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INTRODUCTION

Environmental Justice in International Contexts: Understanding Intersections for Social Justice in the Twenty-First Century

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Economic crises related to bank failures, housing markets, high rates of unemployment, currency devaluations, government credit ratings, and a number of other economic issues have been at the forefront of global media coverage over the past few years. Such events and ongoing discussions represent a growing awareness of class status and the disparity between the wealthy and the poor, as the Occupy movements and blogosphere discussions demonstrate. While these issues have received significant media coverage in recent years and bring attention to the wealth accumulated by private companies such as banks, there is seemingly less discussion of the nuances of how class status intersects with gender, race, ethnicity, and the environment in a globalized context. The essays presented in this special issue on environmental justice in international contexts explore such intersections through diverse topics, methodologies, and theoretical approaches.

As a movement, environmental justice arguably began in Warren County, North Carolina with 1982 protests against a toxic waste landfill (Pezzullo, 2001). However, it was in 1991 that an organized set of 17 principles was first articulated at the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in the USA (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). These events were important steps for articulating the importance of social justice issues related to the environment. As Cox (2012) explains, environmental justice refers to:

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Recent academic and activist scholarship is also moving in directions to connect to other movements. For example, Sandler and Pezzullo’s (2007) book, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism* examines the relationship between environmental justice and environmental movements. Julian Agyeman (2007) in this journal has also discussed the relationship between environmental justice and sustainability and how those paradigms could merge together, focusing on questions related to race and the prison system, use of public spaces, green collar jobs, and the intersections of war, poverty, and climate change. In another issue of this journal, Salma Monani (2011) and co-editors Carlo Arreglo and Belinda Chiu expand on the just sustainability theme by focusing on cinema and new media.

While many studies of environmental justice movements have addressed events in the USA, academic scholarship and activist work has also taken place and focused on issues outside the USA (for example, special sections in edited books such as Bullard, 2005; Carruthers, 2008; Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). Films such as *Even the Rain* and *Crude* also explore the effects of environmental justice for rural and indigenous communities. Tarla Rai Peterson’s (1997) book, *Sharing the Earth*, provides insight into several international environmental justice topics in her thorough analysis of sustainability discourse at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro and the role of public participation in Canada’s Wood Buffalo National Park. International contexts are especially relevant in relationship to concepts such as climate justice, referring to the effects of climate change for poor and marginalized communities. As Roberts (2007) explains, the global environmental justice framework generally applies in two contexts. The first is environmental justice responses to extraction companies and the environmental and social effects of their work. Roberts notes that because of “electronic communications, we increasingly are hearing about the consequence of this expansion through the intermediary work of international environmental and human rights groups” (2007, p. 286). The second concern of global environmental justice “is to describe and resist global patterns of inequality in environmental exposures, where the world’s poorest, often nonwhite regions face a triple threat” (2007, p. 286), such as understanding climate change effects on such communities. Cox (2007) expands this understanding of global environmental justice in his critique of neoliberal discourses of free trade agreements, noting that “The tropes of sacrifice and reward in the story of globalization promise an increase in standards of living and environmental quality (eventually) as national economies grow” (2007, p. 244). Yet, Cox contends that such narratives often fail the people who are supposed to directly benefit from neoliberal trade policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Related studies on the effects of globalization and a globalized environmental justice have focused on the nature of borders themselves. As with Cox’s study on neoliberal discourses and the effects of NAFTA that illustrate the complications
resulting from free trade agreements across borders, so do Peterson, Peterson, and Peterson who argue that:

Both unsustainable development and environmental injustice are chronically acute on borders between comparatively affluent and poor nations (for example, United States/Mexico, Costa Rica/Nicaragua, South Korea/North Korea), where long-time residents and mushrooming immigrant populations are prone to differential treatment, differential access to political systems, and differential conceptions of justice. (2007, pp. 189–190)

Maquiladoras that operate in Mexico illustrate one set of effects for border residents, as evidenced in Peterson’s (1997) study of residents of the USA–Mexico border and Orihuela and Hageman’s (2011) analysis of the films, *Maquilapolis* and *Sleep Dealer*. Peña (2005) and Jennings and Jennings (1993) also discuss the implications of environmental justice/racism for Mexicans and Mexican Americans who face issues related to farm work, land use and tenure, and factory work.

Taken together, the aforementioned studies and other studies not mentioned here demonstrate the complexity of understanding environmental justice issues in a global context. Two recent conference proceedings on these subjects offer further work in these areas (Cotton & Motta, 2011; Sowards, Alvarado, Arrieta, & Barde, 2012). The theme for the 2011 Conference on Communication and the Environment was this very subject, Environmental Justice in International Contexts. The conference had more than 120 participants, coming from more than 12 countries (such as Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, Germany, South Africa, Sweden, and Portugal) and across the USA. The conference proceedings covered topics related to environmental justice in the USA, Brazil, Suriname, Peru, India, and Kenya as well as gender issues in relationship to climate and environmental justice (see Sowards et al., 2012). The conference itself took place at the University of Texas at El Paso, in the border region shared by Texas, New Mexico, and the Mexican state of Chihuahua. The city of El Paso and its neighbor city, Ciudad Juárez share in common many environmental justice issues. One of the most prominent of these injustices has been the activities of the American Smelting and Refining Company (ASARCO), a copper smelting plant that opened in 1899 and closed in 1999. After receiving a permit to reopen in the 2000s, ASARCO closed permanently in 2009 and the city of El Paso is currently undergoing the demolition of the area. High levels of lead in the air in soil near ASARCO led to community protests about its possible reopening. Land in the surrounding area, including at my own home in El Paso, was remediated voluntarily by the company. ASARCO, one of the stops for conference border tour, remains an important reminder of environmental injustice facing communities throughout the world, especially in poor and nonwhite areas and countries.

The essays selected for this special issue examine and expand on these themes related to globalization and environmental justice. The first two essays make important contributions to our understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and the environment. Ellen Gorsevski’s essay offers insight into what she calls emplaced rhetoric, or how lived experience through nature contributes to resistance of traditional power structures. Her analysis focuses on Wangari Maathai, who recently
passed away, but remains an important figure for the Green Belt Movement and
environmental peace in Kenya. Kathleen de Onís’s essay provides a different
understanding of gender, through her analysis of the Asian Communities for
Reproductive Justice, a project that examines how reproductive justice intersects
with climate justice issues. De Onís’s exploration of the metaphor “looking both ways”
reminds academicians and practitioners alike that there is not just one way of seeing
things. In a related way, Danielle Endres examines how American Indian commu-
nities in the USA view land differently from the U.S. federal government. She argues
that the competing discourses about proposed nuclear waste storage at Yucca
Mountain, sacred land versus national sacrifice zone, illustrate the lack of respect for
American Indian values as well as problems with cross-cultural communication.

Other essays in this volume examine media coverage of environmental justice
issues in other countries, and how such news stories frame particular events. Bruno
Takahashi and Mark Meisner analyze media coverage of the creation of the
Peruvian Ministry of the Environment. They conclude that such coverage reinforces
neoliberal discourses while marginalizing indigenous voices. Jill Hopke reaches a
similar conclusion in her analysis of El Salvador’s response to the mining industry,
particularly Pacific Rim Mining Corporation. She argues that mainstream press
reinforces dominant narratives especially of the government’s power structure.
However, she also contends that the alternative press in El Salvador presents a
different discourse that is useful in resisting extractive activities of mining companies
that contribute to deforestation and health side effects for local people.

The final two essays illustrate the ambiguities of borders and cultures in
relationship to environmental issues. Shellabarger, Peterson, Sills, and Cubbage use
the theoretical concept of culturescape to understand the construction of land in
Altar Valley of southern Arizona. They describe a conflict between land managers
who perceived themselves as fighting crime and humanitarians who were trying
to help border crossers survive the desert landscape. Their essay offers possibilities
to rectify this conflict as well as other conflicts that arise in these kinds of environ-
mental disputes. In the praxis section, Chen, Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, and
Knudsen explore community-based participatory research regarding ecocultural
struggles in New Mexico, another USA–Mexico border state. They offer practical
suggestions for doing interdisciplinary and community-based research that better
inform us as to how we can integrate academic research into communities and how
that research can be practical and beneficial.

In short, the essays of this special issue offer nuances and insights into how we
understand environmental justice, intercultural communication, cross-cultural
communication, gender issues, class standing, and other important topics related
to environmental communication.

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References


