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Special issue: environmental justice and epistemic violence

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Special issue: environmental justice and epistemic violence

Studying environmental justice as a global topic is not a new phenomenon and numerous studies have reviewed environmental justice in the Global South (Zerner 2000; Peluso and Watts 2001; MacDonald 2002; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Anand 2004; Walker and Bulkeley 2006; Schroeder et al. 2008; Vermeulen and Walker 2011). It has been widely argued in environmental justice literature that liberal conceptions of justice, and distributional fairness in particular, have enforced an assimilation of western discourses and practices in the Global South (see e.g. Vermeulen and Walker 2011; Martin, McGuire, and Sullivan 2013). This special issue contributes to this growing field of global and critical environmental justice.

Environmental justice scholars have commented upon the distinctions that can be made between Northern and Southern understanding of environmental injustice (Martinez-Alier 2002; Lawhon 2013). Lawhon observes that the transplantation of a northern environmental justice discourse to the South has hampered a contextualised and localised understanding of the relationship between poverty and environmental injustice. Even though environmental justice has adapted to some extent to local circumstances and has reformulated itself as being adaptable to different geographical contexts, there is still a pressing need to move beyond a northern theoretical understanding of environmental justice (Lawhon 2013).

This problem of a “universal” approach towards environmental justice has been widely demonstrated in the area of conservation efforts in the Global South. Impoverished communities have to present themselves as homogenous communities and adopt “dominant ways of knowing nature and living with nature” in order to improve distributional equity and fairness (Martin, McGuire, and Sullivan 2013, 123). This form of hegemonic power in the liberal discourse of distributive justice reinforces the issue of misrecognition (Young [1990] 2011).

In this special issue, we study environmental justice from a situated and networked context, questioning to what extent environmental justice – as a discourse and praxis – caters for alternative, non-Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies. Authors contributing to this issue mainly do this by analysing environmental justice movements through the critical lens of postcolonial and critical theory.

From a postcolonial perspective, the way justice is being conceptualised, debated and mobilised in the Global South should inform political philosophy (De Sousa Santos 2002, 2014). Authors in this special issue use indigenous decolonial theory (Quijano 2000; Escobar 2007; Mignolo 2011, 2012) as a critical lens to highlight how non-western and non-Cartesian intellectual heritages, epistemologies and ontologies must inform the emancipatory practices that we strive for with global environmental justice. As long as environmental justice is driven by worldviews and knowledge processes from the Global North, environmental justice remains steeped and reproduces feelings of misrecognition. As long as knowledges and worldviews of people in the Global South are cordoned off and not mobilised to inform global political processes and theories, environmental justice may be equated with an act of epistemic violence. The recognition of plural ontologies and epistemologies is a prerequisite for environmental justice to be transformative. “Without alternative knowledges within the same hermeneutic constellation, it is not possible to sustain multicultural pluralism within the same territorial timespace” (Cornell 2014, 17). For example, in Latin America, indigenous justice thoughts and practices have informed much of the decolonial theory developed in the region over the last decades, as well as important recent pluricultural political reforms in many countries.

So the wider question we are addressing in this special issue is how to respect divergent epistemologies and ontologies in a field of study that has its roots in and therefore characterised by universal values and norms. Pluralism is at the heart of justice debates in a globalised context (see e.g. Charles Taylor's work on political theory and multiculturalism and is politics of recognition, 1994) and even John Rawls (1999), to the great surprise of many liberal theorists, acknowledged that the law of the people could not be entrenched in liberal principles (1999). It made him reject the global veil of ignorance precisely because it implicated a liberal representation of personhood and justice (Cornell 2014). But for this special issue and specifically the link we are making with postcolonial and critical theory, we are more interested in Seyla Benhabib's (2006) critique of Rawls' *Law of Peoples* for ignoring the devastation of empire and the horrific realities of colonialism (Cornell 2014, 76). Critical scholars like De Sousa Santos (2002, 2014) and Benhabib (2006) inject much needed ethical considerations into the notions of and relationship between cosmopolitanism and justice.

What we are calling for in this special issue is a *disturbance* from the south in the western ontologies and epistemologies around environmental justice. Responding to Emmanuel Levinas' call for thinking about ontology not as Being in its classical mode (1961, 1974), Rosi Braidotti's ontology of mutations, changes and transformations (2011) might add more panache in the sense of a disturbance than some of the more mainstream global environmental justice literature. We are deliberately seeking to destabilise fixity and inertia of what has become a classical approach of the plurality of justice. We question to what extent environmental justice literature could potentially benefit from being exposed to – in the words of Luce Irigaray – “mechanic of fluids” to tackle head on a phallogocentric logic of masculine self-representation (Irigaray 1985; Braidotti 2011); the latter representing the inertia that has been flagged up in some of the critical global environmental justice literature when critiquing the transportation of western ontologies of justice (see e.g. Williams and Mawdsley 2006; Mehta et al. 2014; Sikor and Newell 2014). Gilles Deleuze phrases this in a non-feminist philosophy as a request to loosen the conceptual ties of philosophy enshrined in reason, logos, the metaphysics of presence and the logic of the Same which translates in a typical Deleuzian manner as an interruption of the molar, the sedentary and the majority (1962, 1968).

Drawing on alternative epistemologies and ontologies, we argue that environmental justice requires a more upfront confrontation with the socio historical causes of oppression brought about by coloniality. Even though colonialism ended with political independence in the Global South, according to decolonial thought, *coloniality* persists through the project of modernity and the expansion of a Eurocentric cultural imaginary, which is institutionalised and disseminated through education, the media, state-sanctioned languages and behavioural norms (Quijano 2000; Escobar 2007; Mignolo 2011, 2012). Thus, *coloniality* is a form of power that creates structural oppression over marginalised sectors of society, such as indigenous peoples, whose alternative worldviews become devalued and stigmatised in Eurocentric modernity discourses and practices. As part of decentring some of the western concepts of environmental justice, the authors of this special issue bring the environmental justice literature into conversation with this idea of *coloniality*.

Through her in-depth engagement with the politics and praxis of the Unist'ot'en Resistance and Action Camp in North-Western British Columbia, Temper engages with the longstanding struggle of the Wet'suwet'en clan to reclaim their ancestral lands. Native title claims have been interpreted as being part of a legal canon that is based on rights-based discourses. The latter often criticised in critical legal studies for confirming hegemonic and colonial practices of dispossession through the violence of the law that excludes and divides indigenous peoples' communities (Vermeylen 2013; 2015; Anker 2014). It is the sovereign nation-state, in its desire to create order, deciding who belongs and who is excluded, what is perceived to be law and lawlessness; and ultimately, it is the sovereign nation-state that distinguishes between a legitimate “product” and waste (Bauman 2004). But Temper shows in this paper, through alternative epistemologies from the South, that an alternative and emancipatory reading of environment, justice and belonging is emerging, decentring rights-based rhetorics with the emerging discourse on responsibilities through her in-depth study of the

Unist'ot'en court case. A discourse she compares and places within the wider context of alternative Southern epistemologies and ontologies around Rights of Nature.

What they show is that “the sharp ends of injustice” arise from a continued expansion and acceleration of modernity, a civilising project that is hegemonic in its Eurocentric view of the world even in postcolonial times.

Hegemonic power and conflict are also central points in Hendlin's historical paper on the *Movimiento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST). Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto Laclau, Hendlin shows in his paper that extreme marginalised communities may be impacted negatively by environmental justice claims, as they have not the power to destabilise the persistent violence of some environmental justice claims. He questions the hegemonic power embedded in environmental justice discourses, as they seem to operate as a zero-sum game. As the historical analysis of the MST movement shows, the gain of those with the loudest voice – which are usually the ones with the most power – is the loss of those who are perceived weak in the system. As such Hendlin enriches the notion of plurality showing that even among those who fight jointly for social and environmental recognition, a distinction must be made as not everyone will experience injustice in the same manner or be compensated in an equal manner in environmental justice claims. It is in this diversity of experience that the hegemonic power of environmental justice lurks. Hendlin shows that a critical concept like environmental justice might get problematic when it is getting too entrenched or sedentary in a particular interpretation. It is the moment when it becomes fixed and sedentary with meaning that it can become cannibalised by capital and power (in the traditional Deleuzian and Foucauldian sense). What looked like environmental justice on the surface in the early days of the MST movement was actually perpetrating environmental injustice down the chain, displacing this violence onto indigenous populations.

Zeitoun, Dirar, El Moghraby and Jalal Hashim question the role of the state in relation to the recognition of environmental and social justice within the context of illiberal authoritarian states. Using the Merowe Dam project in Sudan as a case study, Zeitoun *et al* analyses the environmental justice claims of local people who have been displaced and questions to what extent the liberal notions of distributive and procedural justice can still find traction against the background of a “failed” state with a track record of humiliating and committing violence against its own people. They also draw the attention how conceptions of justice change as the struggle for justice develops. The dynamic nature of justice highlights how justice struggles co-evolve over time with the political and economic institutions that create politics of justice. As justice struggles expand, their dynamic nature is exposed and shows how events that unfold as part of the expansion of justice struggles ultimately can create further injustices.

The three papers are proposing two specific interventions. First, unpacking the idea of recognition allows developing a more complex and culturally rich understanding of the plurality of the meaning of environmental justice. Second, focusing on the recognition of non-Eurocentric epistemologies and ontologies also draws the attention to the need to revisit the meaning of misrecognition within the context of a prolonged history of subordination and marginalisation. A good starting point for the latter is to re-assess Iris Marion Young's work on *Justice and the Politics of Difference* ([1990] 2011), including a detailed reading of some of the critical and poststructural literature she is drawing upon. This is done within the context to inject a much needed wider ontological understanding of the philosophies of recognition that inform contemporary political discourses which on their turn influence environmental justice. Often the recognition of cultural difference is approached as a translating process wherein alterity is reduced to the same (Anker 2014).

The irony of recognition is that those who are not recognised by mainstream socio-economic, political and cultural institutions and norms, need to engage with the act of asking for recognition which often reinforces the process of subordination and misrecognition (Anker 2014; Vermeylen 2015; 2013). As Fanon has so aptly argued (1967, 11), systemic misrecognition is a symptomatic disease of the colonial relationship. As exemplified in this special issue, given indigenous peoples' “lack of control over the terms of recognition, [they] may find themselves trapped in a colonial hall of

mirrors that leads to a never-ending cycle of failures of, and thus further need for, recognition” (Anker 2014, 29).

We question in this special issue to what extent a liberal hegemonic discourse of universalism (Motha 1998) has crept into the understanding and meaning of environmental justice. The particularities of the witnessed oppression in the papers of this special issue are airbrushed in moral theory which looks for unity, dispassion and detachment. Impartial reason denies the particularity of situations. As Young ([1990] 2011) argues the most important way that the ideal of impartiality reduces particularity to unity is in reducing the plurality of moral subjects to one subjectivity. Even Rawls (1999), who believes in the plurality of moral subjects, seeks to organise the desire of all persons in one coherent system of desire and thereby to make the principle of choice for a society the same as that for individuals. Impartial reason generates a dichotomy between reason and feeling. But as we know through the work of Levinas (1961, 1974), there are other ways to come to a moral point of view and that is not from a lonely self-regulating reason whereby the focus is not on Being, but from the concrete encounter with others, who demand that their needs, desires, and perspectives be recognised. For Young, the moral reason is dialogical, if we all desire recognition and acknowledgement from the others, then there is no need for a universal point of view to pull people out of egoism. Justice cannot be fixed because it is not a state of affairs but is a movement toward the particularity of the Other, therefore it should be per definition plural, but I depart though from Young’s asymmetrical reciprocity as justice should always involve an *unlimited* responsiveness to and responsibility for the other (Buber 1970; Levinas 1961, 1974; Dussel 1985, 2013).

More than the idea of simple interrelation (or communication as it is often understood in Canada, Europe or the United States), interculturality refers to, and means, an “other” process of knowledge construction, and “other” political practice, and “other” social (and state) power and an “other” society; an “other” way to think and act in relation to, and against, modernity and colonialism. An “other” paradigm that is thought and acted upon, through political praxis. (Walsh 2007, 175–176)

As we have shown in this special issue domination can still be an impulse in environmental justice discourses. According to Vandana Shiva, we are now in the third phase of colonisation and on behalf of transnational corporations:

the white man’s burden is to protect the environment, especially the Third World’s environment – and this, too, involves taking control of rights and resources [...] The salvation of the environment cannot be achieved through the old colonial order based on the white man’s burden. The two are ethically, economically and epistemologically incongruent. (Shiva 2014; 264–265 in Adelman 2015, 16)

Epistemologies need to be overturned that are based on Western rationality and have created monocultures of norms and values. Instead, environmental justice literature can learn from the epistemologies that are born in the struggle against capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Fanon 1967; Dussel 1985; Adelman 2015). But as Mignolo (2011; 2012) argues and as we have shown in this special issue *coloniality* produces decolonial and border thinking, eventually Western rationality may be replaced by intercultural processes based on the ways of being and knowing in the Global South.

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