

Environmental Justice and Climate Change in Latin America

Coordinated by MATTIAS BORG RASMUSSEN and PATRICIA PINHO

Introduction: Environmental Justice and Climate Change in Latin America

by MATTIAS BORG RASMUSSEN | *University of Copenhagen* | mbr@ifro.ku.dk
and PATRICIA F. PINHO | *University of São Paulo* | patricia.pinho@iag.usp.br

Climate change is a growing concern for populations, politics, and science in Latin America. Numerous studies report on the currently observed impacts of climate change. These include receding glaciers, altered patterns of precipitation and hydrological regime (extreme floods and droughts), cold and heat waves, and ocean acidification, affecting both the quality and quantity of water, ecosystems, and other natural resources. There is also considerable concern regarding effects on economic activities, human health, and well-being. Local people, politicians, and scientists also highlight that climate change has an uneven impact.

In part, the uneven impacts of climate change owe to its uneven biophysical manifestations across the globe. While global average temperatures are rising, some places experience cooling. While some see dryer conditions and periods of prolonged droughts, others experience more rainfall and flooding or consecutive events of extreme drought followed by flooding. Thus, it is the increased intensity and frequency of extreme events that are becoming the norm. Much scientific and political energy goes into furthering our understanding of these manifestations. In this context, a climate justice perspective highlights how the uneven distribution of detrimental effects is not simply a biophysical phenomenon but a social and political one, deeply contingent upon social and political conditions. This perspective maintains that climate change impacts do not just “fall from the sky” but are shaped by preexisting socioeconomic and politically contingent vulnerabilities

that are maintained by the current global political economy order of production, consumption, and commerce (Ribot 2010). This perspective is also reflected in the statement on regional aspects by the authors of the 2014 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, “Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerabilities,” saying: “In many [Central and South American] countries, a first step toward adaptation to future climate changes is to reduce the vulnerability to present climate” (Magrin et al. 2014). Such a perspective effectively links the uneven distribution of climate change impacts to the social and political arrangements mediating individual and collective responses. It moreover underlines the need for further study of the ties between environmental and social justice in the context of global climate change.

The linking of academic and activist perspectives holds transformational promise. It is a perspective that integrates biophysical, social, and political causes of vulnerability and suffering. Recognizing this, we aim in this introductory essay to give a brief genealogy of environmental justice as it relates to debates in the United States. We then turn to the specifics of the Latin American context before directing our attention to the articulations between environmental justice and climate change. Finally, we suggest a set of relevant questions for further scrutiny with regards to climate justice as an object of study and a field of inquiry.

Environmental Justice as a Field of Inquiry

Environmental justice highlights the nexus between environmental and social differences (Walker 2012). It is an analytical perspective that emerged out of the civil rights and environmental movements in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. It initially focused on how Native American and black communities suffered disproportionately from the pollution of air and waterways. The Texas-based sociologist Robert Bullard (2000), who is often seen as the father of environmental justice, suggests that “environmental racism” or inequalities have direct expressions in the physical form of environmental harm. While the early environmental justice movement arose from the efforts of local advocacy and rights-based groups, it has also come to constitute an academic field that responds to a diversity of ways in which environmental inequalities arise and are maintained. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency even has an explicit environmental justice agenda and guidelines (<https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>). In other words, these particular concerns voiced by activists and academics have resulted in significant policy change.

Since Bullard’s initial efforts to establish a field of study, the environmental justice framework has been broadened by other scholars to focus on a wide array of environmental “goods and bads,” moving from the extremes of chemical dump sites to conflicting interests in, for instance, urban green spaces where the question

is not so much about the geographies of hazard as the dynamics of exclusion. With this has come an expanding focus that goes beyond spatial distribution to examine procedures of decision making around the environmental phenomena that determine both where the environmental issues are and what form they take. This includes the study of knowledge production about and representations of the environment. It thereby represents a movement toward a more encompassing analytical interest in social differentiation around the environment.

From its early years, environmental justice has been a hybrid, that is, it is a situated, social, and political concept. Growing out of the civil rights movement, the concept has migrated into the worlds of NGOs and academia. It is therefore a discourse for policy making, a social movement for change, and an analytical tool for understanding the uneven distribution of socioenvironmental vulnerabilities related to environmental change.

Its hybrid nature is both a weakness and a strength, which has been discussed at length elsewhere. The partition of environmental justice into discourse, social movement, and scholarly critique reflects parallel and converging intellectual agendas. As a branch of applied philosophy, environmental justice has been tied to ideas of what constitutes social justice. A central figure in that debate has been Nancy Fraser (2008), who suggested a focus on redistribution and recognition, and eventually representation, highlighting that social justice works in different and overlapping domains: how benefits and harm are distributed among a diverse society, how institutionalized forms of affirmative action may or may not ease or exacerbate social inequalities, and how hierarchies be discursively constructed and

thereby naturalized. It also draws attention to procedures and how justice is tightly bound to political inclusion.

Latin American Perspectives

Also in Latin America, environmental justice has become an integrating and mobilizing concept (Carruthers 2008), connecting environmental, social, and ethical dimensions of sustainability and development. In Brazil, social movements since the early 1970s have articulated environmental matters in their claims for land rights as well as access and control over natural resources (Porto 2012). This was mostly stimulated by the Catholic pastoral social movement not only in Brazil but throughout the region. In this context, traditional communities—indigenous, *quilombolas* (African slaves' descendants), and other native people who live from forest gathering, agriculture, and fishing—have been central. These peoples inhabit territories that are disputed by powerful economic groups from the industries of agribusiness, mining, and hydropower.

Environmental justice in Latin America has become a unifying banner of reflection and mobilization. It has drawn together the experience of struggle of diverse individuals, communities, and entities including grassroots movements, traditional populations (indigenous), small farmers and landless workers, environmentalists, and scientists. Historical patterns of social inequality and ethnic discrimination, and environmental conflicts in Latin America are now broadly understood to have a strong relationship with the conditions produced by the region's insertion into the international economy.

Environmental justice works as a critical theoretical framework for

distinct environmental movements in Latin America. This is important when considering the distribution of conflicts arising from economic, social, and ecological phenomena and more recently global environmental change that place the burdens of development impacts on the poorest and most discriminated and excluded areas and populations of the Latin American region. There are promises but also limits of environmental justice in Latin America, both as flagship for popular mobilization and as a set of principles for analysis, interpretation, and policy. In other words, there are many ways by which Latin America's popular movements fuse environmental dimensions into community struggles for social justice, mainly as a means to access and control natural resources and to ensure land rights.

Fields of Action

Within wider environmental justice debates, climate justice is being advanced as a topic of concern. As opposed to the site-specific focus common to much environmental justice scholarship (e.g., the location of waste facilities), climate justice introduces a different scale and need to respond to more elusive cause-effect relations than many other environmental justice issues. Rather than focusing on particular sites and locations of environmental injustice, such as access and control over natural resources, climate justice connects disparate sites across the globe. Climate justice links carbon emissions and global warming to the uneven distribution of harm. Viewed thus, climate change is effectively a political matter, contrary to representations of climate change that portray it as a purely scientific matter.

Both as a field for action and a field for inquiry, climate justice is still maturing. Works such as Naomi Klein's 2014 *This Changes Everything* have further sparked popular attention to the issue, as did the widespread public protests in relation to the different iterations of the Conference of Parties under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In 2014, 300,000 people gathered on the streets of New York for the Peoples Climate March, and the same year, thousands also marched in the streets of Lima for the 2014 COP 20 meeting. This is also true for other parts of Latin America. Similar marches and campaigns have also been seen in different European cities including the capitals of Scandinavian countries, for example the climate action and climate jobs campaigns in the United Kingdom and Norway. Internationally, large environmental NGOs and networks such as Oxfam and 350.org have pushed for an agenda focusing on climate justice. Reparations ("polluter pays"), compensations, technology transfers, and so on are proposed as ways of easing the compounded impacts of industrialization. Local social movements have also appropriated and reshaped discourses on climate and social justice, for example the transition town campaigns aiming at creating sustainable cities, predominantly in the global North (see Transition Network, <https://transitionnetwork.org/>).

Climate justice has also the potential to feed into the long traditions of social movements in Latin America. It connects to a new environmental concern within the region that critiques global capitalism anew. It thereby potentially connects and recontextualizes the critique posed in Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America* (2009) to the Latin American debates about ecological debt from the early 1990s. The global perspective

offered by the broad scientific consensus on the causes of climate change reveals the connections between the patterns of consumption and commerce of the global economy and the unequal share of the environmental burdens. In this way, the climate justice movement has obvious links to the rich Latin American tradition of social mobilizations and capitalist critique. Persisting ecological neocolonialism, built on past patterns of plunder, attain a new environmental dimension as the lifestyle of the North spills directly into processes of environmental change, driving disadvantaged communities to change their lifestyles and livelihoods.

As suggested above, climate change transforms ideas about environmental damage by effectively having the sites of impacts physically and temporally disconnected from the sites of consumption and extraction. The spatial distribution of harm is therefore very different from traditional extraction or waste sites. "Adding insult to injury," as Fraser would point out, climate justice debates reveal the intersections between the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens, the global hierarchies of cultural politics, and the continued exclusions from political processes. It is also worth remembering that the burdens of climate change are unequally shared not only among nations of the global South and the global North, but as important, among the different socioeconomic strata of these societies, which are among the most unequal on the planet. The climate justice debate has demonstrated that climate vulnerability is not about North-South only but just as much about a small global elite whose consumption patterns drive processes that harm them but who are relatively well sheltered by their wealth. By contrast, the large poor majority that contributes only

very little to the furthering of the harms are those who suffer most.

Climate justice connects environmental concerns to a critique of global capitalism. Whether we look at climate justice as a discourse, a social movement, or as uneven impacts, we are forced to consider the links between deeper patterns of production and the lifestyle of affluent elites in both the North and the South, and the distribution of climate-induced vulnerabilities. In 2010, representatives from governments from the South, civil society, and large environmental NGOs met in Cochabamba at The Worlds People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. A central outcome of that encounter was a statement that expresses a profound critique of the capitalist world order. Not unlike Klein, this calls for fundamental changes in the global political economy. While this is expressed in the social movements and NGO networks of climate justice within Latin America, the case studies on impacts and adaptation display the articulation of a different set of concerns that are much more grounded in quotidian dynamics of making do and getting by.

Frames of Interrogation

Environmental justice frameworks focus on distributive justice, procedural justice, justice of recognition, and capabilities. When thinking about climate justice, it can be helpful to direct our attention to four empirical and interrelated areas for interrogation that address spaces for understanding problems and spaces that may produce positive changes. First, impacts and adaptations provide an analysis of the different ways in which global climate change become rooted in particular places. While climate change is a global phenomenon, it is always

located somewhere, aptly demonstrating that climate manifests itself locally in diverse and unequal ways. Second, we are concerned with the complex relationships between environmental issues and climate change. Processes of land degradation through deforestation or desertification, for example, may be driven by logging concessions or agro-industries, but these effects can be exacerbated by changing climatic patterns. Similarly, extractive industries and small-scale mining, both intensive in water use, incur further water stress. Thus environment degradation and climate change are compound phenomena with multiple, ambiguous, and interrelated drivers. Third, we are interested in how climate change is mobilized in social struggles for justice. This is linked to the rich scholarly tradition on social movements and emphasizes how ideas about justice are mobilized to confront the adverse effects of global climate change. This is particularly relevant in the Latin American contexts of *vivir bien*. Last, we are interested in frameworks for action and how a focus on the uneven distribution of burdens and benefits may serve climate justice advocacies seeking to improve the living conditions of marginalized populations. Thereby aiming at understanding the potentials of a climate justice approach to environmental degradation and conflict in Latin America, we pose the following questions:

What contrasting expressions of climate justice exist? How is climate justice defined and articulated by different actors, and what are the results of these in the policy domain? How are the big NGOs pushing for a climate justice framework? How are ideas about climate justice linked to other issues of social justice and environmental degradation? To what extent does the attention to climate justice seep into other spheres of these highly segregated societies?

How is climate justice useful as an analytical approach to understanding the entwinement of social and environmental difference in Latin America?

The intimate relationship between environment and social difference calls attention to questions of equity and justice, or conversely, to the uneven distribution of harm and benefits and the production and maintenance (and sometimes, contestation) of injustices. Bullard's environmental racism attains a neocolonial attire within the global political economy. Whether focusing on distribution, inclusion, or procedure, questions of rights and the historical responsibility become linked to the production of uneven geographies of environmental degradation and social development. As such, they display obvious continuities between climate justice scholarship and engaged political ecology, science and technology studies, cultural studies, and environmental history.

This collection seeks to explore the potentially fertile grounds for cross-pollination between such established disciplinary traditions and the nascent analytical and empirical focus on climate justice in Latin America. We have divided this debate section in two parts: one that takes an environmental justice approach to understanding the impacts of climate change in terms of vulnerability and adaptation, and one that specifically addresses the local articulation of climate justice/injustice. Highlighting recent linkages between social movements working also outside the region, Astrid Ulloa suggests that the inequalities related to gender and ethnicity must come to the fore in analysis of climate justice. Elma Montaña and Paula Mussetta make a case for vulnerability-focused analysis for understanding uneven distribution of environmental harm. Working out of the

Brazilian Amazon, Patricia Pinho shows how representations of the region as an empty space critically shape the possible policy interventions. Astrid Stensrud turns our attention to the Peruvian Andes and the production of water scarcity at the intersections between climate change and water governance regimes. For the case of Bolivia, Nicole Fabricant and Kathryn Hicks document recent developments of the Climate Justice Platform, a grassroots initiative voicing concerns over the impacts of climate change. Finally, Jorge Daniel Taillant and Peter Collins chronicle the work towards creating a policy framework for glacier protection in Argentina, showing how this not only concerns fragile and vital ecosystems but also human well-being.

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