Introduction

Popular Environmentalism and Social Justice in Latin America

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Human history has always included the continuous alteration of our endeavors through the global movement of ideas in religion, politics, art, architecture, literature, cuisine, and so on. This is as true today for the passions and tactics of social-movement organizing as it is for the tools of academic analysis and methods of policy design. In the environmental arena, we tend to think of environmental activism, education, and policy as a story that began in the wealthy, industrialized North and has since traveled to nearly every part of the world. This received wisdom is mistaken, largely because of the way the story has been told and who the storytellers have been. In actuality, there have always been myriad forms of environmental consciousness, practice, and mobilization in most parts of the world, even if they have not always appeared in forms familiar to Western eyes. Such is the case with environmental justice.

Most readers recognize “environmental justice” as the rallying cry raised against environmental racism in US communities of color from the mid 1980s onward. Fusing civil rights activism with environmental health concerns, the environmental justice movement energized African American, Latino, and Native American resistance to industrial hazards and toxic threats concentrated in their communities. Environmental justice has been transformative, broadening the scope and altering the character and tactics of the US environmental movement (Bryant and Mohai 1992; Bullard 1993; Cole and Foster 2001; Westra and Lawson 2001). By launching a dialogue about race, class, and the unfair distribution of environmental hazards, environmental justice has also altered academic and political debates. Its language and ideas move between activist, scholarly, and policy circles, offering a critical framework for
analyzing environmental inequities (Bullard 1994; Bryant 1995; Pellow 2000a; Mutz, Bryner, and Kenney 2002). Indeed, several authors believe it represents a paradigm shift, both in the larger environmental movement and in the study and practice of environmental politics (Novotny 2000; Taylor 2000; Rhodes 2003).

Narratives of social justice and environmental well-being also come together in many other forms and in many other places. Environmental justice, in fact, is an important part of the fabric of popular environmentalism in much of the world. Growing numbers of activists, scholars, and policymakers have been breaking open the environmental justice discourse, recognizing value in its language and methods, and drawing upon its symbols and assumptions to better understand and address environmental conflicts and concerns in a variety of global settings, from Europe to Asia and from Africa to South America (Adeola 2000; Byrne, Glover, and Martinez 2002; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003a). Analysts are also applying notions of environmental justice to the global distribution of environmental risks (such as climate change or toxic waste), highlighting the disproportionate negative environmental and social costs of global production borne by the communities of the global South (Kiefer and Benjamin 1993; Khor 1993; Agarwal, Narain, and Sharma 2002; Glover 2002; Sachs 2002).

This book contributes to an emerging effort to explore the promise and limits of environmental justice in Latin America and the Caribbean, both as a banner of popular mobilization and as a set of principles for analysis, interpretation, and policy. To what extent and in what forms have Latin America’s popular movements fused environmental dimensions into community struggles for social justice? How do we recognize and analyze local or global forms of environmental justice consciousness and action? Do the analytical tools of environmental justice open the doors to useful understanding that we might otherwise not capture? The book explores these questions both conceptually and empirically, drawing lessons from a variety of studies of popular environmental movements and cases throughout urban and rural Latin America. Here, to set the context for this exploration, I first consider some of the challenges facing environmental justice research in Latin America. Next I turn to its unique potential for the region, rooted in diverse, localized meanings. In the
third section of this introductory essay, I point toward the practice of environmental justice in Latin America, introducing the scope and content of the chapters to follow.

Research Challenges

In order to assess the ways in which environmental justice might be promoted, understood, or experienced in Latin America, or indeed in any global context, I begin by outlining some practical and conceptual difficulties.

Data and Resource Limitations

One basic challenge to environmental research in Latin America concerns the availability and quality of scientific data. The allegations of the US environmental justice movement gained credibility with a series of studies documenting disproportionate environmental burdens in poor communities of color, beginning with *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (Commission for Racial Justice 1987). Analysts from geography, public law, social science, epidemiology, public health, and other fields have continued to use a wide variety of data and methodologies to document, analyze, and assess environmental inequities. The Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act of 1986, which led to the creation of the Toxics Release Inventory, means that US community activists can readily access information regarding hazardous substances in their neighborhoods.

In contrast, the paucity of systematic environmental and public health data in most Latin American and Caribbean countries presents an obstacle, at least to the research model familiar to US analysts. In spite of the rapid growth of industrial production and associated hazards in Latin America’s cities, limited data are available for testing relationships between ethnicity or class and exposure to environmental risk. Demographic data can also be unreliable, particularly in industrializing cities with fast-growing, mobile immigrant populations. Recent decades have witnessed explosive production growth in export-processing zones throughout Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. These industrial export sectors are notoriously defensive and secretive, and
government enforcement of hazardous-waste-disposal laws has been uneven at best. Studies that rely on industry or official statistics are likely to understate toxic threats significantly (Cohen and Méndez 2000). Right-to-know laws, if they exist at all, are typically limited in reach and efficacy (Naumann 2004). As several studies in this volume demonstrate, these constraints on the quantity and quality of data are systemic, resulting from enduring limitations on democratic space as well as pressures stemming from the imperatives of international economic integration.1

Limited funding for research or activism presents another challenge. While US environmental justice campaigns originate in poor neighborhoods with limited resources, the financial barriers to community activism are more daunting in the global South, where economic marginalization is more severe and fewer societal resources are available. Community groups in the United States or Europe can secure assistance from large environmental organizations, philanthropic foundations, and government entities, and can obtain material or logistical support from regional or national networks such as the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ) and the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice (CHEJ). In contrast, formal environmental networks in most Latin American countries are nascent at best, and philanthropic and government support is much scarcer. Latin American environmental groups are less able to advance agendas on their own terms and tend to rely more on denunciation and defense (Kelly 2002).

Context, Concepts, and Strategies
Taking questions that have arisen in one geographic or social context and seeing what insights they might reveal elsewhere presents additional challenges. What does it mean to employ the language, tools, or assumptions of environmental justice in the context of Latin America? Concepts, discourses, movements, and policies emerge from specific political-cultural-historical experiences. Environmental justice in Latin America will not share the hypotheses, assumptions, images, or political ramifications that would be most familiar to US activists and analysts. Few of the major works in Northern environmental justice scholarship have been translated into Spanish or Portuguese; only a few Latin American
authors approach their studies with the familiar language and concepts of Northern environmental justice traditions (Leff 2001; OLCA 2005). While many Latin American researchers and activists confront clear cases of environmental injustice, they operate with localized discourses and tactics. North American conceptions of popular environmental activism likewise overlook many forms of action and consciousness that are central to the Latin American environmental experience, such as struggles for land and defense of traditional seeds or agricultural practices.

Consider the question of race. Environmental justice emerged in the United States as an extension of the civil rights movement into the arena of environmental health. The environmental justice movement has drawn directly on the rhetoric, the organizational experience, and the institutions of the civil rights movement (Camacho 1998). If we think narrowly about environmental justice, only in parts of the Caribbean basin and Brazil would we find a comparable legacy of Afro-American slavery, segregation, and civil rights mobilization. Nevertheless, race-based struggles for rights and citizenship have been going on in Latin America for centuries. Indigenous identity replicates inherited social hierarchies and has long been a focal point of social justice mobilization. As several chapters in this volume illustrate, indigenous people face some of the most egregious environmental (and social) inequities in Latin America. Furthermore, as Juanita Sundberg argues, critical race theory reveals historically embedded processes of racialization that correlate to inequities in the distribution of environmental goods and bads, as well as unequal political representation.

Similarly, the socioeconomic and distributional assertions of US environmental justice will often not appear or hold the same way in other contexts. Analysts in the United States impose spatial maps of environmental hazards over race and income data to identify disproportionate siting of industrial hazards in poor and minority communities. However, clear correlations between race or poverty and environmental risk do not typically appear in Latin American cities. Instead, studies suggest that industrial hazards are distributed widely throughout metropolitan zones and outskirts. While factories and waste-storage facilities might be concentrated in industrial parks, in most cases they are dispersed across
many neighborhoods of all social classes. The risks that lower-class and working-class urban Latin Americans face are not consistently greater than those faced by middle-class or upper-middle-class residents. While higher risks often face the poorest, most recent urban immigrants, this is largely due to growth patterns that produce inexpensive informal housing settlements near factories (Kopinak and Barajas 2002). This stands in contrast with deliberate policy decisions to impose environmental hazards on politically weak minority communities—the “perpetrator-victim scenario” that can mobilize community action in the United States (Pellow 2000b).

The relative lack of legal protection and the limited opportunities for democratic political participation are also important. Only since the late 1980s or the 1990s have Latin American governments begun to adopt environmental laws and institutions. Much of that policy architecture has been modeled along US or European lines. While democratic space has opened considerably since this process began, environmental groups in nearly every Latin American country still face considerably greater constraints on participation than their counterparts in the industrial democracies. Moreover, as we will see in the case studies throughout this volume, Latin America’s environmental laws and institutions have not functioned as well in practice as on paper, in part because they cannot presuppose the regulatory capacity and political pluralism of the Northern contexts from which they were “imported” (Alfi e Cohen and Méndez 2000; Carruthers 2001a).

The Unique Promise of Environmental Justice in Latin America

In spite of the aforementioned challenges, the authors represented in this volume see ample reason for optimism about the potential of environmental justice in Latin America. As a framework for analysis and as a discourse of political action, environmental justice reveals new insights and reframes important questions about Latin America’s inherited problems of inequality and injustice. Such possibilities have been demonstrated in diverse global contexts. Studies and movements appear in many settings, including Canada, Scotland, New Zealand, Israel, Eastern Europe, India, Africa, and the Pacific Islands. In Latin America, Brazil
hosted the region’s first international colloquium on environmental justice (in 2001) and is home to the Brazilian Environmental Justice Network (Roberts and Thanos 2003; Acselrad, this volume). Analysts have explored environmental injustices in mining, oil, agriculture, and development in Peru, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and elsewhere (Faber 2002; Roberts and Thanos 2003; Martinez-Alier 2003). One volume on Latin American environmental justice broadens the concept to consider cultural rights, indigenous knowledge, genetic resources, and citizenship (Leff 2001).

While environmental justice in Latin America is not anchored in the hazardous siting inequities that fueled its rise in the United States, environmental concerns are deeply woven into the fabric of Latin American popular mobilization for social justice and equity. Environmentalism in Latin America generally begins with a stronger social justice component than its counterpart in the United States (Faber 1993; Antal 2003; Roberts and Thanos 2003). Localized meanings of “environmental justice” inhere where environmental concerns intersect with strong traditions of social justice activism.

As with environmental justice movements elsewhere, popular environmentalism in Latin America takes shape in the arenas most directly salient to people’s lives and livelihoods. Environmental resistance weaves into existing struggles for social justice because people face environmental threats in every corner of their daily lives. Environmental injustice is real to the millions who breathe the poisoned air of Mexico City, Santiago, and São Paulo. It is real to the farmworkers and day laborers who spend their days and nights in the pesticide-drenched fields of Mexican, Central American, and Chilean export agriculture. It is real on the eroded slopes of El Salvador’s volcanoes and in the Andean foothills, where farmers struggle to eke out a living on depleted soil. It is real for indigenous peoples in Chiapas, Guatemala, the Amazon, and Patagonia, whose ancestral forests are disappearing before their eyes. And it is real in the shadows of the export factories of Mexico, Honduras, and Nicaragua, where shantytown families store drinking water in discarded chemical barrels and raise their children in a landscape leached through with heavy metals. In the language of the US movement, environmental justice claims arise where people “live, work, and play” (Novotny 2000).
Social Justice, Social Movements, and the Quest for Political Voice

In addition to distributional inequity, one of the pillars of environmental justice is a concern about procedural inequity, propelling a quest for greater political participation and more authentic citizenship (Hunold and Young 1998; Schlosberg 2003). Environmental grievances gain legitimacy when representatives of affected communities demonstrate not just disproportionate exposure but deliberate exclusion from the political decisions that determine the locations and the risk levels of environmental threats.

The aspiration for political voice is likewise essential to the Latin American social-movement experience. While complete analysis of the origins and impacts of the region’s new social movements is beyond our purpose here, it does provide a backdrop. Grassroots resistance has endured from conquest and colonialism through independence and modernization, but we pay special heed to the popular movements forged in the context of Cold War repression. Social movements emerged throughout Latin America as pillars of resistance to late-twentieth-century authoritarianism and went on to play vital roles in the democratic transitions of the 1980s and the 1990s. The region has since experienced explosive growth in popular movements demanding greater voice in all matters of social justice, including labor, gender, community health, human rights, and the environment (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Lievesley 1999; Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley 2003). Strong, diverse traditions of education, organization, and networking are built into the experience of popular resistance in virtually every country in Latin America, presenting an existing populist organizational infrastructure within which justice and environment narratives readily interweave.

David Schlosberg explores the pluralistic character of the environmental justice movement with reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome metaphor. Rhizomes are a type of root system that spread underground in all directions; rather than producing a single stalk, they sprout in multiple locations, connecting in ways that are not always visible from above (Schlosberg 1999, pp. 96, 120). This is an apt metaphor for social-movement networking in Latin America, where generations of activists learned to work beneath the surface during the dark years of authori-
tarianism and military dictatorships. As environmental consciousness and activism have exploded across a democratizing Latin America, they have spread in this “rhizomatic” fashion among multiple social-movement networks, demonstrating connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. Thus, a diverse mosaic of existing popular struggles with an unmistakably environmental cast has evolved throughout Latin America. I can only begin to scratch the surface here.

The urban popular movements and shantytown dwellers’ organizations that have emerged in virtually all Latin American cities testify to the failure of development strategies that dispossess rural citizens at a pace that outruns the ability of urban expansion to absorb them. Neighbor- hood associations in urban and peri-urban communities increasingly organize and educate people to confront pressing environmental health hazards, alongside traditional issues of education, land titles, crime, and public services (Gilbert 1994; Collinson 1996; Alfie Cohen 2003; Roberts and Thanos 2003).

Women’s movements are remapping social relations throughout Latin America in human rights, community health, labor, and other campaigns for justice. As in the United States, women often take the lead in Latin America’s environmental justice campaigns precisely because injustices obtain in ways that threaten their households, their workplaces, and their children’s health (Hofrichter 1993; Di Chiro 1998). This link between gender and environmental health is represented in hundreds of women’s grassroots and community organizations throughout Latin America.

Independent labor movements in Latin America’s labor-surplus economies still struggle to secure basic rights and protections for workers. Central to many of these struggles is a growing awareness of the inhumanity of workplaces in which unprotected toxic exposures are an unacceptable price to pay for employment (Williams 2002; Anner 2003). At the intersection of labor, human rights, gender, environment, and public health, the global anti-sweatshop movement demonstrates broad recognition of workplace injustices in the world economy.

Latin America has a strong tradition of academic activism, spawning generations of “organic intellectuals” who keep one foot in the academy and another in the activist community. They lead, support, or lend technical expertise to the tens of thousands of non-governmental organizations
(NGOs) that have exploded on the scene to address virtually every dimension of social and environmental injustice. Agronomists and forest ecologists lend support to rural grassroots groups, as do attorneys, epidemiologists, and toxicologists in contaminated cities (Reilly 1995; Brooks and Fox 2002; Hogenboom, Cohen, and Antal 2003).

Indigenous rights have been a powerful catalyst to mobilization throughout the region as native communities battle the forces that threaten to fragment them, displace them, and drive them toward cultural disintegration. Not only are Indian leaders and their environmental allies revaluing the inherited ecological wisdom of their ancestors; struggles for indigenous recognition and autonomy are often inseparable from environmental and resource claims (Carruthers 1997; Apffel-Marglin 1998). Environmental injustices can be glaring, as in the ongoing conflicts with the international oil companies that have contaminated indigenous lands in Ecuador and Colombia (Martinez-Alier 2003; Roberts and Thanos 2003).

*Campesino* identity and farmworker identity have long been pillars of political participation in rural Latin America, particularly where peasants’ demands for justice figure in national histories of revolutionary violence. Now despoiled landscapes, poisoned watersheds, agricultural chemicals, and other rural environmental problems share the platform with such traditional peasant issues as land, credit, and commodity prices (Paré et al. 1997; Roberts and Thanos 2003; Wright 2005). Global sustainable-agriculture and fair-trade movements represent national and cross-national solidarity with *campesinos* who suffer from environmental and economic injustices.

Human rights struggles have tremendous salience for Latin Americans, with decades of authoritarianism looming large in their recent pasts. Human rights activism and legislation increasingly incorporate “environmental rights,” and human rights campaigns have an established international reach (Adeola 2000; Leff 2001; Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003b).

Finally, the popular church of liberation theology has been a powerful force in the struggle for social justice, with significant political ramifications in Nicaragua, Mexico, Brazil, and elsewhere. In theology, policy, and daily practice, Christian Base Communities have linked environmen-
tal stewardship to human rights and equity (Faber 1993, 2002; Esteva and Prakash 1998).

These movements provide a mere glimpse into the many ways that environmental concerns mesh with the quest for social justice in numerous, interlocking arenas of contemporary popular participation in Latin America. This takes the form of a web of networked organizations, all demanding greater voice in the political decisions that affect people’s lives. Many of these activists might not identify themselves first as environmentalists, nor might outside observers first see them as such. Yet all are increasingly mobilized to action by inter-related social, economic, and environmental injustices.

Environmental Justice and Global Justice
In addition to histories of state repression and the quest for more vital democracies, we must also consider Latin American social mobilization in the context of today’s backlash against the “Washington Consensus” agenda of economic liberalization. Since the debt crisis of the early 1980s, virtually all Latin American governments have actively embraced (or acquiesced to) the mandates of international creditors and financial institutions, implementing strict packages of “free-market” restructuring policies to stabilize currencies, reduce inflation, shrink the role of the state in the economy, introduce greater competitiveness, create a favorable climate for corporate investment, and eliminate barriers to trade. Though the controversies surrounding this economic program lie beyond my scope, it has provoked widespread resistance across Latin America as people have reacted against crippling austerity programs, worsening economic polarization, the erosion of basic economic security, the collapse of small farms and businesses, and insurmountable household debt. Sophisticated, multi-faceted campaigns to constrain or renegotiate the process, character, and terms of international economic integration are now central to the region’s politics (Chalmers 1997; Broad 2002; Finnegan 2003; Fisher and Ponniah 2003).

Social, economic, and political relationships between Latin America and the industrial North increasingly reflect the forms, tensions, and consequences of global neoliberalism. With deepening economic and corporate integration, solidarity links to the South present dense
counterpointing concentrations of the myriad “transnational advocacy networks” that have arisen with various aspirations to humanize the workings of the global economy (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Brooks and Fox 2002; Hogenboom, Cohen, and Antal 2003). An important thread of this story began in the early 1990s, when a network of labor and citizen’s campaigns from Mexico, the United States, and Canada rose to oppose and ultimately renegotiate the content of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In 1999, transnational citizen activism captured the world’s attention with street protests of the World Trade Organization’s ministerial conference in Seattle. Since then, a broader global justice movement calling for debt relief and for reform of the institutions and rules of global trade and finance has made its presence felt at meetings of regional and international institutions in Washington, Prague, Genoa, Cancún, Miami, and elsewhere. Though the movement is complex, controversial, and multifaceted, it has articulated and projected coherent arguments, images, and assumptions about the injustices of the world economy, including environmental inequities.

Activism and scholarly debate over the costs and consequences of economic globalization incorporate important elements of the environmental justice discourse writ large (Anand 2004). Environmental injustices are not “relegated to local failures in wealthy nations” but are instead “symptomatic of systemic tendencies of globalization” (Byrne, Martinez, and Glover 2002, p. 8). Global systems of production and distribution parcel out costs and benefits with profound inequity. Special benefits accrue to highly mobile international capital (mostly based in the North), as well as to domestic subsidiaries and locally allied industrial and agricultural elites. Consuming classes in both the North and the South enjoy an expanding cornucopia of inexpensive manufactures and foods. But the “poor neighborhoods of color” on a planetary scale—the peasant villages and working class communities of the global South—pay disproportionate human and environmental costs in the form of low-wage labor and unchecked environmental devastation. Without corrections, free-trade regimes reward the producers who most effectively push the negative externalities of production onto nature, the poor, and future generations (Khor 1993; Weissman 1993; Shiva 1997; Glover 2002).
Globalized notions of environmental justice take a variety of additional forms. “Ecological footprinting” assesses the load of different human lifestyles on ecosystems, highlighting the disproportionate ecological damage caused by the world’s overconsumers (Durning 1992; Rees and Westra 2003). Wolfgang Sachs (2002) argues that the world’s poor endured inequality when they could aspire to a larger “slice of the cake,” but ecological constraints have undermined that premise; the world economy has become a zero-sum game in which benefits to the wealthy come directly at the cost of social and ecological injustices to the poor. William Rees and Laura Westra (2003) refer to an “ecological apartheid” that segregates the world’s peoples along class and ethnic lines. Within the larger global movement for debt relief, Friends of the Earth and Acción Ecológica launched a campaign for repayment of the “ecological debt” that rich countries owe to the poor for the colonial and post-colonial legacies of accruing their own wealth at the cost of Southern poverty and ecological devastation. The “International Right to Know Coalition,” comprising more than 200 environmental, human rights, and social justice organizations, promotes laws requiring global corporations to disclose environmental and labor information about their operations abroad.

The Practice of Environmental Justice in Latin America

Environmental justice is clearly global. Rather than framing it principally as a US movement experience that has migrated abroad, we should focus on forms of environmental justice as they have unfolded in Latin America, on their own timelines, with their own language and their own historically grounded circumstances. While policy transplants from a Northern template have often been disappointing, dysfunctional, or ineffective in implementation in the South, elements of other countries’ environmental experiences have in fact appeared in creative new forms in Latin America. These are not simple transplants; they have evolved as hybrid fusions of imported notions with local, indigenous ideas or experiences. We can identify hundreds of illustrative examples: biosphere and nature reserves (particularly those which consciously reject the “wilderness” profile and seek instead to integrate residents as stakeholders), ecological tourism,
traditional medicine, sustainable agriculture, social forestry, fair-trade organizations, creative tax policies, and even locally appropriate innovations in urban planning (such as the innovations in greenbelts, public transportation, and waste management made by the Brazilian city of Curitiba—see Collinson 1996 and Roberts and Thanos 2003).

According to Joan Martinez-Alier (2003), environmental justice is but one element of a larger “environmentalism of the poor” that can be found everywhere in the world. Daniel Faber (2002) presents the “revolutionary ecology” of Nicaragua’s Sandinista government in the 1980s as a model infused with principles of equity and social justice alongside more traditional environmental notions of resource conservation. There is likewise a substantial literature on the defense of inherited ecological knowledge among indigenous peoples; traditional knowledge informs myriad experiments with sustainable agriculture, social forestry, and even ecological management of resources for small artisans (Bray 1995; Carruthers 1997, 2001b; Apffel-Marglin 1998). This book argues that we should view environmental justice in this mold—as a malleable discourse that presents elements of both Northern and Southern forms of environmental consciousness. In scores of cases across Latin America and the Caribbean, we find claims for justice already embedded in myriad indigenous, independent forms of popular environmentalism. The language, principles, tactics, and questions posed by environmental justice present an opportunity to reveal new insights, new ideas, and new ways of understanding the tremendous social and environmental challenges facing the region. “In this sense, the discourse of environmental justice may be seen as a unifying process, bringing together diverse situations and sharing understandings and experiences.” (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003b, p. 9)

Organization of the Book

The chapters in part I address the larger conceptual issues evoked by environmental justice as a discourse, a social movement, or an analytical construct in the Latin American context. Juanita Sundberg explores the relationship between race and the environment in Latin American social movements. She dispels the idea that race is marginal or irrelevant,
arguing instead that it is a key variable for environmental justice research in the region. Peter Newell turns our attention to the global economy, exploring the controversial relationships between trade, social justice, and the environment. Global economic, cultural, and conceptual integration place issues of North-South justice at the center of the discussion about the global future. Newell finds the demands of environmental justice—equity, recognition, and participation—increasingly framing Latin American social debates over the virtues and perils of globalization. Henri Acelsrad, in his account of an environmental justice movement in the South, discusses domestic and international contributions to the evolution of Brazilian environmental consciousness. As one of the co-founders and organizers of the Brazilian Environmental Justice Network, Acelsrad has been a scholarly observer, an activist, and a participant in this process.

Parts II and III take us in a more empirical direction with a series of case studies from Latin America and the Caribbean. Recall that the perception of unjust exposure to industrial hazards fueled much of the North American environmental justice experience. In Latin America, there is a sense of injustice with regard to the unfair distribution of environmental burdens associated with rapid industrial development. Part II offers four studies that demonstrate issue mobilization around the perils of industrial development. Latin American leaders have eagerly embraced industrialization as the quickest path to modernity and economic security. Powerful public and private interests have imposed a fast-paced, largely unregulated process of industrial development on inherited class hierarchies and ethnic fault lines, seldom pausing to consider, let alone constrain, the consequences for human, social, and environmental health. Though the local language and expressions vary, social justice and environmental health concerns are increasingly fused in the popular sector’s response to industrial hazards.

Carlos Reboratti begins part II by taking us through a series of environmental conflicts in Argentina, demonstrating similar social and political tensions over an array of industrial and infrastructural “mega-development” projects. Chapters 5–7 explore environmental justice in Mexico, a country whose rapid industrial development and deep integration with its northern neighbors might imply a strong environmental
justice consciousness. Sarah Moore’s study of environmental risks and solid-waste management in Oaxaca offers a sobering assessment of the limited quality of citizenship in the Mexican policy process. In chapter 6, I look at the US-Mexico border, which offers an intensified local illustration of global injustices in the distribution of costs, benefits, and risks. My study looks at the industrial-waste hazards of the border region’s export assembly plants and at northern Mexico’s role as an export platform to meet the energy needs of the United States. Jordi Díez and Reyes Rodríguez derive important lessons from the absence of environmental justice mobilization in a community facing serious health hazards and pollution from a northern Mexican mineral and chemical enterprise. Their study demonstrates how cultural, institutional, and contextual barriers can seriously constrain popular environmental mobilization in Latin America.

Part III offers a departure from the familiar North American traditions of environmental justice scholarship, helping to flesh out the book’s assertion that there is indeed a distinctively Latin American environmental justice framework emerging—one that adopts varied languages and takes myriad localized forms, merging local environmental and health concerns with the language and the tactics of justice mobilization. Throughout Latin America’s history, social injustice has been inextricably linked with grossly inequitable access to land and natural resources. Perpetual conflicts between landed elites and land-poor peasants explain much of the region’s contentious and violent political history, from conquest through colonialism and independence, and at every turn in the modern era. Part III focuses on the power and politics of land and resources, which infuse social justice struggles with environmental values. It opens with Michele Zebich-Knos’s analysis of the politics of competing land uses in Latin America, where environmental values vie with traditional extractive industries for access to land. The expansion of national and private parklands may present opportunities for more equitable revenue sharing, particularly through ecological tourism. Wendy Wolford takes us to Brazil, which suffers under one of the world’s most inequitable structures of land distribution. She traces collective mobilization for land and resource justice, demonstrating the localized pursuit of distributitional and procedural equity. In Bolivia too, national and local
conceptions of injustice in the use of natural resources have fueled massive social discontent in recent years, as Tom Perreault chronicles. With a variety of resistance strategies to challenge the privatization of natural gas and of water, Bolivians are testing the boundaries of citizenship and are asserting livelihood rights. Many advocates view the closure of the US Navy’s bombing range in Vieques, Puerto Rico as a significant victory for a Latin American environmental justice movement. Yet Katherine McCaffrey documents Vieques as an incomplete, ongoing struggle for environmental justice and political accountability. McCaffrey shows how the conversion of the former bombing range to a wildlife preserve not only continues to estrange islanders from the land but also allows the US military to elude responsibility for a toxic legacy of unexploded ordnance and chemical and industrial waste. The volume concludes with a comparative examination of the control of water resources in Chile, Bolivia, and Mexico. Stephanie Wickstrom traces decades of water policy in the three countries, exploring the politics of control, access, and exclusion. Wickstrom’s study demonstrates the value of cross-national analysis, applying the lessons from the three countries comparatively to assess the problems and prospects of environmental justice in the region.

Combined, these studies suggest that, although environmental justice research and activism present risks and challenges, they also hold tremendous potential. Environmental justice has firm roots in Latin America, locally, nationally, and transnationally. The discourse of environmental justice highlights macro issues of global injustice North to South, yet takes on localized meanings appropriate to the many parts of the world in which it now appears. Like the activists, advocates, and analysts who operate under its banner, we have every reason to expect that environmental justice will continue to present openings for a more just and sustainable future for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Notes

1. In debt-burdened Latin American and Caribbean countries, state austerity often translates into chronic underfunding of environmental institutions, undercutting enforcement and efficacy. Indeed, limited state regulatory capacity is an enduring feature of the business climate in much of the region, valued by transnational or domestic industrial interests not accustomed to constraints.

3. Although this “fair trade campaign” did not see its proposed “just and sustainable alternative” to the NAFTA enacted, its members’ efforts were indispensable in pressuring the US Congress and the Clinton administration to require the NAFTA signatories adopt parallel side agreements, ensuring basic protections against labor abuses and environmental destruction (Brooks and Fox 2002).

References


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