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# Undoing environmental justice: Re-imagining equality in the Rosia Montana anti-mining movement

Irina Velicu<sup>a,\*</sup>, Maria Kaika<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

<sup>b</sup> School of Environment Education and Development, University of Manchester, Arthur Lewis Building, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper we outline the limitations of Environmental Justice theory when it comes to explaining and theorising the politics of contemporary environmental movements. Justice, we argue, needs to be understood not as a formalised and preconceived 'thing' to be delivered or applied but as an open egalitarian ideal that movements across the world continuously redefine in embodied and performed ways which are historically and geographically distinct. Drawing upon the fifteen year long anti-mining struggles of Rosia Montana, Romania, we explore the tension between seeking 'traditional' forms of justice (i.e. dialogic consensual politics) and putting forward more radical demands for socio-ecological change, in which representation and recognition are seen as insufficient practices for distributing justice. Visibility (rather than recognition) and egalitarian politics (rather than distribution) become the quilting points of struggles of many contemporary environmental movements, equality can only be enacted (or staged) through praxis that disrupts the distribution of the sensible experience and exposes the arbitrariness and incompleteness of power. We argue that in order to analyse and theorise the praxis of contemporary environmental movements, it is imperative for geographical literature to engage with post-foundational theory, and 'un-do' pre-conceived ideas and theorisations of (environmental) justice.

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## 1. Introduction: Rethinking environmental justice

The paper aims to expose the limitations of the Environmental Justice (EJ) framework when it comes to understanding and explaining the changing dynamics of contemporary socio-environmental movements. Our analysis is grounded on the Save Rosia Montana (SRM) anti-mining movement in Transylvania-Romania that became emblematic worldwide for its militant struggles that successfully opposes one of the largest open cast gold mining projects in Europe, and also for its insurgent and ongoing demands for equality that go beyond requests for recognition, participation and redistribution (Velicu, 2012a,b/2014). These demands challenge the tendency to reduce justice to the application of representational/consensual politics.

The paper argues that the contemporary insurgent practices in Rosia Montana alongside practices across the world that put forward demands beyond and above the redistribution of EJ reveal the growing inadequacy of the EJ framework to conceptualise

contemporary resistance practices (Noriko, 2003; Sundberg, 2004; Nightingale, 2003; Tschakert, 2009). This hiatus between conceptual framework and praxis is our main concern. It is a hiatus, we argue, that forces academic analysis to revisit the EJ conceptual framework in order to address the emergence of 'the political' in contemporary environmental movements; that is, the emergence of practices that aim not only to contest the power positions of existing actors, but also to redefine the very identities and positions of these actors by performing alternative ways of being and acting together. Drawing upon Ranciere's (1981, 2012) definition of the political (*la politique*) as that which opposes, thwarts and interrupts, we argue that an understanding and conceptualisation of contemporary EJ politics as a process of disruption, interruption and dissensus, rather than one of consensus-building and redistribution may be a more fruitful way forward in bridging the gap between contemporary EJ praxis and theory.

What we propose here is a reimagining of the politics of justice within a post-foundational framework, as an egalitarian ideal to be enacted not only in contesting power along representational/consensual lines, but also as a practice of performing political equality and other spheres of experience

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [irinavelicu@hotmail.com](mailto:irinavelicu@hotmail.com), [irinavelicu2013@gmail.com](mailto:irinavelicu2013@gmail.com) (I. Velicu), [maria.kaika@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:maria.kaika@manchester.ac.uk) (M. Kaika).

(Butler, 1999; Ranciere, 1981/2012; Swyngedouw, 2014). Ranciere calls this process ‘subjectification’ which implies both de-identification with pre-existing or given political positions/identities and non-foundational re-identifications, staging/performing new socio/political identities/positions as alternative ways of living in common. The Rosia Montana movement illustrates these events of subjectification which inspired our call for “undoing” prevailing visions of justice.

Alongside other contemporary socio-environmental movements (Bebbington et al., 2008a; Pellow, 2007; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Pieterse, 2007; Noriko, 2003; Guha and Spivak, 1988; Martinez-Alier, 2002) the Rosia Montana movement exposed the limits of enacting EJ only as a practice of recognition, participation and redistribution. Its struggles went beyond the ‘traditional’ pursuit of justice as a normative idea to be applied in the Rosia Montana ‘case’ through citizen participation or compensation. Many amongst the movement’s key activists often refused to enter negotiations for practicing ‘justice’ through a consensus-building exercise between pre-defined and pre-selected sets of actors with pre-conceived and fixed identities (e.g. ‘peasants’, ‘farmers’, ‘miners’, ‘local residents’, etc.) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Featherstone, 2008; Dikeç, 2013). Instead, they sought to redefine their own positions and identities and to practice EJ as a transformative act, as an open egalitarian socio-environmental ideal that needs to be re-negotiated, re-embodied and performed in ways that change not only the power relations between given actors and the set of actors involved, but also the subjective positions the actors themselves hold.

The argument presented in the paper draws upon original material collected during 20 months of fieldwork research conducted over a period of seven years (2007–2013) in Rosia Montana. This material includes: 20 semi-structured and open interviews, 10 informal group discussions amongst activists and residents of the Rosia Montana region. The interviewees and participants were male and female, aged between 20 and 70, and were selected on the basis that their livelihoods were directly (through employment, or residence in the affected area) or indirectly (close/extended family of a former miner or of a home/land owner) connected to mining in the area. The selection of interviewees began with the identification of key informants (e.g. formal and informal spokespersons of the local (in Rosia) organisations and movement and of other organisations and movements across Romania. It was followed by snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted at the interviewee’s homes or in the village square and lasted between thirty minutes and two hours. A semi-structured interview protocol was used. The key focus of the interviews was to identify the rationale and reasoning behind selling (or not) land/property to the mining corporation. The interviews’ and informal meetings’ data were coded and analysed on the basis of key themes, concepts and ideas that emerged from discussion where local people were supporting and justifying their respective subject positions and explaining how these changed over a period of 15 years, through participation in the anti-mining struggles.

In addition to interviews and informal meetings with local residents the paper draws upon data collected through participant observation and activist engagement with environmental NGOs and the environmental movement in Romania. This material is also inspired by short interviews with ten leaders of environmental NGOs in Bucharest, Cluj, Galati and Sighisoara, as well as informal discussions with activists during participatory observation and activist engagement in major local and national events. The activist engagement in these networks and events adds texture and depth to our understanding and analysis.

## 2. Reaching beyond recognition and redistribution: Limitations of the environmental justice framework

The rich history of debates in Environmental Justice (EJ) is the product of a longstanding and exceptionally fruitful dialectic between theoretical analysis and activist practice (Walker, 2012; Martinez-Alier et al., 2014). The conceptual analysis developed in the field is as strongly connected to international civil rights, social equity, racial justice and indigenous rights movements (Agyeman, 1990, 2003; Bullard et al., 1990/2007), as it is to local and neighbourhood movements against hazardous waste disposal. EJ literature has paid as much attention to documenting class relations and institutionalised racism linked to environmental injustices (Pulido, 2000; Pellow, 2007; Heynen et al., 2006; Heiman, 1996, McCarthy and Prudham, 2004; Schlosberg, 2007) as it did to analysing the transnational and multi-scalar nature of environmental impact from Europe to Latin America and from India to the United States (Bullard, 1990; Martinez-Alier, 2002; Carruthers, 2008; Pellow, 2007; Bebbington et al., 2008b; Urkidi, 2010). Drawing upon detailed original material and participant observation in a rich history of struggles, authors working within the EJ framework asserted the importance of establishing normative ideals of understanding and practicing justice within a liberal (i.e. distributional) tradition. To this end, many authors advocated an understanding of justice as fairness “associated with the allocation dynamics of environmental externalities” (Heynen et al., 2006, p. 9; see also Kitchen, 2013; Benford, 2005) and a focus on redistribution, participation, and recognition (Schlosberg, 2007, Urkidi and Walter, 2011) as normative responses to socio-environmental conflict.

However, as Ranciere (2012) suggests, one of the key problems with allocation of justice might be that there is too much invested in the concept of justice as such. Indeed, one of the key questions posed when an individual or a group voices opposition, protest or dissent is: how can one distinguish between a voice that discusses matters of collective distribution of justice, and a voice that simply requests the alleviation of a private pain or suffering? (Ilic and Eleni, 2013). Already in its ancient Greek origin, the concept of justice was problematised as a socially constructed convention and the word just (δικαιος) denoted a conformist way of being (Shapiro, 2014) that both “observes and conforms with rules, traditions and duties, and abides to formal and ethical law” (Mpaminiotis, 2002: 370; authors’ translation). Plato’s conceptualisation of justice was already closely linked to practices that aimed to secure each person’s allocated place and position within the *polis*. Later, Aristotle would define justice as a humanist/rationalist virtue that differentiates Men from Animals. Man (sic!) is a *Political Animal* (ζῷον πολιτικόν) and not a Mere Animal by virtue of his ability to use reason and therefore to allocate justice in the name of the *polis*. Inability to reason equals inability to allocate justice and this in turns equals not being a Man; those who cannot reason and allocate justice are Mere Animals, i.e. less-than-human beings, a-political beings and non-existent (invisible) political entities. Every man born a citizen of the *polis* (and few who gained that right through great achievement during their lives) was pre-assigned the ability to reason and allocate justice. For all the radicalness of the praxis of democracy, ancient Greeks were not radical enough to include women, slaves or foreigners in the category of those who were capable to articulate reason; these categories remained invisible politically as their voices could only be used to scream out private sufferings; they had no speech, as speech is the ‘voice’ of those are considered capable of using reason and therefore able to allocate justice.

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