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Analysis

The 'Environmentalism of the Poor' revisited: Territory and place in disconnected glocal struggles

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ABSTRACT

In 2002, the year it was published, The Environmentalism of the Poor was one of the first books examining in a multidisciplinary perspective three parallel environmental movements around the world. Eleven years later, we re-examine these movements – the Cult of Wilderness, the Gospel of Eco-Efficiency and the Mantra of Environmental Justice, – focusing on the increased visibility of struggles representing Environmental Justice and The Environmentalism of the Poor. Even if they are often disconnected from an organizational standpoint, glocal manifestations of resistance have emerged since the 1990s. Today, environmental movements assert common values related to place, identity, and culture. Activists' concepts such as ecological debt, environmental justice, environmental liabilities, land grabbing, environmental gentrification, corporate accountability, climate justice, food sovereignty, or economic degrowth are the keywords of the networks of the global Environmental Justice movement. At the same time, such concepts support the rural and urban movements that remake place for marginalized groups, re-assert traditional practices, and protect territory from contamination, land appropriation, and real estate speculation. Some possibilities exist for cooperation between Environmental Justice and the other varieties of environmentalism. Here, comparative research can help unravel the use of valuation languages different from "green" economic growth or sustainable development.

1. Introduction

The Environmentalism of the Poor (Martínez Alier, 2002) was published twelve years ago as a seminal book distinguishing three types of environmentalisms around the world, and dissecting their origins, discourses, and strategic repertoires of action: first, 'the Cult of Wilderness' as the love of pristine nature and the expression of concerns about contamination outside of its broader socio-economic and cultural framework; second, the 'gospel of eco-efficiency' as the defense of a wise use of natural resources, ecological modernization, ecotaxes, technological improvement, sustainable development, or smart cities, without considering the unavoidable environmental and health impacts of rapid industrialization; and last the 'environmentalism of the poor,' of those who have a material interest in the environment as a source and a requirement for livelihood and a preoccupation for today's historically marginalized residents. Although one chapter was devoted to urban issues and to the Environmental Justice movement in the United States, the book had an undeniable rural bias that the present article corrects.

Between 2002 and 2014, resistance processes within rural territories inhabited by indigenous communities, peasants and poor farmers, and within deprived urban communities, have exploded all around the world. Latin America, for instance, has a long history of environmental justice struggles, mostly in relation to mining and oil extraction in indigenous communities in the Andes and Amazon, and more recently in relation to land grabbing for biofuel or tree plantations, and water use struggles in Central America and in the Southern Cone (Boelens et al., 2011; Brysk, 2000; Carmin and Agyeman, 2011; Evans et al., 2002; Hilson, 2002; Zoomers, 2010). Urban conflicts have not only multiplied against environmental inequalities in exposure to dumping and contamination but also in regard to access to environmental goods and services. Many activists contest processes of land speculation and gentrification.

Today, there is indeed a global Environmental Justice movement (Martinez-Alier et al, 2014; Sikor and Newell, 2014) but no umbrella global organization representing the voices of the many residents, community leaders, and the NGOs that support them. Struggles for clean air in the Cancer Alley along the Mississippi River, where Black and Latino residents are exposed to the toxic fumes of the petro chemical industry, struggles for safe water in Espinar (Cuzco) in Peru where effluents from the Tintaya mine have affected the rivers of indigenous farmers, and struggles for green, revitalized, and livable neighborhoods in marginalized areas of Barcelona, appear disconnected. The activists engaged in

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those conflicts have built on their own local or transnational networks related to the themes or issues they are trying to address. Yet, these struggles embody common values and interests which often go beyond environmentalism itself. Indeed, as Escobar and others have argued, environmental conflicts are not merely environmental, as activists seem to use their contestation as a segue to address broader questions related to place, its identity, and their identity (Escobar, 2008). Both in urban and in rural struggles, environmental issues are central to sustainable livelihoods. However, the reaffirmation of identity is by itself a crucial concern reinforced by environmental discourses.

In this conceptual and analytical paper, we aim, through case examples, at refining (and updating) twelve years later these three varieties of environmentalisms, at examining in more detail the concepts that activists use to address environmental inequities and injustices, and at unraveling the broader threats they confront. How do activists define, represent, and use place, culture, and tradition in their demands? What languages of valuation are deployed in their struggles? To what extent do environmentalism of the poor struggles frame and advance broader political goals? Throughout our analysis, we show the role played by contestation as a way to remake place for historically marginalized groups, re-assert cultural and traditional values and practices, and protect urban land both from contamination and dumping and private appropriation and speculation. This last point is especially important as previously contaminated land gets cleaned up and (re)developed, it often becomes the object of competition for uncontrolled growth and profit. Cities are places where uneven and often debilitating and damaging socio-natural relations of power work together through the urbanization of nature.

The production of urban nature is deeply political.

In the next section, we briefly review and update the two currents of environmentalism named Cult of Wilderness and Gospel of Eco-Efficiency and examine their alliance. We then turn to an analysis of The Environmentalism of the Poor and present some of its recent manifestations and the different discourses and values embedded in those examples. We also link them to what we see as the underlying causes for the emergence of these movements. In the final section, we evaluate possible bridges and alliances between the different varieties of environmentalism section, we evaluate possible bridges and alliances between the different varieties of environmentalism.

2. Currents of Environmentalism

2.1. The Cult of Wilderness, the Gospel of Eco-Efficiency, and their Alliance

The main concern of the Cult of Wilderness movement has historically been – since the 19th century, – the preservation of pristine nature by setting aside natural areas from where humans and market values would be excluded, and the active protection of wildlife for its ecological and esthetic values. Beautiful landscapes, threatened species, disappearing ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangroves, tropical rainforests were and still are the main focus of this international movement. In the US, this movement has its origin in John Muir and the creation of Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks. It is best represented by organizations such as the Wildlife Conservation Society, Nature Conservancy, WWF, or the IUCN.

However, one of the criticisms against this deep ecology movement is the failure of its adepts to consider the role of local people and involve them in the management of nature preserves. Many advocates indeed argue for keeping parks in poor countries out of the hands of 'non-qualified' and 'non-committed residents', especially indigenous people. In these views, parks must be guarded from their presence and heavily funded by international agencies (Lowrey, 2008). In many cases, people who have a stake and a local lay knowledge of sustainable natural management remain excluded from the protected areas. Nature preservationists also often neglect to examine the social impacts of protected areas on local residents and the displacement and loss that people have to suffer when parks and reserves become created (West et al., 2006).

Today, this world conservation movement has been increasingly drawn to an economic language. Some researchers even claim that its approach copies and parodies a narrow economic discourse, especially as it promotes the extension of tradable permits to endangered species areas or wetlands (Spash, 2011). This movement starts with arguing that humans in the developed world seem to have disconnected themselves from Nature and are struggling to find the "value of Nature." The lack of economic valuation is deemed to cause the degradation of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity. Nature is seen as ecosystems which have functions that become services to humans. Such services have no market value. It is possible nevertheless to give to them notional economic values. This will increase their visibility for public administrators. As a result, high-impact publications such as The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) (2008–2011), supported by the WWF and the IUCN and published under UNEP's auspices, emphasize the relevance of assigning monetary values to ecosystem services so that policymakers and businesses focus their attention on biodiversity conservation. Conservationists now see nature as "natural capital" (McAfee, 1999; Rodriguez-Labajos and Martinez-Alier, 2013).

The second current of environmentalism – Gospel of Eco-efficiency – is perhaps the most powerful today. This name is inspired from Samuel Hays' book published in 1959: "Conservation and the *Gospel* of *Efficiency*: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920." Such early efforts in federal environmental policy in the United States aimed at reducing waste on the one hand, and at conserving forests (or turn them into tree plantations) on the other hand. These proposals set a sharp contrast with both the reality of plunder and with the mystical proposals of nature activists like John Muir. This movement is nowadays concerned about the whole economy as a system and is best reflected in the theories of ecological modernization and wise use of natural resources. Here the word "Nature" is barely used and resource economists present cost/benefit analysis to justify global conservation programs (Balmford et al., 2002). For them, economic and ecological rationalities are perfectly compatible. Conservationists and resource economists work amicably together.

The words Sustainable Development, appealing to a triple bottom line of environmental preservation, economic growth, and social equity, became widely known in 1987 with the Brundtland report. The first influential use of "sustainable development" came however from the 1980 IUCN's World Conservation Strategy, with the objective to avoid the clash between conservation and economic growth. This is in tune with today's panoply of recipes on sustainable technologies, environmental economic policies (taxes, tradable fishing quotas, markets in pollution permits), optimal rates of resource extraction, substitution of manufactured capital for lost "natural capital", dematerialization of the economy and Kuznets environmental curves, habitat trading and carbon trading, smart growth and smart cities, "green" economic growth and, in summary, sustainable development.

Combining eco-efficiency principles with a wilderness reverence, environmental economists market ecosystem services to help make decisions about natural resources more "efficient, effective, and defensible" (Nelson et al., 2009), and guide win–win decisions for both the environment and people (Boyd and Banzhaf, 2007; Farber et al., 2002). Their basic tenet is that natural resources and environmental services provided for instance by the Orinoco basin not only benefit the indigenous people who live on its banks, but potentially Venezuela and Colombia as a whole, tourists, scientists, hydroelectric industry, as well as the entire world through the climate change mitigation services it provides. Through surveys of often-remote consumers, contingent valuation studies estimate their willingness to pay for protecting endangered species and territories while removing the cultural values and traditional knowledge of residents from their study.

As a result, over time water, air, plants, and animals are becoming commoditized – as mineral resources, oil, gas, and timber have been for centuries – in actual or fictitious markets through a system of purchase and sale with a standard unit of exchange (Kosoy and Corbera,