United Kingdom, Sweden, China, Bolivia, and Cuba. The argument is that in a market economy profits dominate decision-making at the expense of social or environmental concerns, leading to both social inequalities and environmental deterioration. Market pressures force governments to deregulate the economy and adopt policies focusing on economic growth. When faced with opposition, polluting activities can simply be relocated, often to places where the victims have low economic or political power. The globalised capitalist system also creates pressures for poorer countries to adopt policies to maintain competitiveness. This explains the rapid industrialization of South Korea and China and the dependence of Bolivia on resource extraction. Even the environmental problems of socialist economies such as Cuba can be explained by the legacy of previous capitalist periods or ongoing capitalist reforms.

The role of capitalism is facilitated by what the author calls “damaging hegemonic environmental discourses”. An important component of these discourses is the belief that growth is “good”, prevalent in the early stages of economic growth (evident in the cases of South Korea and China) and supported by consumerism, which is fuelled by the dissemination of information about patterns of consumption in richer countries. Once the country is rich enough, the growth discourse transforms into a “green growth” one, based on the hope that environmental problems will be solved by technological innovation or by the adoption of eco-friendly lifestyles (but only those that do not threaten current levels of consumption). For example, the widespread recognition of Swedish people’s interest in nature and recycling behaviour obscures the fact that the country’s economy is built on the production of cars and disposable items of clothing, furniture, and technology, and has been shifting environmentally harmful industries to poorer countries.



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In contrast, non-damaging environmental discourses seldom become hegemonic. In the United States, the cultural assimilation of indigenous groups by the political and religious establishment in the 19th Century has diluted the belief held by those groups in the importance of reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. More recently, the development of a culture that promotes social and environmental sustainability in Bolivia (the [Vivir-Bien](#) approach) has met with several political and economic obstacles. In Cuba, for many decades the authorities have tried to encourage the idea that cars are a resource to be shared and not individual items for consumption, but in recent consultations, the population chose to allow a market for private vehicles.

The book has a matrix structure. The chapters analysing each country start with a review of relevant events, institutions, policies, and legislation. The following three sections discuss aspects of distributive, substantive, and procedural justice. A concluding section suggests causes for the environmental injustices identified. I was left with the impression that the conclusions are the same no matter how different the scenarios described are. It is not always clear how the conclusion that capitalism is behind environmental injustices has been derived from the descriptive sections of the chapters. Since the list of criteria defining environmental justice was based on a “Marxist ideal of justice” (p.23), the environmental justice patterns found for each country are naturally related to the country’s economic system. But a different narrative could also have been constructed from the material describing the seven countries; for example, that the main factors explaining environmental justice outcomes are levels of income or political democracy.

The comparison between the seven countries is supported by the calculation of an indicator of environmental justice, described in an Appendix. The countries are classified into three levels (“generally achieves this”, “mixed”, and “generally does not achieve this”) for each of the criteria defining environmental justice. The author states that this classification was based on “people’s subjective satisfaction levels” but does not explain how the opinions of a large number of interviewees were translated into the final classifications of the countries. The ranking of the countries in the overall environmental justice indicator neatly follows their order from less to more capitalist, with Cuba having by far the best score. The assignment of equal weights to all the criteria leads to some odd results: China has a relatively good score although it does not “generally achieve” any of the 45 criteria. I think the whole message of the book would be clearer, and the results of the qualitative analysis less ambiguous, if the methods used to build the quantitative indicator were explained in detail in one of the introductory chapters of the book, and related with indicators measuring the degree of capitalism of each country.

Overall, the book is a revealing snapshot of current local and global environmental justice issues in a variety of countries, a valuable contribution to what [Gordon Walker](#) called the “international travelling of the environmental justice frame”. It would be interesting to compare the situation in the countries described to that in areas of the globe not covered in the book (such as Africa and the Middle-East), or to reassess the situation in the same seven countries in ten years time.

Paulo Rui Ancaes is a researcher at the Centre for Transport Studies, University College London. He completed his PhD. at the Department of Geography and Environment of the London School of Economics. Paulo blogs about [Community severance](#) and [Alternative environmentalism](#) and contributes to the [UCL Street Mobility project](#) blog.

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