



Perspectives

Setting energy justice apart from the crowd: Lessons from environmental and climate justice

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ABSTRACT

The continuation and exacerbation of many environmental failures illustrate that environmental and climate justice's influence on decision-making is not being systematically effective, giving rise to a renewed emphasis on finding new, more focused, justice models. This includes the energy justice concept, which has received ready and growing success. Yet for energy justice, a key question keeps arising: what does it add that environmental and climate justice cannot? To answer this question this perspective outlines the origins, successes and failures of the environmental and climate justice concepts, with a view to both distinguishing the energy justice field, and providing cautionary tales for it. It then outlines three points of departure, which it argues increases the opportunity of success for the energy justice concept: (1) “bounding out”, (2) non-anti-establishment pasts and (3) methodological strength. This paper exists to stimulate debate.

1. Introduction

In terms of academic airtime, the energy justice concept has achieved rapid success. Although its roots extend further back, since its first use as a policy-oriented term by McCauley et al. in 2013 energy justice scholarship has emerged with regards to whole-systems, energy policy-making, consumption and mobility as prominent themes amongst myriad others [1]. Aiding the rapid development of this literature, there have been two special issues with “energy justice” in their title, one in *Energy Policy* [1] and one in *Energy Research & Social Science* [2].

Yet despite this apparent success key questions continue to emerge within the academic conference circuit: how is the debate on energy justice substantively different from environmental and climate justice? Is it the same thing labelled in a different way? Is the “energy only” focus reductionary? And what can it deliver that environmental and climate justice failed to? As one of innumerate examples from the literature, does the application of the energy justice concept to climate issues by Sovacool et al. [3] illustrate overlap, or demonstrate something more productive? This perspective paper makes a first step towards answering these questions.

The paper begins by outlining origins, successes and failures of the environmental and climate justice concepts, with a view to both distinguishing the energy justice field, and providing cautionary tales for it. It then outlines three points of departure, which it argues increase the opportunity of success for the energy justice concept: (1) “bounding out”, (2) non-anti-establishment pasts and (3) methodological strength.

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2. Successes and failures of the environmental and climate justice movements

The following paragraphs introduce the environmental and climate justice literatures and begin to build the case for energy justice as a more manageable approach with beneficial environmental and climate knock-ons.

2.1. Environmental justice

Environmental justice is commonly defined as the distribution of environmental hazards and access to all natural resources; it includes equal protection from burdens, meaningful involvement in decisions, and fair treatment in access to benefits (see [4–7]). The environmental justice movement emerged in 1970s North America as a response to the unequal distribution of environmental ills – pollution and waste facilities, for example – alongside the risks associated with them, which tended to be inequitably borne by poor black/minority ethnic Americans [8,9]. Thus it manifests as a concern for “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies” ([10]: 83). Through a focus on alerting, educating and mobilising the public to the unequal distribution and environmental risks and benefits, and also on ensuring the meaningful participation of affected

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communities in decision-making, it represents distributive and procedural justice concerns [11].

Initially, environmental justice complaints focused on local, activism-led, community-oriented means of ensuring the just distribution of toxic burdens; a distributionally-based form of environmental justice inquiry that could be operationalised and measured on a local scale [12]. Since its inception, however, many authors have noted that the concept of environmental justice has grown both substantively and theoretically [13–16]. Williams [9] illustrates, for example, that federal governments established policies to protect against future inequity in environmental decisions, recognising not just local, but also national impacts of noxious facilities. Thus the geographical scale of application within the United States changed. In this regard, Agyeman and Evans [17] identify two inter-related dimensions of this form of environmental justice: (1) a local, activist level using it as a vocabulary for mobilisation, action, and political opportunity, and (2) a government level that sees environmental justice as a policy principle, stating that no public action will disproportionately disadvantage any particular social group.

Further, in their review of environmental justice literature Reed and George [18] state that whilst much research is still framed around the distribution of hazards and risk, the scope of what these risks are perceived to be has grown too. In the years following their analysis this is increasingly the case. Indeed, within the literature topics of concern range from prominent debates on toxic waste, air pollution and landfill sites, to new technology, ecological restoration, transport, health, energy, housing, access to food and forest management, amongst others [19,16,20,15]. Yet despite this, Hess and Ribeiro [21] identify that energy has yet to become a major concern for environmental justice, and that injustices along the global supply chain have not yet been tackled satisfactorily.

Holifield et al. [12] also highlight a shift within the movement towards a more multi-faceted understanding of the concept, where environmental justice is increasingly used in coalition with other theories and agendas, including the capabilities approach, social movement theories, assemblages, and actor network theory. In this regard the environmental justice agenda has gradually expanded from a social movement to a policy vocabulary, and a research field in its own right [22–24].

On the grounds of this expanding scope, some see the literature as flourishing, expanding, and deepening. They do so as apparent recognition of a growing international scholarship, with many instances of engagement through both activism and policy processes (although the successes of these are challenging to verify) [25]. The expanding scope of environmental justice interpretations and applications are also understood by some as necessary, given that justice is an inherently complex and contested concept which will inevitably be taken to mean different things in different settings, cultures, and political arenas. Conscious of this positivity, it is therefore problematic to determine whether the environmental justice concept or movement is either a “success” or a “failure”, despite the following negative critiques. With this in mind, this paper does not prescribe a positive or negative outcome or suggest an abandonment of environmental justice work. Instead, it argues that this growth limits the material impact of environmental justice claims.

Notwithstanding the widespread uptake of the topic within academia, the environmental justice agenda is widely criticised for its failure to have a pervasive impact beyond the grassroots level – the result, perhaps, of increasing diffusion of its meaning and application, and a lack of a strong conceptual core. As an illustration, Bickerstaff and Agyeman [26] note the limited uptake of the environmental justice concept in the UK, where the environmental justice movement does not utilize the vocabulary of mobilising minority and low-income groups, and, in their words, is yet to make any significant impact on policy and decision-making. Reed and George [18] demonstrate that despite some overseas proliferation, on the whole environmental justice research

remains US-centric. Heffron et al. ([27]: 175) later reinforce this critique by stating that environmental justice faces two problems: (1) that the definitions are too broad and (2) that this has resulted in difficulty of translation into economics and therefore, policy formation.

This perspective identifies that energy justice faces (at least) two major weaknesses. Firstly, whilst the concept has been used as a mobilising tool, it lacks defined and recognised content—a structure or approach that can be readily applied at a range of scales in a systematic manner. Secondly, because of the way the concept has been used, it has not achieved much environmental protection or conservation. Instead, the main motivation of the movement has been the affect on less affluent areas—a concern for people, not their environment. The result, arguably, is a floundering concept, with little benefit beyond the grassroots level.

2.2. Climate justice

The evolution of the climate justice concept and movement sits alongside the methodological and theoretical growth of environmental justice. Climate justice first evolved from climate change activism, where a focus on the grassroots environmental justice movement combined with concern for global climate change. The concept, or movement, began gathering pace in the 1990s, with a focus primarily on: assisting those affected by climate change; sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change; mitigation and adaptation; and reducing CO₂ emissions [28]. Goodman ([29]: 509) thus describes the role of climate justice as an “interpretative frame” for the climate crisis, and a concept that addresses the “triple inequity” of mitigation, responsibility and vulnerability by (1) asking who benefits from CO₂ emissions and how should they bear the burden for mitigation, (2) recognising the vast divergence in capabilities to respond to global climate change, and (3) addressing the issue of adaptation, the burdens of which are unequally focused on the world’s poor.

Bulkeley et al. ([22]: 915) summarise the agenda as the mobilisation of justice with respect to climate policy, and state that the concept has “provided a means through which to bring concerns for the outcomes and processes of climate policy into the same frame of analysis”. They go on to state that in contrast to the origins of environmental justice in local struggles, arguments or debates about climate justice appear predominantly at the international level (see also [30,31]). Heffron et al. [27] point to the perceived failure of the international Kyoto Protocol for example, which triggered climate protests and calls for climate justice. The climate justice framework has, however, also been applied to nation states and cities, demonstrating national, local and international applicability (e.g. [32,22,33]). In addition, although climate justice has predominantly concerned itself with issues of justice among and between existing and future humans [34], work such as that of Schneider and Lane [35] on “inter-species equity” conceptualises its impact more widely [36].

The challenge that climate justice is a struggling concept is, to some scholars, not going to be a welcome one. As with environmental justice, counter arguments may come as the defence that the concept is understood and used in different ways due to different understandings and manifestations of (in)justice—a perhaps understandable diversity. Moreover, some may assert that the relatively limited application of climate change policy hides its successful application in a local setting or on a smaller scale, where it may hold more promise. Indeed, you could claim that without climate justice arguments being mobilised in international and local forums, progress would have been even *more* phlegmatic and even *more* inequitable. Yet, despite this positivity, a number of authors have increasingly begun to reflect on the failures of the climate justice literature [37,38].

The climate crisis is an all-enveloping one. Is climate justice scholarship coming too late and is it too complicated to tackle? How do we define the right to sustainable development, deal with currently untapped oil and gas reserves and the rights to them, and contend with the

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