Geographies of Environmental Justice

The concept of environmental justice, from its earliest emergence in the civil rights politics of the United States, has always been intensely geographical. The legal and political contestation of proposals to site polluting and toxic facilities in predominantly poor and black communities, which formed the central political mobilisation of the US environmental justice movement, focused on questions of distribution, inequality and injustice which resonate with long standing traditions of geographical enquiry and analysis. The body of US based literature on environmental justice contains substantial contributions by geographers, including multiple empirical studies of patterns of location of industrial and waste sites, historical research on processes of co-evolution of urban and industrial development, and analysis of environmental justice activism in general and in particular settings. Not surprisingly much of this work has been framed by the particularities of environmental justice in the US. Whilst there are significant exceptions, attention has predominantly been given to the socio-spatial distribution of pollution and 'toxicity' within US national borders, to the politics of race and civil rights, and to policy responses to accusations of environmental racism in facility siting.

However, the terminology of environmental justice has now travelled beyond the US and the sites of grassroots activism within which it originated. Whilst retaining its potency in relation to grassroots and everyday struggles against injustice at multiple political sites (Dunion and Scandrett 2003; Schlosberg 2004), this 'fast conceptual transfer' (Debbane and Keil 2004: 209) has taken place mainly within political and academic elites. Principles of environmental justice have as a consequence begun to feature within policy rhetoric and the work of mainstream institutions operating in varied places and at different scales of governance. For example, in the UK environmental justice (or, frequently 'environmental inequality' or 'environment and social justice', the terminological significance of which may serve do particular political work in terms of what is included in the politics of justice and the environment) has been included in the strategic priorities of the main environmental regulatory agency, the Environment Agency (Chalmers and Colvin 2005), and features repeatedly within the new national strategy for sustainable development, *Securing the Future* (DEFRA 2005). In South Africa, principles of environmental

justice have been bought into the mainstream through their inclusion in the Constitution (Patel, this volume), and within the negotiations and documentation of multilateral environmental agreements, principles of equity and justice frequently surface (Okereke, this volume).

In breaking away from its origins and initial framing in the US, the concept of environmental justice is evolving to become broader in scope and more encompassing in the sites, forms and processes of injustice it is concerned with. In becoming more globalised, the environmental justice agenda is extending into questions of distribution both between and across nation-states (Stephens et al 2001; Newell 2005), and into very different political, cultural and economic environments (Ageyman et al, 2003). Justice 'to whom' is being cast in more inclusive terms to include, for example, differences of gender, age and the rights of future generations (Buckingham-Hatfield et al 2005; Dobson 1998). Notions of the environment have similarly broadened to include access to environmental goods and resources such as water, energy and greenspace (Lucas et al 2004, Heynen 2003) and the threat of 'natural' as well as technologically produced risks, interfacing here with 'vulnerability' literatures (Walker et al 2006; Adger et al. 2003; Pelling 2005)

Whilst opening up new pathways for activism, academic analysis, and institutional intervention, a dynamic and expansive environmental justice agenda also raises many challenges. This special issue of *Geoforum* considers such challenges and their implications by explicitly focusing on arenas within which environmental justice has to date been relatively unexplored. First presented at a session on environmental justice organised by the Planning and Environment Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers at the International Geographical Congress, held in Glasgow in August 2004[1], the papers demonstrate the resurgence of critical concern with issues of environmental justice, and broader issues of (in)justice and (in)equality, within the geographical imagination. In exploring the varied geographies of environmental justice, the papers take on board the need to examine the evolution and application of the concept outside of the narrow confines of the US, and beyond western liberal notions of environment and justice. To this end,

[1] Other papers from the conference session concerned specifically with the UK context have been published in *Local Environment: the International Journal for Justice and Sustainability*, 10 (4).

each of the papers is seeking a critical engagement with the use of an environmental justice framework. They do so in different post-colonial political and cultural contexts - India, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, Singapore - and at different scales of articulation extending from the particular local case, through to institutions of international environmental governance.

In setting the scene for these discussions, in the remainder of this editorial we consider three particular challenges for the development of (geographical) research on environmental justice: first, how questions of terminology, meaning and definition may be addressed; second, the connections between environmental justice and sustainability; and finally, how notions of environmental justice must confront issues of multiplicity and diversity.

Environmental justice and inequality

Despite the long history of theoretical discussion over the term justice and all that it implies, the notion of environmental justice, in part reflecting its roots in a social movement, has been subject to less intensive interrogation and definitional precision. The way in which the notion of environmental justice has been deployed has been more as an instinctive gut reaction than as a closely argued concept. There are, of course, some extensive and rigorous treatments (e.g. Dobson 1998; Low and Gleeson 1998), but in the main the impulse has been to call for environmental justice as a response to perceived *in*justice, as judged through observations of unreasonable inequality in outcome and lack of 'fair treatment' for, in particular, people and social groups that are already marginalised and disadvantaged.

Given that there are some shared, common sense understandings of environmental injustice/justice, further conceptual deliberation and clarification may not be all that useful. On the other hand, as the concept breaks free from its initial moorings and is at once translated into other political sites of intervention and taken up within mainstream political institutions, exploring critically its varied meanings and keeping hold of a (radical) sense of justice may be important.

Several of the papers in this issue take some time to consider the meaning of justice in an environmental context, demonstrating the complexities and diversity of perspectives that can be adopted and recruited for strategic purposes. It we take the idea of environmental justice as equality the "familiar and crucial practical question … equality of what is raised. Should it be opportunities (after liberal convention), primary goods (after Rawls), resources (after Dworkin), capabilities (after Sen) or welfare outcomes?" (Smith 2000: 6). In the main, much of the attention initially given to environmental justice adopted a consequential focus on (in)equality of outcomes, that is of the distribution of environmental risks (Schlosberg 2004). There are, however, concerns about a language of justice based on the premise of distributional equality. First, in relation to environmental risks, this logically could be addressed by the even sharing of environmental burdens rather than by addressing any of the route causes of environmental problems (Dobson, 1998). Second, given that much of the environment, when broadly defined, is inherently and sometimes uniquely distributed into particular places and cannot sensibly be experienced equally or uniformly, it can become positively perverse to be seeking its 'even' distribution (whatever that might mean). In this sense, an unequal distribution of environmental goods or bads by itself may not necessarily be unjust (Walker et al 2005a) – it is rather the 'fairness' of the processes through which the distribution has occurred and the possibilities which individuals and communities have to avoid or ameliorate risk, or to access environmental resources, which are important. In part for these reasons, both within movements for environmental justice and in academic discourse, alternative notions of justice have been deployed, in terms of both 'recognition' (Schlosberg 2004) and participation in the processes through which decisions about exposure to risks and access to resources take place.

There is much to be debated here, but, we would argue, no necessity to pursue an agenda of absolute definitional precision and commonality of perspective. Whilst Ikeme (2003; 195) appeals for conceptual clarity and a 'unifying framework', the ethical and ideological character of justice theory can only serve to maintain plurality and alternative perspectives are likely to be more or less appropriate to different practical and analytical contexts (there are further tensions here between universal notions of justice/rights and justice worked out on the ground in particular places; see below). Furthermore, the term 'equity', rather unhelpfully, too easily slips in its use

between the descriptive sense of inequality, and the normative sense of justice, providing a further complication for the search for clarity in language and meaning.

The papers in this volume ably demonstrate the need to conceive environmental justice as a 'broad church' within which different notions of justice are encompassed. Williams and Mawdsly and Davies emphasise process dimensions, considering the ways in which groups are able to articulate and practise environmental justice activism and take forward agendas, which in turn raise questions of distribution, access and recognition. Hobson, argues that a performative approach can provide an alternative way of viewing environmental justice and its role in everyday political struggles. Patel and Okereke both focus on institutions and the ways in which the egalitarian notions of justice in sustainable development are worked out in practice and constrained in turn by technocratic approaches and a neoliberal emphasis on market efficiency. Hillman suggests that alongside any treatment of the distributional and procedural aspects of environmental justice, due consideration must also be given to *ecological* justice – in the form of relationships between the social and natural worlds (Low and Gleeson 1998) – and to the ways in which the 'environment' is defined in particular social and historical contexts. Not only are multiple dimensions of environment and justice invoked across the papers, but their persistent entanglement suggests that outside the realms of abstract conceptual debate, separating out the multiple dimensions of justice and environment may both be futile and of only limited value.

Environmental justice and sustainability

In making a journey from its initial conceptualisation, environmental justice has more directly entered the intellectual and policy territory of sustainable development raising questions of interrelationship and relative utility (Ageyman and Evans 2004). Given that sustainable development provides *the* meta-narrative for environmental concerns it is necessary to ask if the environmental justice vocabulary and analytical lens adds anything useful to what is already in place. Is this just a new unhelpful, branding which begins to take apart the integrative discourse and values of sustainable development? Two key issues are illuminating here. First, whether concepts of justice

and equity are reconcilable between the two sets of discourses.[2] Second, how notions of environmental justice seek to engage with the traditional model of sustainable development as a means through which to engage economic, social and environmental concerns simultaneously.

If we look back to the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987) as the primary source of conceptualisation of sustainable development, notions of equity and justice are fundamental. The focus on meeting the needs of current and future generations both centres on current inequalities in the meeting of basic needs and establishes the pursuit of intra and intergenerational equity as key dimensions of future progress towards sustainability. If the ability to live in an environment which meets reasonable standards of quality and tolerable levels of environmental risk is included as a basic need, and one which the Brundtland Report argues is intrinsically necessary for meeting other social needs, then addressing these environmental needs and pursuing environmental justice is manifestly encompassed within, if not central to, the broader framing of sustainable development.

In practice, however, from the very earliest stages of implementation, translation and re-presentation of the notion of sustainable development, there have been criticisms that equity and justice issues have been downplayed. Nowhere is this perhaps more apparent than in the continuing tensions over responsibilities and equitable approaches to addressing international environmental problems, such as climate change (Okereke, this volume). 'Weak' forms of sustainability have been criticised as casting environmental protection in economic terms, whilst 'strong' forms of sustainability have been seen to neglect the impacts that moves to sustain critical environmental capital might have on social equity. In this way, the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability have tended to be separately pursued, neglecting their interactions and attendant equity and justice implications (Patel, this volume). When set alongside the failure of environmental movements to engage with how environmental quality is being experienced by marginalised communities at a 'doorstep' level; the possibility that the new participatory and deliberative agenda of environmental decision-making may be serving to exclude some 'public' voices

[2] Within the sustainable development discourse the term equity is typically used rather than justice but, as noted above, without a clear definitional distinction

whilst privileging others; and the failure of policy appraisal and impact assessment tools to consider how environmental change may be socially distributed (Walker et al 2005b), it is hard to argue that all of the many concerns that there might be about how the environment is regressively socially distributed, the fairness of decision-making procedures and the negative social consequences of environmental policy, have been adequately given voice, researched and addressed within the 20-year discourse of sustainable development.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to view environmental justice as simply plugging this gap. While the discourses and mobilisations of environmental justice provide the political space to consider the 'socio-environmental' aspects of sustainability, including, for example, issues of fuel poverty, graffiti and vandalism in the UK (Lucas et al 2004), or the differentials of water use and water culture in South Africa (Debbane and Keil 2004: 222), the agenda is both more far-reaching and more fundamental. Rather than being only concerned with the surface manifestations of environmental injustice, as a political programme environmental justice is concerned with the underlying causes and dynamics of inequities at different scales. Thus, in the context of the urban, for example, 'there is no such thing as an unsustainable city in general. Rather, there are a series of urban and environmental processes that negatively effect some social groups while benefiting others' (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003:901). In seeking to understand the causes and consequences of environmental inequities, and the ways in which they can be addressed, we necessarily confront the relations between the economy, society and the state (Newell 2005). Rather than providing a further prop to existing notions of sustainable development, in these ways, environmental justice may bring enable new critical engagements with the relations between economy, environment and society, and illuminate the radical potential of sustainability. As Debbane and Keil (2004:222) argue *'we must remind ourselves of the perhaps most important single aspect of the global, multiscale environmental justice movement in its various incarnations: its function to provide a safeguard against the depoliticisation of environmental politics.'*

In this light, we would argue that the addition of environmental justice as 'a vocabulary of political opportunity' (Agyeman and Evans, 2004), and a new framing for research and policy attention in which equity is brought to the foreground, is both

welcome and necessary. However, it is critical to ensure that as notions of environmental justice enter into mainstream discourses, the elasticity of the concept does not mean that it is reduced to the (relatively) comfortable assessment of how local, visible manifestations of social justice problems can be 'cleaned up' and how environmental law can be more strictly enforced (both of which have been evident in governmental interpretations in the UK). Rather, in refocusing attention on equity and inequity within sustainable development, environmental justice has the potential to provide a productive intellectual and policy space for multidimensional and multi-scalar exploration of its many meanings, manifestations and implications.

Environmental justice, multiplicity and diversity

Recognition of the plurality of the meanings and principles of environmental justice poses a further challenge to those who seek to identify a set of universal principles of justice and sustainability. For some, 'notions of justice and notions of movements linked to justice struggles are highly diverse and can not be measured or expressed in universal terms' (Debbane and Keil 2004: 209). For others, the acceptance of different concepts of justice leads to the kind of relativism which makes any notion of justice in the first instance meaningless (Low and Gleeson 1998). Schlosberg (2004) suggests that an alternative is possible. In recognising the importance of context in shaping struggles for environmental justice, it is argued that by confronting the underlying logics of inequity through multiple sites, a unified, if not uniform, environmental justice movement can be forged (Schlosberg 2004: 534). The papers in this volume, by taking seriously the difference that different contexts make in shaping discourses and practices of environmental inequities, provide insights into the tensions between universal and particular notions of environmental justice, while Willams and Mawdsley (this volume) explicitly consider the validity of Scholsberg's arguments for engaging with environmental justice in a post-colonial context.

At the same time, engaging with *environmental* justice poses significant material challenges for those seeking equity in access to resources and in protection from harm. Where the 'environment of justice' – be it access to clean air, to water, productive land and so on – is subject to change, assessing what constitutes just access and just protection carries additional conceptual and practical challenges

(Hillman, this volume). Given that arguments for environmental justice extend across spatial and temporal scales, and the complexities of the environmental systems within which justice is sought, uncertainties about future environmental goods and bads provide another critical issue with which concepts and policies of environmental justice have to engage (Hillman, this volume, Okereke, this volume).

There are also local contingencies in the conditions under which environmental justice arguments are and can be evoked within strategies of resistance and activism. Davies (this volume) contrasts the lack of environmental justice discourse in the case of protests against the siting of an incinerator in Ireland, with the political opportunities this *could* provide in the future through the deployment of scaling-up opportunities, linking with other social justice movements and exploiting the rights now enshrined within the Aarhus convention. In the context of the distinctive capitalist state of Singapore, Hobson (this volume) argues that environmental justice is implicit and performative in the enactment of environmental care and in micro-struggles over the meanings and uses of space, despite the absence of liberal democratic institutions and formal opportunities for political activism. In India Williams and Mawdsley (this volume) emphasise various ways in which the postcolonial experience shapes and constrains opportunities for pursuing a western model of environmental justice. They argue that the western model becomes particularly problematic in its faith in a deliberative democracy that will be inclusive and afford recognition to all and in the expectation that state action to manage the environment will be both effective and applied in non-discriminatory ways. They more generally conclude from their analysis that “regardless of the theoretical lens through which concepts of injustice are viewed … a close examination of differences in the context in which struggles for environmental justice are located is required”

This conclusion pervades each of the papers in this volume and provides an important intervention in the sometimes too easy movement of ideas, approaches and concepts between places and contexts. It is also a timely reminder of the need to consider geography in all of its dimensions in the deployment of an environmental justice discourse and frame of analysis.

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