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Reversing the arrow of arrears: The concept of "ecological debt" and its value for environmental justice

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ABSTRACT

The ecological debt concept emerged in the early 1990s from within social movements driven by rising environmental awareness, emerging Western consciousness of responsibility for past colonial subjugations, and a general sense of unease during the debt crisis. First developed organically, mainly in locally-scaled, civil contexts, ecological debt has since gained attention in academia and international environmental negotiations. Now, the concept of ecological debt requires further elucidation and elaboration, especially in light of its historical interconnection with environmental justice. In this paper, the development of the concept of ecological debt in both activist and academic circles is described, proposed theoretical building blocks for its operationalization are discussed and three brief cases illustrating its recent utilization are presented. Ecological debt is built upon a theoretical foundation that draws on biophysical accounting systems, ecological economics, environmental justice and human rights, historical injustices and restitution, and an ecologically-oriented world-system analysis framework. Drawing on these building blocks, the concept of ecological debt has been used as a biophysical measure, a legal instrument and a distributional principle. In theory and in practice, it has much to offer the environmental justice movement. We conclude by reflecting on some of the pros and cons of the ecological debt concept as a tool to be used in fulfilling some of the goals of environmental justice movements in the world today.

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1. Introduction

Two reports on ecological debt—Deuda ecológica (Robleto and Marcelo, 1992) and Miljöskulden (Jernelöv, 1992)—were published in 1992. The authors of these reports, from Chile and Sweden, respectively, were likely unaware of one another, and their reports are quite different in both approach and content. Robleto and Marcelo's report, reflecting ongoing debates on ecological debt that had started in Latin America in the late 1980s (Gudynas, 2008), was meant as a critical interjection into negotiations at the Earth Summit in Rio. Presenting the concept specifically in the context of ozone depletion and resulting health costs in Southern Chile, ecological debt was no less generalized in the report as "the vital heritage of nature... that has been consumed and not returned to it" (our translation). Jernelöv's report, on the other hand, the title of which can be translated as The Environmental Debt, was written for the Swedish Environmental Advisory Council and largely intended for a national audience. A first calculation of Sweden's liabilities to future generations, ecological debt was defined in the report as "the restoration costs for techno-economic environmental harms and the capital required to pay for recurring repair efforts" (our translation). While Robleto and Marcelo's report is often identified as having been seminal in campaigns calling for the recognition of ecological debt, Jernelöv's report has had little international significance, though it is still occasionally referred to in Swedish research on sustainability.

The point in mentioning these reports together in introduction to this paper is that they well-illustrate the breadth of debate over the past twenty and more years on topics having to do with the ecological debt concept. This breadth has led to a seemingly endless (and ever-increasing) number of as yet unanswered questions, especially in reckoning the as yet too-little examined interconnections between ecological debt and environmental justice, which are congruent but have, as we understand them, quite distinctive origins, scopes and meanings. Environmental justice is the broader concept, focusing more generally on the unequal distribution of ecological burdens and benefits. It has its

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origin in struggles against the dumping of toxic waste in minority (mainly African–American) communities in the US in the early 1980s, and was therefore originally aligned closely with environmental racism. Since that time, environmental justice has spread beyond the US contexts of its origin and is now widely used by activists and academics alike to call attention to how the distribution of ecological burdens follows general patterns of power distributions (for a recent overview, see Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). Ecological debt, on the other hand (and as focused on in this paper), is more often used as an indicator of the cumulative, or net sum, of historical environmental injustices. Although not a defining condition of its usage, it primarily focuses on historical geographical inequalities, as between specific countries or more generally between the global North and South. Environmental justice can also be geographically oriented but is more likely to focus on categories such as race, gender or class.

A more meticulous reckoning of these different but interconnected concepts is crucial, as these interconnections have in the modern period considerably shaped how the concepts of debt and justice have contributed to and in turn been further shaped by our individual experiences of the increasingly dire socio-ecological conditions we all now face regardless of our place on the planet. The primary aim of this paper then is to provide just such a reckoning. It does so in four sections. The first section presents an overview of the development of the concept of environmental debt, while the second provides a glimpse at the current state of both activist and academic knowledge in terms of each type's claims for the concept. In the third section, three cases in which the concept has been or could be utilized effectively—as a biophysical measure, as a legal tool, and as a distributional principle—are presented. Finally, some pros and cons of using the ecological debt concept as a tool for fulfilling the goal of environmental justice are discussed in conclusion in Section 4.

2. Historical overview of the concept of ecological debt

2.1. 1992: the cradle of a concept

In the early 1990s, with the convergence of three important historical drivers—rising environmental awareness, emerging consciousness among Western peoples of responsibility for past colonial subjugations, and a general sense of unease during the debt crisis—the concept of ecological debt was in the air. The 1992 Rio Earth Summit garnered a lot of media attention for environmental and development issues, which in turn led for the first time to the mobilization of broad civil society on such issues. The early 1990s also saw the culmination of various socio-political struggles at different scales that had first emerged in the 1960s. By the time of Rio, for example, many nations had already acknowledged the impacts of emerging environmental issues and had begun to take seldom before imagined possible state-level measures to address them.

The best known outcomes of the Rio conference are the environmental conventions on climate change, biodiversity and desertification. Less well-remembered from the meeting is that NGOs and grassroots organizations also adopted a number of treaties of their own. Particularly relevant for this paper was the adoption of the Debt Treaty (1992), which stated that the "planetary ecological debt of the North... is essentially constituted by economic and trade relations based on the indiscriminate exploitation of resources, and its ecological impacts, including global environmental deterioration, most of which is the responsibility of the North." The treaty also demanded that pressure be put "on international organizations for the establishment, by the end of 1995, of a system of accounting of planet Earth in order to quantify the cumulative debt of the Northern countries which results from the resources they have levied and the destruction and waste produced in the course of the last 500 years."

To be sure, the irony of 1992, which marked the 500-year anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas by Columbus, was not lost on the framers of the treaty. While Columbus' landing in what would come to be known as the West Indies was celebrated by some at the conference as auspicious in the shaping of the modern world, others chose instead to commemorate the victims of a half millennia of colonialism and oppression, of so many centuries of plunder and resource extraction in historical accrual by the Western architects of the modern state system of an as yet unpaid ecological debt.

The early 1990s not only gave rise to such remembrances, however, but also to growing acknowledgement of the persistence of such oppressions, especially with the focus in the early 90s on the debt crisis that had by then all but consumed the global South. Briefly, international bankers in the 1970s, searching for lucrative capital investments after the stagnation of oil-shocked industrialized state economies, began to offer cheap loans to developing countries, whose governments borrowed heavily (George, 1988). Responding to this industrial stagnation and concerned about rising inflation, however, U.S. Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker resolved early in Reagan's first term to shift from Keynesian to monetarist policies in an effort to break this stagflationary impasse. Although Volcker's move, which steeply raised the federal funds rate from an average of 11.9% in 1979 to 20% in 1981, did succeed in controlling inflation, at the same time it put heavily indebted third world countries in an impossible situation in regard to debt repayment.

Faced with default, countries saddled with these heavy external debts found themselves at the mercy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which set conditions for bail-out or further funding that mandated "structural adjustments" to liberalize national economies and governance structures. Such adjustments, which led to the global demise of the Keynesian state as a governance framework, included massive cuts in public expenditures, removal of state price controls and subsidies, comprehensive privatizations of state-owned companies, currency devaluations and trade liberalization. Across the global South, the direct result was the rise of grave social consequences, from reductions in health and education spending, to growing malnutrition, to dispossessions of land and tenure rights, and so on. As standard practice, these adjustment programmes also tellingly forced developing countries to refocus their economic activities on increasing exports of primary products, mainly through intensified resource extractions.

By the early 1990s, the ecological and social degradations that had at that point already resulted from such mandated intensifications lent even further authority to the emergence of ecological debt as a concept that could account for ongoing injustices levied on the peoples of the global South. Recognizing the place of this contemporary injustice within a trajectory of history, one key paragraph of the 1992 Debt Treaty states that foreign debt is only "the most recent mechanism of the exploitation of Southern peoples and the environment by the North." But what made the concept of ecological debt so brilliant in this context was that it suddenly made it possible to turn tables against creditors in the North. While the developing South had to this point in history always been framed as being indebted to the industrial North, that is, the concept of ecological debt effectively reversed the direction of the arrow of arrears. Framed through an ecological debt discourse, degradation to both environmental and social ecologies of the South constituted an unpaid account of ongoing Northern accrual. Thus framed, in other words, the global North became historically reprobate, a delinquent debtor.

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