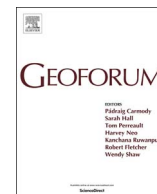




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Editorial

Environmental justice through the lens of mining conflicts

1. Introduction

Minerals are fundamental for the world's major economies, even following the global economic downturn in the late 2000s (USGS, 2016). Although the extraction rates of some commodities stabilised during this time, the extraction of key mineral resources that have industrial applications (e.g., copper, zinc, and lead) witnessed an incremental annual increase of about 3 percent between 2000 and 2013 (Henckens et al., 2016), and the mining frontier continues to expand worldwide (Hota and Behera, 2016; Paulick and Machacek, 2017; Verbrugge, 2015). Going further back, from 1980 to 2011, the extraction of industrial and construction minerals and metal ores increased globally at rates higher than any other type of resource in absolute terms (by 228 percent and 147 percent, respectively), and hence higher than the rate of aggregate extraction (118 percent) (SERI and WU, 2014).

The literature offers various explanations for the drivers of mining expansion. For some, the change in the metabolic profiles (in terms of energy and material flows) of high-demand countries, such as European Union (EU) member states, the United States of America (U.S.) and China is a fundamental factor (Muradian et al., 2012; Schaffartzik et al., 2014). For others, interest in mineral commodities mainly escalated with the advent of financialisation (Adams and Glück, 2015); in particular, with the scarcity rent (Rankin, 2011) and attractive fiscal terms offered to capital in favour of minerals (Emel and Huber, 2008) during times of financial distress. In many instances, the global drivers of mining also interact with the idea of resource-led development backed by domestic political agendas (Kaiser et al., 2012). The imaginary of resource nationalism (Kohl and Farthing, 2012) turns the expectations of renegotiated revenues (The Economist, 2012) and income distribution (Segal, 2011) into an 'extractive imperative' (Arsel et al., 2016), and from there, into a wave of (neo) extractivist settings for mining control across different countries (Vélez-Torres, 2014).

Regardless of what is driving the mining investments, mining operations occur as localised events that are connected to developments and influences at different scales (Bridge, 2004a, 2004b; Franks et al., 2014). Critical approaches based on the study of ecological distribution conflicts (Haslam and Tanimoune, 2016; Martinez-Alier et al., 2010) underline that increased mineral consumption has triggered a wave of socio-environmental conflicts related to extractive industries (Le Billon, 2012; Urkidi, 2010); both in the global South (Bebbington et al., 2008; Bebbington and Williams, 2008; Perreault, 2013), and in peripheral areas in the North (Hatzisavvidou, 2017; Keeling and Sandlos, 2009; Segal, 2011). Looking at these conflicts, it appears that environmental justice emerged not only as a central concern among affected groups and local communities, but also as a framework to organise and link the claims of resistance movements, which are reflected in various ways: as distributional concerns, as demands to respect the human rights to life and health, as insistence on indigenous territorial rights, as claims for the sacredness of nature, and as efforts to introduce alternative visions of—or alternatives to—development (Sikor and Newell, 2014).

Today, environmental justice extends beyond the remarkable contributions of Bullard (1994), Agyeman et al. (2003) and Mohai and Saha (2007), among others, who had mainly emphasised the uneven *distribution* of environmental burdens on disadvantaged communities, and addresses claims to *recognition* (what kind of values and visions matter?) and *participation* (who is involved in the decision-making process and how?) (Schlosberg, 2004; Walker, 2012; Walker and Bulkeley, 2006). Overall, these notions intertwine well with the central concerns of mainstream justice frames addressing aspects of distributive justice—focused on equal treatment—and procedural justice—accentuating the need for fairness in the decision making process (Kuehn, 2000). As such the concept more and more served as a crucial rallying ground for social activism and political resistance outside the U.S., in parts of Latin America, Asia and South Africa (Walker and Bulkeley, 2006).

Early writings on environmental justice originally focused on harms that were distributed unequally on racial grounds and mainly due to choice of location. Although these works did not directly refer to mining *per se*—which is less mobile and constrained by geology—the discourse gradually gained acceptance in anti-extractivist movements all over the world as well. There is now an extensive literature on extractive industries and environmental justice (Bebbington et al., 2008; Bebbington and Williams, 2008; Hurley and Ari, 2011; Martinez-Alier, 2001; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). *Geoforum* also has an environmental justice themed issue (Walker and Bulkeley, 2006), and influential contributions that examine the political ecology of the subsoil (Bebbington, 2012).

Indeed, as underlined by Schlosberg (2013) and Sikor and Newell (2014), environmental justice as a form of social justice politics kept evolving through the years, and activist organisations have played an important role to this end. Knowledge generated by social movements and environmental justice organisations also increased in parallel to the pressures they experienced (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). They helped spread the environmental justice frame—geographically in space, horizontally across a broad range of issues, vertically in the global nature of injustices, and conceptually in relationships with the non-human world—hence integrating and empowering widely different movements and concerns (Schlosberg, 2013). Today, the environmental justice discourse gives hope to all those confronting different expressions of domination in which environmental conditions in particular are at stake, and the core issues at the heart of environmental justice struggles seem to become universal (Agyeman, 2014;

Sikor and Newell, 2014). Nonetheless, while the frame has been praised for its receptiveness to plural demands that interweave and find their way to new forms of institutionalisation (Schlosberg, 2013), the use of the environmental justice lens far beyond the original terrains of racism and dispossession raises criticisms as well (Pulido, 2017).

In this special issue of *Geoforum*, we build on previous efforts to engage with environmental justice, and position ourselves within a dynamic field of research that combines the environmental justice literature of the North with the environmentalisms of the South. We aim to further underpin new conceptual developments that are arising in the environmental justice framework, which in many instances are initially put forth by activists and later taken up by academics and policymakers (Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). To this end, we focus particularly on mining conflicts, and refer to the specific claims that environmental resistance movements have used against mining activities at exploration sites. By uncovering what lies beneath perceived environmental injustices in mining operations and understanding how justice concerns may be best addressed, we hope to contribute to efforts toward situating mining conflicts within the global environmental justice movement, supporting the evolution of the environmental justice frame and highlighting the needs of and opportunities for a transition to sustainability.

In this respect, this editorial seeks to set the scene for the papers in this volume by providing a brief background on the roots of injustices in mining conflicts as well as some key concerns the environmental justice scholarship recently put forth with regard to conceptual framing(s). As a collection, recent studies of socio-environmental conflicts reveal that while a global form of environmental justice is certainly growing day by day, the extended framework—with its classical concerns of distribution, recognition and participation—faces challenges on three somewhat interlinked fronts.

The first challenge is the risk of co-optation. It is well known that whenever activists or academics propose new vocabulary, real policy-making quickly adopts it—but not necessarily in the way it was originally meant. Deliberately or not, meanings are distorted. This was the case in sustainability debates, where ecologists' concerns and/or communal demands were assimilated into a green-washing discourse that used the vocabularies of sustainable development, green economy and circular/inclusive economy (Kothari et al., 2015; Naredo and Gomez-Baggethun, 2012), and is certainly a problem now in environmental justice discussions as well (Dowie, 1995). Some argue that environmental justice has been brought too much into the mainstream (Pulido, 2017), and somehow formalised and pre-conceived which opens it up to further manipulation (Velicu and Kaika, this issue). For instance, participation and recognition—well-established propositions of the environmental justice framework—are said to be hijacked by the same forces that generate injustices in the first place (Faber, 2008). Discontent particularly results when false participation or inadequate forms of recognition are introduced in official or corporate practices. This special issue provides evidence of such instances of co-optation in mining conflicts, and attempts to restore environmental justice to its original meaning.

The second front concerns the issue of environmental justice frames. While it is true that environmental justice framing has been evolving and expanding over the years, there is a need to orient concepts that are at the core of the environmental justice framework in a way that will prevent them from becoming irrelevant to contemporary and more radical claims (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Nussbaum, 2007; Sen, 2009). This special issue links the environmental justice framework to other relevant sustainability frames, e.g. political ecology, and socio-ecological transformations, so as to elaborate on the types of orientations, conceptualisations and practices that could help justice prevail. By doing so, the special issue also identifies instances where the current environmental justice frame may fall short of its demands, and highlights the need for it to keep on evolving.

This, then, brings us to the third challenge, which is the spectrum of alternatives and development profiles expected to bring about justice and much needed societal transformation. As recent critiques of environmental justice focus on the use of this notion as a post-political discourse (Swyngedouw, 2009), discussing alternatives that stem from mining conflicts and environmental justice is a step forward; not only in terms of assessing the transformative potential of the environmental justice discourse itself, but also to gain insights about which forces might steer our socioeconomic system in the direction of justice and sustainability transition as opposed to the drivers of extractivism and injustice (Arsel et al., 2016; Bebbington, 2012). In this sense, the special issue is also engaged with alternative imaginaries and reflect on these matters on the basis of international comparisons as well.

The rest of this editorial is organised into three sections. Section 2 examines the roots of injustice in mining conflicts and presents three of the papers in this special issue that focus on this theme. Section 3 discusses the transformative potential of mining conflicts and introduces the remaining three papers of the special issue that problematize the way forward—a process that relies on the vision of the anti-mining community. Section 4 wraps up the editorial and looks at some pending issues in terms of mining conflicts and the environmental justice agenda.

2. Unpacking environmental injustice in mining conflicts

Over the years, knowledge has been accumulating on the socio-ecological impacts of mining and unequal geographies of risk, and the uncertainty embedded in these operations (Bebbington, 2012; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Walker and Bulkeley, 2006). Extraction related concerns have become increasingly visible, for instance, in critical geography (Perreault, 2013), political ecology (Bebbington and Williams, 2008) and environmental justice (Martinez-Alier, 2001), helping us better understand the relationships among extractive industries, the environment and livelihoods, and as such, the roots of conflicts and community claims. This is thanks both to researchers' growing interest in the topic, and the availability of new conflict databases produced by or co-produced with environmental justice organisations (Özkaynak and Rodriguez-Labajos, 2017). These new sources of evidence allow us not only to observe commonalities among mining conflicts but also further inform qualitative analyses with quantitative indicators (Haslam and Tanimoune, 2016).

Drawing on material from 346 mining cases across the world featured in *The Atlas of Environmental Justice* (Temper et al., 2015), factors that influence perceptions of environmental justice in mining cases were explored to better grasp the keys to environmental justice. Overall, answers—and justifications—to the question “Do you think this case was a success for environmental justice?” were systematically analysed. This was done to understand why resistance movements consider a particular situation to be a success or failure in terms of environmental justice in the context of a mining conflict, and therefore to unveil underlying notions of environmental justice for the direct participants in the struggles. Justifications included reasons that were ‘favourable’ in terms of environmental justice, such as the project being halted, securing compensation and strengthening of the social fabric, and those that were ‘unfavourable’, such as continued operation of the project, lack of compliance with legislation and the potential threat of project reactivation.

The results reveal that in mining operations, justice or injustice occurs in four overarching arenas; as seen in Fig. 1, they are (1) the state of the project, (2) its impacts and how they are managed, (3) institutional responses and (4) community-power relations. In each arena, circumstances develop that can be ranked from best to worst, depending on whether they improve or obstruct environmental justice. The vertical double-headed arrows in Fig. 1 indicate whether these circumstances are positive and comparatively more just, or negative and comparatively less just, always in

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