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Rural intersections: Resource marginalisation and the "non-Indian problem" in highland Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the combination, and mutual reinforcement over time, of political marginalisation and resource-related conflicts that have affected indigenous communities in Cotopaxi province, in the highlands of Ecuador – based on ethnographic fieldwork studying the relational dynamics of community organizing and indigenous political action. Over the course of the last century, national policies for agrarian change focused successively on 'modernization,' agrarian reform, and integration into globalized markets and systems of production. Indigenous populations have consistently been targeted by these policies – the existence of widespread poverty was often dubbed the 'Indian problem' by institutions of authority. However, government policies directed at this 'problem' have repeatedly recreated the very issues they outwardly sought to resolve: rural indigenous populations have been redefined (as peasants, then workers, or now 'partners' in national agricultural projects), but they have not been repositioned. The 'problem' can thus more accurately be located within the histories of dispossession and systemic politico-economic exclusion that both (i) support structures of inequality, and (ii) allow environmental and juridical injustices to persistently shape the contexts within which rural indigenous communities here, and elsewhere, are acting. Examining the 'non-Indian problem' in Ecuador, and the mechanisms behind social and environmental inequalities (Callewaert, 2002) more broadly, this research engages environmental injustice as a socio-historical process rather than the result of discrete events or as an ahistorical phenomenon (Pellow, 2000). In the community studied here – San Isidro – collective action challenges entrenched historical inequalities in access to land and water, and seeks to increase shared labour on common infrastructure, whilst also managing communal areas of páramo moorland. This research identifies links between place-based processes of development and coordinated efforts to defend rural livelihoods – with implications for policies of governance (land rights, water rights), and for the design of localised resource management.

1. Introduction: San Isidro and 'difference'

I first met Porfirio Allauca whilst visiting with Esmeralda Yasig in Cinco de Junio, a small community in comparison with Porfirio's home, which was a mile or so further north in the Alpamalag valley. He lived in San Isidro, an indigenous community of just over 90 households where many residents were engaged in a number of different community projects that work towards stabilising, securing and developing rural life as it is (and can be) lived in that particular location. Rural life in San Isidro depends on such collective endeavours, along with income from a variety of jobs, and household-level agriculture. Cinco de Junio itself sits beside the local road, immediately opposite a vast *hacienda* plantation growing broccoli for export. Through the agrarian activist group *la Red de Guardianes de Semillas* (Seed Guardians' Network), I had been put in touch with Esmeralda as an associate of their network, based on her work with native seed varieties in Alpamalag, and the Training Centre she had built with local *jovenes*/young people. Given my interest in basing my fieldwork in the area, she had invited Porfirio over to tell me about action being undertaken in San Isidro – their work in the *páramo* hills, the recently completed irrigation-pipeline project, their conflict with the *hacienda* over land rights, the absence of most men of working age due to labour migration, and mobilised campaigns for water justice against the plantations. All these actions stemmed from inequalities with

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specific historical roots – intersecting forms of environmental, social and political injustice.

In what follows, I trace these roots and the historical development of how 'social categories of difference' – including citizenship, space and indigeneity – combine and intersect within issues of environmental injustice (Nyseth Brehm and Pellow, 2013). Through the particular case of an indigenous community in Ecuador's central Andes, and that nation's history of rural change and government policy, I suggest that similar intersections of social difference and injustice underpin many understandings of, and approaches toward governing, 'rurality' – itself often a placeholder term for locations and livelihoods that have been systematically devalued. During the course of ethnographic fieldwork conducted over fifteen months (Sept. 2010–Dec. 2011), this research focused on forms of activity in San Isidro that were both affective (appealing to particular values, principles and practices) and productive (engaging in struggles to reorder social and economic relations). Fieldwork involved relationship building, long-term immersion and work within different settings of collective activity. These included communal gatherings, shared work-parties, mobilisations, meetings, campaigns and celebrations. The broader project analyzes how such collaborative actions are combined with struggles for land and water rights, everyday forms of paid and unpaid work, memories of conflict, and a sense of duty toward future generations.

In this article, and drawing on experiences in San Isidro, I focus on how processes of historical dispossession and systemic politico-economic exclusion have shaped, and continue to influence, contexts of social and environmental injustice for rural groups. I begin by outlining the article's theoretical engagement with environmental in/justice and understandings of rurality, and then detail the Ecuadorian context. Within national policy, we see how dominant definitions of groups identified by themselves and others as 'indigenous', 'rural' or 'peasants' have entailed the devaluing of those communities and have increased the forms of marginalisation and environmental injustice that they face. Case material is then presented in four subsections – describing indigenous struggle in and around San Isidro that fights for more equitable access to land and water, and for limits to agro-industrial expansion. The concluding section addresses some of the consequences of these struggles and observations for rural and environmental policy – both in Ecuador and elsewhere – and reflects on the importance of non-discriminatory proposals developed through decades of indigenous action.

2. Environmental injustice and rurality

2.1. Environmental injustice as process

Adopting a 'process perspective' is to highlight how systematic and structural processes of discrimination, dispossession and marginalisation contribute to, and constitute, environmental injustices (Kenrick, 2009). This draws on and engages with three elements of environmental justice scholarship, with a focus on history, resources and ecology. Examining the existence of an unequal distribution of environmental harms (and destructive outcomes that burden some populations more than others) offers an incomplete understanding of the processes and mechanisms that create those outcomes (Callewaert, 2002: 264). Approaching environmental injustice instead as a socio-historical process – rather than as only the result of "perpetrator-victim scenarios" (Pellow, 2000: 588) – draws attention to systems and entrenched historical inequalities that position certain groups as particularly vulnerable to environmental injustices. As well as focusing on systemic injustices inflicted on others, this focus also draws attention to forms of resistance and ongoing practices at the community level, for example processes by which 'place-making' is reinforced and revived, and how people "preserve and interpret the past and then reinterpret it in the light of new questions" (Mooney-Melvin, 1999: 9, at Callewaert, 2002: 265).

Examining socio-historical processes also draws attention to forms of environmental injustice that are not limited to the distribution of pollution and immediate environmental harms, for example those that relate to accessing and using natural resources, to participation and procedural justice in other arenas such as food systems (Scholsberg, 2007: 91), issues surrounding resource depletion (Rees and Westra, 2003), and the inter-related calls for more just ways to reorganize land-use and restructure production (Pellow and Brulle, 2005). In this light, histories of struggle among highland indigenous groups in Ecuador reveal how diverse and intersecting forms of inequality share common roots in historical processes of discrimination. This is particularly true in terms of access to land and water, as experienced elsewhere in the world, where "impoverished and therefore politically marginalised people are increasingly being displaced from their ecosystems by the demands of the wealthy for space and resources" (Rees, 2008: 695). The case examined here, from a process perspective, further combines these struggles with moves to secure ecological protection and place-based approaches to land use and livelihoods.

In addition to a focus on history and resources, then, are concerns linked to ecology. Ecological distribution conflicts are a particularly visible form of environmental injustice, though they tend to be articulated with other concerns, pressures and values (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Being attentive to process, history and emergence in matters of environmental injustice (rather than pursuing an ahistorical focus on discrete events) means both looking beyond "distributional inequity" and understanding dynamics of "ecological justice" in relationships between humans and nonhumans (Schlosberg, 2007: 79, 6). In the case considered here, collective ways of valuing the land and natural resources both reflect a rejection of systems that unjustly distribute environmental impacts and disruptions, and at the same time form the basis of attempts to reduce those impacts. These are actions, then, that combine environmental and political concerns. Pramod Parajuli uses the term "ecological ethnicities" to refer to groups engaged in such actions, combining ways of being-in-the-world with sensitive and systematic interaction within the environment, and aiming to support existence not only 'for us' but for all human and non-human worlds together (Parajuli, 2004: 238). Matters of injustice are thus tackled both through nature preservation, and through mobilized demands for recognition (Harvey, 1996) and community participation in decision-making processes (Schlosberg, 2007: 79) – to sustain a political voice that is heard when speaking out against the destruction and *devaluing* of place-based ways-of-living (Blaser, 2004).

2.2. Devaluing rurality

Devaluing occurs when dominant political rhetoric sees the challenges faced by rural groups across the world as hopelessly terminal, and subsequently paints a bleak picture of doomed futures (Robertson, 2012). The assumed inevitability of rural decline, however, is rooted in constructions of modernity which hold that the modern world, and even the notion of progress, is predicated on the "erosion" of collectivity (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1999: 28). The singularity of such imagined trajectories has very real consequences, especially for indigenous groups and rural populations. It is a narrative that devalues localities in two ways in particular: (i) it places rural populations somehow "outside history" (Parry, 2007), and (ii) implies that only analysts and people in positions of power