Third World Environmental Justice

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This special issue relates the key analytical constructs of environmental justice scholarship – distributive justice, procedural justice and environmental racism – to a series of Third World case studies. It calls attention to the need to theorize both distributive burdens and benefits; treat the relative salience of race as a category of differentiation as an empirical question; and examine new avenues of procedural justice that have opened up to transnational environmental justice activists. The basic position advanced in the collection is that the core issues at the heart of environmental justice struggles are universal. In this sense, the case studies presented here should be read not as though they were part of exceptional Third World circumstances, but instead as part of broader patterns of distributive, procedural and racial injustice with global significance.

Keywords distributive justice, environmental justice, environmental racism, globalization, procedural justice, Third World

The birth of the environmental justice movement in the United States is often traced to the controversy surrounding the contamination of Love Canal in upstate New York in the late 1970s and acts of civil disobedience by groups of predominantly African Americans protesting the dumping of toxic wastes in a landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, in 1982 (Szasz 1994; Di Chiro 1998). Similar sorts of watershed moments can be identified for the cause of international environmental justice. In a 2-month period in 1984, both the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India, and the PEMEX liquid propane gas plant in Mexico City blew up, killing
thousands and injuring roughly a million nearby residents (Arturson 1987; Rajan 2001). Just a few years later, the first reports began surfacing in the popular press of illicit dumping of North American and European toxic waste materials in over a dozen different countries in Africa (Vir 1989; McKee 1996).

Graphic images of chemically burned victims in Bhopal and Mexico City and garbage barges from Europe and the United States plying the coasts of West Africa drove home the notion to an international audience that environmental justice was a cause with global dimensions. The paltry compensation paid to victims in Bhopal—a fraction of what they might have expected to claim in U.S. courts (Rajan 2001)—suggested that separate standards of environmental justice were being applied in Third World cases. Union Carbide’s subsequent abandonment of its Bhopal plant and the uncovering of additional evidence of toxic dumping in Latin America and the South Pacific also demonstrated the footloose nature of the transnational capitalists implicated in the growing scandals. The response by Third World actors such as the Organization of African Unity and a number of individual governments in the African region to outlaw all forms of “garbage imperialism” (McKee 1996, 238) underscored the political potency of the issue of environmental justice the world over.

Viewed against this backdrop, the concerns of this special issue are hardly new. At the same time, a number of scholars have recently sought to explore the question of environmental justice in the Third World more systematically (Zerner 2000; Peluso and Watts 2001; McDonald 2002; Agyeman et al. 2003; Anand 2004; Walker and Bulkeley 2006). The reasons for this renewed interest in the concept are not hard to trace. Former manufacturing centers in North America and Europe have undergone deindustrialization, leading many toxic industries to relocate in the global south. Ever-increasing capital mobility, adjustments in trade governance, agrarian restructuring, neocolonial conservation projects, expanding suburban frontiers, and displacements induced by war and violence have also contributed to a sense that environmental justice concerns are increasing in scope. In effect, environmental justice scholars have been confronted with circumstances that require them to reconsider their core analytical constructs—across scales, within spaces defined by new concepts of territoriality, and in the context of a complex and shifting network of global interconnections.

The first article in this issue by David Carruthers examines how well the concept of environmental justice translates when applied to hazardous industrial sites in the cross-border context of Tijuana, Mexico. Carruthers suggests that there have been “myriad forms” of environmental activism around the world that could potentially be analyzed under the rubric of environmental justice. He notes that Mexico’s social movement history is rich and varied, and that the issue of environmental justice accordingly finds currency in, and is bolstered by, preexisting mass mobilizations. At the same time, environmental justice activists and scholars face a number of challenges. They lack basic environmental, public health, demographic, corporate and legal information, and they have less support from philanthropic organizations than their counterparts in the United States. In this sense, Carruthers argues, the United States/Mexico border area is “a microcosm of north–south relations, revealing the forms, consequences, and tensions of global economic and cultural integration” that play out all across the Latin American region.

Drawing on rich historical sources, Juanita Sundberg explores the significance of race as a key variable in determining resource distribution outcomes in Latin America. Sundberg acknowledges that race may not work in the same overt way in
the Latin American region as it does in the United States, particularly given the emphasis in the United States on liberal notions of intentional racism. She nonetheless asserts that indigenous peoples and “whites” have effectively been racialized at a number of key junctures in Latin America’s history, and that these historical precedents continue to shape environmental outcomes today. Sundberg develops the concept of “environmental formation” to refer to the “historically specific articulations between environmental imaginaries, natural resource allocations, and patterns of environmental transformation” within which particular forms of structural racism, classism, and ethnic prejudice take root. These conjunctural forces carry tremendous power in determining “who constitutes the body politic” in contemporary Latin America, and thus who is best placed to claim a share of environmental dispensations.

Richard Schroeder uses a case study of Tanzania’s world-renowned safari tourism industry to explore how different models of distributive environmental justice are implemented in the context of neoliberal economic reforms. Schroeder notes that while most environmental justice scholarship in the United States centers on the unfair distribution of environmental burdens, the Third World has seen a proliferation of projects premised on the distribution of environmental benefits instead. He argues that benefit-sharing mechanisms are often used for public relations purposes, rather than to address the need for just compensation in cases where rural Tanzanians have been displaced by protected areas, or where they have suffered loss of property or personal injury following wildlife attacks. He concludes that benefit sharing in the context of generalized poverty can amount to a form of economic coercion unless the legal rights of rural communities are upheld and explicit connections to environmental burdens associated with wildlife are recognized.

Sarah Moore invokes what at first glance seems like a conventional environmental justice issue: the problem of waste management in Oaxaca, Mexico. In order to preserve its status as a major tourist destination, the Oaxacan municipal government pursues an aggressive policy of street cleaning and refuse collection. Once collected, this waste is carted away to one of Mexico’s few functioning municipal dumps. The metonymic association of people and garbage allows the modern citizens of “clean” neighborhoods in Oaxaca to establish their own sense of social distinction. At the same time, however, residents of the colonia where waste is eventually discarded use their proximity to it as a source of considerable political leverage. Demonstrating the ingenuity and resourcefulness that are often born of difficult circumstances, colonia residents have repeatedly blockaded roads leading to the dump, forcing the municipal government to meet demands for basic services that are otherwise routinely denied them.

Robin Leichenko and William Solecki examine the production of new suburban landscapes that help relatively wealthy middle-class consumers shed the “problems” associated with the abject poor. In Brazil, Indonesia, and a number of other locations, exclusive housing estates modeled after gated communities in American suburbs allow residents to segregate themselves from sources of pollution, crime, and aesthetic blight. Homeowners in planned communities are granted access to separate amenities, including reliable power sources, improved roadways, parks, shopping centers, and medical facilities. On the face of it, this new spatial pattern suggests distributive inequities, but the authors argue that the effect of such skewed urban development priorities is also to foreclose procedural options for those left behind in crowded neighborhoods beset by multiple forms of hazard and economic disadvantage.
Christopher Sneddon and Coleen Fox analyze political mobilizations organized in opposition to the construction of large dams in Thailand and Mozambique. In both cases, local dam opponents have invoked the findings of a major report by the World Commission on Dams to bolster their position vis-à-vis state authorities who support the projects. Sneddon and Fox use the cases to call attention to questions of scale as they apply to the organization of political action in struggles over large-scale construction projects. While anti-dam campaigners mobilize around proximate livelihood and socioecological issues at the local scale, they also utilize transnational networks to stake broader claims and gain political support and leverage for their cause. At the same time, state authorities attempt to legitimize their position by invoking the prospect for improved quality of life for all national citizens through rural electrification and irrigated agriculture. The basic question in each case is: Who defines, and thus who ultimately constitutes, the “community of justice” charged with determining whether dam projects should be built in the first place?

Wendy Wolford addresses the issue of scale in her study of commercial agricultural development in Brazil as well. She argues that environmental injustices in access to land in Brazil are justified and maintained through a hegemonic discourse that naturalizes the superiority of large-scale agriculture. Her case study centers on Brazil’s newest agricultural frontier, the central grasslands known as the cerrado. Once considered a wasteland, the region has been transformed through soil improvements via the intensive use of agro-chemicals, and is now characterized by extreme distributional inequalities in land ownership. Public policies in the geopolitical context of global commodity production have overwhelmingly favored heavily capitalized, modern farmers even as the rural poor in Brazil have had to mobilize to fight for access to land. Wolford argues that the automatic privileging of large-scale agriculture as more economically efficient and ecologically suited to the region has only reinforced inequality in access and control of the means of rural livelihood.

As these brief précis suggest, the contributors to this issue have extended the scope of environmental justice scholarship in a number of provocative ways. For the remainder of this brief introduction, we take up the three core themes of existing literature on environmental justice, namely, distributive justice, environmental racism, and procedural justice, and explore how these concepts have been applied by the contributing authors.

Sharing Burdens and Benefits: Revising the Calculus of Distributive Environmental Justice

As conventionally defined, the environmental justice movement in North America was formed around a notion of distributive (in)justice combined with environmental racism. Indeed, the inequitable distribution of toxic wastes and other unwanted land uses has effectively been synonymous with environmental injustice since the movement first got underway in the late 1970s. One of the lessons that we take away from the articles in this issue concerning the basic dichotomy between burdens and benefits is that these concepts are always relative, both in absolute terms and with respect to any particular group of potential resource users. Thus, for example, the large herds of charismatic wildlife in Tanzania represent a source of tremendous potential revenue for the state and individual tourist operators, even as that presence constitutes multiple sources of risk to local pastoralists and farmers. Such circumstances defy
simplistic cost/benefit analysis. A second point to be gleaned from these articles is that the geography of burdens/benefits can often be quite complex. Carruthers’s study of toxic exposure in the Mexican border zone, for example, highlights the unplanned nature of Mexican cities, where palatial estates and shacks occur in the same neighborhoods, and are thus equally vulnerable to hazards. By contrast, in Moore’s study of Oaxaca, the hazardous effects of waste dumps are more concentrated in specific areas of the city, due to the municipality’s waste management policies.

Since the inception of the environmental justice movement in the United States, the distributive justice paradigm has tended to emphasize the unequal distribution of burdens rather than benefits. This comes as little surprise given the serious risks toxic waste poses to health and human safety in work places and residential areas. As far as the waste management problems discussed by Carruthers and Moore are concerned, one critical issue distinguishing Third World environmental justice politics is the relative absence of environmental regulation. Poorer neighborhoods in North America may be negatively affected by the lack of effective regulation, but such protections are generally absent altogether in the Third World. Indeed, this is a major factor in the relocation of hazardous industrial plants to the Third World in the first place (O’Connor 1994). Lacking legal protections, groups such as those living around the Oaxacan garbage dumps are left with little choice but to take to the streets.

In terms of the issue of distributing environmental benefits in the Third World, current practice must be seen against the backdrop of neoliberal market reforms. Since the mid-1980s when the sustainable development paradigm swept the Third World, distribution of environmental revenues has become an increasingly commonplace practice in bioprospecting, fair trade networks, integrated conservation and development projects, and other market-oriented environmental initiatives (McAfee 1999; Schroeder 1999; 2000; Zerner 2000). As Schroeder’s Tanzania research suggests, revenue sharing is typically a voluntaristic approach embraced unilaterally by elite environmental managers in the context of asymmetrical power relations. While the practice could be construed as a progressive step forward, explicit recognition of links between benefits and burdens is typically lacking in these programs, and more fundamental claims to land and rights of cultural and economic self-determination are routinely ignored.

Leichenko and Solecki give the issue of benefits distribution a somewhat different spin in their analysis of the recent construction of gated communities and exclusive suburban housing estates in and around Third World cities. In Leichenko and Solecki’s case, relatively wealthy housing consumers and state planners have deliberately created conditions that exacerbate tendencies toward uneven development and differential provision of amenities at the urban scale. In effect, they show elite consumers abandoning the mixed, unplanned residential patterns outlined in Carruthers’s article in favor of safe, hermetically sealed residential areas. Wolford’s case is similar. In Brazil’s cerrado region, state policies privileging large-scale agriculture have effectively displaced smallholders from prime farmland, creating a sense of naturalness and inevitability about industrial agriculture that is difficult for disenfranchised groups in other parts of Brazil to challenge. In both Brazil and the Indonesian case featured in Leichenko and Solecki’s analysis, naturalized consumption and production landscapes reflect class- and status-based social relations that have generated a skewed distribution of environmental benefits.
Histories and Geographies of Difference: Debating the Place of Race

Although the legacy of the civil rights movement in the United States has meant that race and race-inflected class dynamics are central explanatory variables in most analyses of the geography of distributive injustices involving toxic waste management, the evidence contained in the articles collected here suggests that the relative significance of race in many other parts of the world is less clear. Carruthers, for example, suggests that in the border areas of Mexico, race is not the only, and often not the primary, axis of social distinction when it comes to the distribution of environmental burdens. Instead, he argues, racial dynamics typically articulate with other forms of identity related to ethnicity, indigeneity, gender, and class in the adjudication of environmental injustices. Similarly, the “landscapes of privilege” (cf. Pulido 1996; 2000; Duncan and Duncan 2004) described by Leichenko and Solecki are largely drawn along lines of class and ethnicity, and Moore’s analysis of the conflict surrounding the Oaxacan garbage dump features class and status. In effect, the relevance of race as opposed to other categories marking difference very quickly becomes an empirical question.

Drawing inspiration from so-called new social movements in Latin America, Sundberg suggests that one way to understand how race factors into the environmental justice equation is to adopt a long historical view. She begins her analysis by laying out a series of carefully worded definitions, which identify race as a historically contingent phenomenon that naturalizes the social order at a given moment. The process of racialization is accordingly understood as the process by which specific types of racial order are produced. Sundberg deploys the concept of “environmental formation” to locate particular patterns of racial ordering in time and space. In different parts of Latin America, specific racial categories—Spanish, white, ladino, mestizo, Indian—formed the basis of shifting exclusionary discourses that were deployed at particular junctures to determine patterns of land ownership, decision-making authority, and citizenship rights.

Leichenko and Solecki and Moore also show how new concepts of consumption-oriented urban citizenship in Third World nations are built on geographies of difference and the marginalization of specific groups. Leichenko and Solecki underscore what it means to export the “good life” to Third World countries, where the embrace of modern aesthetics by the middle class results in spatial arrangements that increase environmental hazards and restrict access to basic amenities for the underclass. Identity-based segregation is thus reincarnated in the gated communities of postcolonial cities. Moore’s ethnography of Oaxaca similarly shows how the ideology of the “clean city” has certain inherent assumptions about the use of city space and its rightful owners. In effect, this discourse determines who can occupy public space: “dirty,” abject slum dwellers, it seems, have no place, and thus no rights, in the modern city.

Locality and Transnationality: Political Avenues to Procedural Justice

The concept of procedural environmental justice was originally developed as a direct response to, and critique of, earlier approaches that were narrowly defined in terms of burden/benefit distribution and race. By shifting the lens from distributive outcomes to decision making, and from intentional racism to planning and institutional processes, procedural justice interventions pinned the question of environmental
equity on matters of choice, access, control, and participation (Young 1990; Lake 1996). This issue has special salience in the Third World, where forms of political, economic, and cultural imperialism by “external” powers combine with peremptory decision making by “internal” elites. These alliances deny marginalized citizens the opportunity to shape environmental policies that directly affect their lives.

It is instructive to consider the types of actors that ultimately become involved in the production of procedural injustices. In Wolford’s case, the sometimes unwitting accomplices in the task of naturalizing large-scale agriculture in the Brazilian cerrado included agronomists producing soybean hybrids that could withstand tropical climatic conditions, and agricultural engineers and chemists who solved related irrigation and soil fertility problems. In Sneddon and Fox’s study of Thai and Mozambican dam projects, decisions to prioritize hydroelectric and irrigation potential over existing river-based livelihood practices were made by global financiers, development agents, government officials, and engineers. And the segregated housing markets in Sao Paulo or Beijing described by Leichenko and Solecki were the joint projects of state planning agencies, construction contractors, and advertising executives. In each of these cases, the primary determinants of distributive inequities were decisions taken by powerful exogenous actors, who invoked narratives of development, modernity, and progress to legitimize private gains.

Activists working on environmental justice issues in the Third World have nonetheless persevered in confronting these difficulties head on through political action and participation at different scales. Recognizing that pursuing rights claims through the courts and other formal planning forums would require the sorts of information and financial resources flagged by Carruthers (cf. Ruiers 2001), and drawing on the experience of having participated in parallel social movements, some activists have simply sought to force their issues through direct political action. Examples drawn from the articles here include the garbage blockade in Oaxaca or the invasion and partial destruction of Monsanto laboratories in Brazil, where scientists were busy developing hybrid and genetically modified soybean seed varieties. In other sites, where the issues involve regional, national, and international constituencies, environmental justice campaigners have been forced to reach beyond the locality to open up other sorts of participatory avenues. As Carruthers and Sneddon and Fox demonstrate, these solidarity ties are often formed in regional and transnational arenas where material support and informational resources can be more effectively mobilized. By forming strategic alliances through transnational advocacy networks, isolated activist groups often find themselves in a much stronger position when it comes to negotiations with the state and transnational capital (cf. Harvey 1996).

**Conclusion**

The initial efforts to organize a political movement around the concept of environmental justice in the United States in the 1970s began with the basic observation that not all people experience equal treatment in the environments where they live, work and play. After the facts of the Love Canal and Warren County cases were exposed, it became quite clear that race, class, and other forms of social differentiation allowed the managers of industrial plants to feel secure in applying lower standards of environmental and occupational health and safety in those settings. Very quickly, a broader pattern became clear: working-class, Native American, African American,
and Latino communities were routinely denied equal protection all across the country. In this sense, they were effectively marginalized as part of a “Third World within” (Schroeder et al. 2006). When the dramatic explosions in Bhopal and Mexico City occurred and the scandals surrounding the issue of international toxic waste dumping broke, the question of commonalities between First and Third World victims of environmental injustice came very quickly to the fore, and a Third World environmental justice movement was born.

Judging from the evidence the authors in this special issue provide, we conclude that the early problems with toxic dumping in the Third World have, if anything, only intensified in recent years, in part due to the deindustrialization of former manufacturing centers in North America and Europe and relocation of toxic industries in the global south. Neoliberal economic reforms have expanded markets, raising the political and economic stakes in play in environmental justice conflicts across the board. The cultural and wildlife tourism industries have grown exponentially in the past two decades, and sales of commodities such as soybeans, middle-class housing units, and hydroelectric power have expanded dramatically due to the establishment of regional trade agreements and the emergence of modern tastes and desires all across the Third World. In response, the efforts of activists seeking fair treatment for themselves and their families have also intensified. Since the 1980s, countless political actions have been staged by displaced, disenfranchised, and disillusioned workers, peasants, slum dwellers, and minority activists to contest the environmental inequities and injustices they experience on a daily basis. These movements have increasingly joined forces with transnational advocacy groups, which provide them with material and political support for their efforts. In effect, what these articles collectively suggest is that a new environmental formation has taken shape, and that movement organizers have changed their own strategies and tactics accordingly.

We have highlighted here the many ways contributors to this issue have extended and elaborated on the basic concepts of the First World environmental justice movement, including distributive and procedural justice and environmental racism. Reading through the collection, we are struck by the way market forces have reduced environmental justice remedies to unilateral benefit sharing, rather than negotiated settlements centered on notions of fair compensation; by the creation of so many new sites of racial and class privilege, where the environmental costs of maintaining a comfortable lifestyle are blithely passed off onto less powerful communities; and by the forceful insurgencies led by social movement activists working to challenge naturalized landscapes and implicit social orders of inequality on all of these fronts. We have self-consciously deployed an analytical frame centered on the First World/Third World dichotomy, in part because we find that Third World cases throw environmental justice issues into graphic relief in ways that might be less obvious in First World settings. Our basic position, however, is that the core issues at the heart of environmental justice struggles are universal. The same basic spatial logic applies in all instances—some places are defined as dumping grounds and some are “clean”; some livelihoods are deemed expendable and are swept off the land in the name of progress and others are protected via systems of privileged access. In this sense, the case studies presented here should be read not as though they were part of exceptional Third World circumstances, but instead as part of broader patterns of distributive, procedural, and racial injustice that affect us all.
References


