

# Transforming knowledge creation for environmental and epistemic justice

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Environmental Justice is both a field of study and a social movement. This dialectical relationship between theory and praxis constitutes the basis of its empirical and theoretical richness. However, there is a persistent divide between theorist and activist approaches to Environmental Justice that needs to be abridged. This paper explains how through co-design we delved into the transformative potential of EJ research with and for social movements and aimed to unearth some of the tensions and colliding epistemologies inherent in co-production of knowledge. Activities included workshops and consultations, visioning through appreciative enquiry, a pro-action café, and an online survey. We conclude that co-design can help inform more just, inclusive and socially relevant scholarship, however we caution that the needed transformation in knowledge production and the dismantling of hierarchies remains an unfinished process that calls for ongoing attention to power dynamics and ‘care-full’ scholarship.

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## Introduction: The expansion, globalization and radicalization of EJ

‘Environmental justice’ as both a social movement and a research subject serves as an important lens to critically analyze political and environmental transformations in a mutually informing dialogue between theory and practice [1]. Environmental Justice, hereafter EJ, has increasingly taken on a trans-national and trans-disciplinary character [2<sup>•</sup>,3], serving as a meeting point, a dialogue and forum for action-research among a growing network of activists, scholars, and non-governmental organizations, in what

may be termed a ‘global brand of environmental justice’ [4,82].

Early EJ scholarship in the 80s in the US sought to support the claims of activists by demonstrating empirically how minority communities suffered disproportionately from environmental hazards [5,6] and expose the link between pollution, race and poverty. Further work has drawn attention to inequalities across gender and class [7,8], using ethnographic research but also statistical methods [9], and recently, increasingly sophisticated spatial methodologies [10,11].

Over the years, EJ theory has expanded through both academic work [12–14] and activist campaigns, and now serves as a crucial rallying ground for social activism and political resistance. It has been reformulated in new regions, including Brazil [15], South Africa [16], Scotland [17], etc. and now encompasses a range of issues from opposition to dams [18], mining [19,20], trade agreements [21], land grabbing and finance [22], water [23], food [24], transfers of wastes [25,26], climate change [27,28<sup>••</sup>], the Rights of Nature [12,13], among others.

Across these struggles, the concept of justice provides local communities and their allies with an important vocabulary in their resistance against dispossession [29<sup>•</sup>]. Meanwhile vocabularies and theories of justice conceived of and commonly used in activists’ campaigns have been transferred onto the academic research agenda through two-way knowledge exchange and uptake of ideas [28<sup>••</sup>,30–32].

Academics increasingly grapple with the plural dimensions of justice applied to environmental issues, often turning to political philosophy [2,33,34] to highlight multiple dimensions (such as distribution, participation and recognition), temporal and spatial scales, and the plurality of justice norms across diverse cultural, social and environmental contexts [35]. For example, EJ regarding Indigenous peoples [36] includes claims to sovereignty and questioning of liberal notions of collective action and citizenship [37]. It takes into account how mainstream measures of health can be at odds with indigenous perspectives by overlooking impacts such as the loss of sacred resources, culturally significant plants and animals; and communal health and spiritual well-being [38]. This has led to a call for the concept of environmental reproductive justice to be further developed in environmental health research [39].

What can be observed is that social struggles, as well as social sciences, are both becoming increasingly ‘environmentalized’ [15,40]. We understand this as a result of the expansion of the extraction frontiers whereby the limits of the biophysical contradictions of capitalism are increasingly revealing themselves. As Bellamy Foster notes, ‘the struggle for material welfare is increasingly taking on a wider more holistic environmental context’, positioning the ‘*struggle over the interrelationship of race, class, gender and imperial oppression and the degradation of the environment as the defining feature of the 20th century*’ [41].

This ‘ecological turn’ in a global sense, contradicts critiques of EJ struggles as ‘militant particularities’ [42] and NIMBYs [43]. Rather, we argue that the globalization of EJ issues invites three key reflections. First, EJ is leading to a much more relational understanding of how we are connected, including on an intergenerational dimension (see literature on ecological debt for example [44,45], and how processes at one scale impact those at much larger scales [46]. EJ calls for new solidarities and alliances, for example with labour movements [47,48,49], ecofeminists [50], urban activists [51] and with those who struggle over green spaces and gentrification [52].

Second, a globalizing EJ unveils the structural and political dimension of environmental problems that cannot be solved apart from social and economic justice [53]. Only a transformative approach and the restructuring of dominant economic models, social relations and institutional arrangements can address social, political, economic and environmental inequities. This approach disavows the potential of the ‘green economy’ [54], pointing to the need for attention to multiple values, sustainability and power in environmental governance [55–57].

Lastly, we note that EJ is developing a new understanding of the environment beyond the ‘place where we live, work and play’ [58] to encompass a multidimensional materiality based on a consciousness of the innate interconnection of existence on Earth and concomitant power relations. The multiple examples of joint struggles, campaigns, alternative proposals described by Martinez-Alier *et al.* [29] are evidence of such a “theory in practice”.

### Towards transformative environmental justice

The current challenge facing the EJ movement is to balance its successes at opposing hazardous technologies and unsustainable development with a coherent vision, policy proposals and ‘transformative remedies’ that can reshape the political-economic structure behind injustices [59]. To this end, insightful links and commonalities can be found between EJ and other counter-hegemonic visions of the economy and society, such as the commons, degrowth, plenitude, and discourses from the Latin American tradition like *sumak kawsay* [60,83]. Kothari has

proposed the concept of Radical Ecological Democracy, identifying five key pillars including ecological sustainability, social well-being, economic democracy, political democracy and respect for cultural and knowledge diversity as necessary components of a true transformation [61,62]. A unification and synthesis of such transformative visions within their ecological dimensions will significantly enrich EJ theory in the near future.

Another body of work examines strategies to enhance the emancipatory potential of existing instruments, policies and institutions to defend environmental and human rights, and suggests new ones [63]. Legalistic conceptions of justice based on a human rights approach are necessary but insufficient and need to be complemented by other approaches. As Gonzales argues, when human rights are incorporated into international legal instruments and institutions, they become embedded in structures that may constrain their transformative potential and reproduce North-South power imbalances [64]. Granting rights to nature, while discursively powerful, still calls for someone to defend those rights [12,13].

### Seeking epistemic justice

A further question is what form of knowledge creation can inform the needed transformation?

Conflicts over the environment are epistemic struggles wherein other forms of the political, other economies, other knowledges are produced and theorized and hegemonic worldviews are questioned and reformulated. EJ activists have thus made the case for increased participation in research and decision-making and a change in how environmental science is conducted [1,65].

As a ‘citizen science’, EJ activists engage in a range of strategies, termed ‘knowledge practices’ [66]. Examples include the co-production of alternative data on health impacts to challenge the manufactured uncertainty produced by the state or companies [67,68]. Through these processes, impacted communities transform from ‘vulnerable’ to collective subjects, bringing about an innovative sense of political participation and re-energizing political imaginaries [69]. It can be said that this dialectical relationship between EJ theory and praxis constitutes the basis of its empirical and theoretical richness as well as its demonstrated impact beyond the academy.

Recognizing the role of social movements, not as objects to be studied, yet as creators of knowledge, calls for the blurring of established scientific boundaries to promote a more relational-symmetrical approach [66]. Recognition of the knowledge capacity generated through EJ struggles brings attention to the need for epistemic or cognitive justice [70]. This may involve taking a step back from questions such as ‘how to feed or provide energy for the world?’ to understanding of diverse meanings of energy,

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