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The Globalization of Environmental Justice: Lessons from the U.S.-Mexico Border

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This article is part of an emerging effort to explore environmental justice as it appears in Latin America, both as a symbol of popular mobilization and as a set of principles for scholarly analysis and interpretation. The study begins on the U.S.-Mexico border, with one community's struggle against industrial hazardous waste. It then considers larger regional efforts to develop cross-border environmental justice collaboration, and a national campaign to create more authentic right-to-know laws in Mexico. Northern Mexico also provides a point of departure for a broader analysis of the promise and limits of environmental justice in Latin America. While the constraints are serious and the successes mixed, the article finds hopeful potential, arguing that environmental justice takes on myriad, local forms that fuse environmental goals into existing popular movements for social justice.

Keywords environmental equity, environmental justice, industrial hazardous waste, right-to-know, transnational advocacy, U.S.-Mexico border

Since the early 1980s, African American, Latino, Native American, and other minority activists have fused environmental and civil rights struggles under the banner of environmental justice (EJ), fueling popular resistance against the industrial and toxic hazards concentrated in their neighborhoods. The environmental justice movement (EJM) has transformed the scope, character, and tactics of environmentalism in the United States (Bullard 1993; Cole and Foster 2001). By opening a dialogue about race, class, and the distribution of environmental threats, EJ has also contributed to a new framework for scholarly analysis, interpretation, and policy (Bullard 1994; Bryant 1995; Pellow 2000a). Several authors even argue that it represents a paradigm shift in the study and practice of environmental politics (Novotny 2000; Taylor 2000; Rhodes 2003).

Popular struggles for environmental well-being and social justice come together in many other forms and places as well. In fact, environmental justice is an important part of the fabric of popular environmentalism in much of the world. Analysts have assessed the global distribution of environmental risks (such as toxic waste or climate change) through the lens of justice, revealing the disproportionate costs borne in the

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Global South. Additionally, activists, scholars, and policymakers have employed EJ language, symbols, and assumptions to understand problems, promote action, and resolve conflicts in Europe, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere.¹

This article contributes to a growing literature on environmental justice abroad, in this case, in Latin America. It takes its lessons from the U.S.-Mexico border, an enigmatic space where local and global collide. The border offers a microcosm of north-south relations, revealing the forms, consequences, and tensions of global economic and cultural integration. It is simultaneously prosperous and poor, urban and rural, Anglo American and Latin American, First World and Third World. Its residents feel these contradictions with great intensity. They have also demonstrated myriad efforts to confront them, including local, national, and cross-border movements for environmental justice.

The article is organized into two main sections. The first explores borderland EJ empirically, at multiple levels of analysis. It begins locally, with one community's struggle to confront the industrial waste hazards of northern Mexico's export assembly plants, the *maquiladoras*. It then moves to a regional overview of border-region EJ organizations and networks, and finally to Mexico's national right-to-know campaign. The second section analyzes the larger lessons for environmental justice in Latin America, both as a banner of popular mobilization and as a set of analytical principles. While facing significant constraints, EJ also holds promise for Latin America, taking diverse and locally adapted forms, and revealing unique insights.

Environmental Justice on the U.S.-Mexico Border

Metales y Derivados

Many researchers and journalists have chronicled the varying successes and shortcomings of a series of EJ struggles over chemical hazards in and around the industrial parks that dominate the landscape of Mexico's northern border. Local cases have been prominent in ongoing debates about the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) institutional protections for communities and workers. Studies have focused on unusually high rates of neural-tube birth defects (such as spina bifida and anencephaly) in border communities, acute chemical toxicity in Mexicali's New River, and the lead smelters, battery recycling facilities, and other uncontrolled hazardous wastes or chemical releases that have tarnished the reputations of Stepan Chemical, Alco Pacífico, Chemical Waste Management, Hyundai, and other companies.²

Even with that ignoble background, *Metales y Derivados* stands as one of the border's most visible symbols of an industrial threat to a community's environmental health. The Metales plant perches on the rim of Tijuana's Otay Mesa industrial park, 150 yards above Colonia Chilpancingo's 10,000 residents. Owned by San Diego-based New Frontier Trading Corporation, the plant began smelting in 1972 to recover lead and copper from automobile batteries and other sources. For over 20 years, residents expressed concerns to local and national officials about possible threats to public health and the environment. One 1990 study of the local creek found lead levels 3,000 times higher than U.S. standards, and cadmium 1,000 times higher (Sullivan 2003).

In 1987 and again in 1989, Mexican authorities ordered cleanups and imposed fines; however, the factory owners did not respond, and there was no enforcement (Fritsch 2002). The facility remained in operation until March 1994, when the Federal Ministry for Environmental Protection (PROFEPA) ordered its closure for violating Mexico's environmental laws. The owners fled to the United States, leaving approximately 24,000 tons of mixed hazardous waste behind, including over 7,000 tons of lead slag. With only a crumbling retaining wall, rusting drums, and the tattered remnants of plastic tarps to contain the wastes, the plant continued to leach arsenic, cadmium, antimony, and other hazardous metals into the soils and waters of the community below (EHC 2004).

Metales y Derivados landed on the international stage in October 1998, when San Diego's Environmental Health Coalition (EHC) and residents of Colonia Chilpancingo (the Padre Canyon Restoration Committee) filed a petition with the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC), the principle institution of NAFTA's environmental "side agreement." Chilpancingo's parents and activists held news conferences, organized vigils and protests, and launched letter writing and direct action campaigns—strategies familiar to EJ activists everywhere. The case gained a high profile in the debate over the lessons of NAFTA's shortcomings for the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (Fritsch 2002).

The community's campaign continued for several years. In February 2002, the NACEC released its factual record on the *Metales* case. The report confirmed the community's claim that the site presented grave risks to human health, and called for remediation (NACEC 2002). The ruling offered vindication and a great symbolic achievement, but it was a hollow victory, given that the commission has no enforcement authority or budget.

With no cleanup forthcoming, local homemakers and activists formed a new citizen's organization, the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental (Chilpancingo Environmental Justice Collective), in April 2002. The women of the Colectivo kept pressing PROFEPA for a cleanup, because, in the words of Colectivo Promotora Lourdes Lujan, "we were looking at a case of injustice . . . we are looking for justice, and the government and the companies are not giving it to us" (interviewed in Tijuana, Mexico, September 27, 2002). In May 2003, they increased the pressure by offering a cleanup plan of their own, calling on officials to seek implementation (Colectivo Chilpancingo 2003). In February 2004, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and its Mexican counterparts began to seek funding for a cleanup strategy. A month later, EHC and Colectivo members met with U.S., Mexican, and Baja Californian officials and established a working group to carry out cleanup and remediation (Cantlupe and Wilkie 2004).

Finally, in June 2004, the Colectivo and the Mexican government signed an agreement for a comprehensive cleanup of the *Metales y Derivados* site within 5 years (EHC 2004). Mexico's state and federal governments initially contributed \$500,000, and the U.S. EPA \$85,000 more, toward a cleanup expected to cost \$5–10 million (Cantlupe 2004). In April 2005, the state of Baja California expropriated the site and assumed responsibility for remediation. By the end of 2005, the bulk of the highest risk, above-ground hazardous waste had been removed (2,000 tons, plus 50 tons of lead smelter process equipment), and the EHC and the Colectivo had succeeded in archiving all of the waste-removal manifests. By 2007, the cleanup reached the third phase of the working group's remediation plan.³

Regional Organizations and Networks

The Metales story is reflective of a much broader array of experiences, communities, and organizations involved in environmental justice throughout the U.S.-Mexico border region. I offer here only an illustrative glimpse, selected from scores of local and regional groups.⁴ Important regional EJ advocacy networks include the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ), the Red Fronterizo de Salud y Medio Ambiente (Border Health and Environment Network), the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras (CJM), Fundación Ecológica Mexicana (Mexican Ecological Foundation), the Border Ecology Project (BEP), Arizona Toxics Information (ATI), Greenpeace Mexico, the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC), and the INCITRA Project (Cross-border Citizen Information). In the area of environmental law, the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA, Mexican Environmental Law Center) works with Earth Justice Legal Defense Fund and the Center for International Environmental Law. In the areas of labor, trade, and workplace health and safety, the Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC), the Frente Auténtico del Trabajo (FAT), and the Comité de Apoyo Fronterizo Obrero Regional have worked with the CJM and dozens of local, regional, and national organizations.⁵

At the community level, starting in the east, the Comunidad Ecológica de Matamoros (Matamoros Ecological Community) works with CJM on maquiladora toxic hazards. The Texas Center for Policy Studies supports grassroots EJ organizations in Coahuila and Tamaulipas, and works with the Comité Chihuahua de Solidaridad y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Chihuahua Solidarity Committee for the Defense of Human Rights), and with the Northeast Environmental Rights Center on forests, watersheds, and hazardous waste. The Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission and the Border Commission against Radioactive Waste assisted local organizations in the defeat of the Sierra Blanca radioactive waste facility and a Chemical Waste Management site in southern Texas. In the Ciudad Juárez area, important groups include the Grupo Ecologista y Participación Ciudadana, the Alianza Internacional Ecologista del Bravo, and the Comité Ecológico de Ciudad Juárez.⁶

In Baja California, notable organizations include the Foro Ecologista de Baja California, the Movimiento Ecologista Mexicano en Baja California (MEBAC), the Grupo Ecologista Gaviotas, ECO-SOL, and the Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental.⁷ Grupo Yeuni works in environmental law. Tijuana's Grupo Factor X/CITTAC (Workers Information Center) focuses on gender in the workplace. San Diego's Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), affiliated regionally with the SNEEJ and nationally with the CEHJ (Center for Environmental Health and Justice), sponsors the "Border Environmental Justice Campaign" with the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental.

It is beyond the scope of this analysis to demonstrate comprehensively the many ways in which environmental justice narratives, tactics, values, and assumptions are manifest in the daily work and the diverse experiences of so many different organizations and communities. To understand these processes, some observers have emphasized the dynamics of diffusion, assessing the development of EJ narratives and concepts in Mexico in terms of social movement action across borders (Bandy 1997; Bejarano 2002; Antal 2003). Analysts have also situated border environmentalism explicitly in the context of neoliberal economic integration, especially as part of

the response to the threats and opportunities posed by NAFTA and the world economy (Dreiling 1998; Bacon 2004; Bandy 2004).

Diffusion and political economy are indeed crucial elements in the story of borderland environmental justice, as they are in Latin America more broadly. However, as I argue more completely later in this article, an additional critical consideration involves unique fusions of local and global notions and practices. While clearly influenced by proximity to their U.S. counterparts, these border organizations demonstrate distinctive conceptions of environmental justice, rooted locally, infused with Mexican political culture, and unmistakably binational in character. And while the dynamics of global capitalism have indisputably provoked many high-profile EJ struggles (such as *Metales y Derivados*), not all social movement action can be explained by or reduced to economic imperatives. As we see in the case that follows, activists have also brought EJ into the realm of national politics as part of a larger political quest for expanded legal rights and deeper democracy in Mexico.

Right-To-Know in Mexico

Right-to-know laws are important to advocates of environmental justice because compelling evidence of industrial threats can bolster claims of injustice, generating greater pressure for compliance or clean up. Public right-to-know first appeared on the Mexican policy agenda through NAFTA membership, mandated by the NACEC in order to harmonize standards across the three countries. However, it did not come to life until a coalition of borderland EJ groups, scholars, and policy-makers launched a legal and political campaign in the mid-1990s. Laura Silvan, of Tijuana's Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental, explains that her organization worked with Mexicali's Comité Cívico de Divulgación Ecológica and Agua Prieta's Enlace Ecológico to lead the effort, with important support coming from the Border Ecology Project and Arizona Toxics Information (interviewed in Chula Vista, CA, July 21, 2002).⁸ Their efforts led to changes in Mexico's General Environmental Law (LGEEPA) in 1996, and took legal form in 1997 as an executive proposal promoting voluntary reporting of pollution. Unfortunately, voluntary compliance remained low (around 5%), funding was insufficient, and various technical and administrative setbacks undercut its implementation (Durazo and García Zendejas n.d.; Naumann 2004).

While border EJ groups kept up the pressure, a parallel process was unfolding over transparency and accountability for human rights violations during Mexico's "Dirty War" in the 1970s. Together, these processes produced the two central juridical components of Mexico's right-to-know laws (Naumann 2003). First, in December 2001, the legislature created a Pollution Release and Transfer Registry (PRTR) modeled on those in the United States and Canada. Second, in June 2002, President Vicente Fox signed the Federal Transparency and Governmental Public Information Access Law, which potentially "fills gaps in the environmental law, giving Mexico the best of only three laws of this nature in Latin America" (Naumann 2003, 2). By spring 2004, the Mexican government had created an Internet site that some experts claim produces better access than the U.S. Freedom of Information Act (Dellios 2004).

Nearly 15 years from its beginnings, industrial right-to-know is still disappointingly limited in practice. The Transparency Law has received substantial attention, funding, and support, but it only provides information on government agencies,

not private industrial practices. In March 2004, President Fox signed the PRTR into law, yet corporate compliance remains significantly lower than U.S. or Canadian norms. Industry presence on the advisory board outweighs citizen groups, who fear their participation is symbolic (Naumann 2003). Underfunding, administrative setbacks, lack of sanctions, and other major structural problems continue to undercut implementation. So far, President Calderón has not made right-to-know a high priority. Nonetheless, it is now firmly established as a feature of the Mexican political landscape, and will likely continue to generate popular and media expectations of progress toward substantive legal status.

Environmental Justice in Latin America: Lessons from Northern Mexico

It is a common mistake to interpret environmental awareness, activism, and policy as developments that first emerged the industrialized North and have since diffused globally. In reality, there have always been multiple forms of popular environmental thought and mobilization in most parts of the world, even if they have not appeared in forms familiar to Western eyes. Such is the case with environmental justice.⁹ This section seeks better understanding of the promise and limits of EJ in Latin America, extrapolating on the lessons from the border. I first consider key challenges and differences, and then turn to its promise, rooted in diverse, localized notions and practices.

Data and Funding Limits

One challenge to EJ research in Mexico concerns the availability of scientific data. Starting with *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* (Commission for Racial Justice 1987), U.S. EJ advocates have documented the disproportionate environmental burdens faced by poor communities of color. Social scientists, attorneys, and public health advocates employ various methods to identify and assess environmental inequities. The Emergency Planning and Community Right-To-Know Act of 1986 (and its Toxics Release Inventory) also makes information available to community leaders about hazardous substances in their neighborhoods. In contrast, the lack of environmental, demographic, and public health data limits the viability of that model of EJ research in northern Mexico and in much of Latin America. In rapidly growing border cities, it is difficult to find reliable data on environmental risk, let alone to assess relationships to race or class. Studies relying on industry or official statistics often understate toxic threats, the manufacturing sector is infamously secretive, and enforcement of waste disposal laws is uneven at best (Alfie Cohen and Méndez 2000).

Funding poses another obstacle. EJ campaigns in the United States face obvious financial challenges, but barriers to activism are more daunting south of the border, where economic marginalization is more severe and fewer societal resources are available. Grass-roots U.S. groups can secure assistance from larger environmental organizations, foundations, government agencies, and regional and national networks. In contrast, formal networks and philanthropic support are nascent in Mexico and most of Latin America. Mexican EJ groups are therefore less able to advance agendas on their own terms, relying more on denunciation and defense (Kelly 2002).

Conceptual and Practical Distinctions

Another set of issues has to do with taking questions that arose in one context to see what insights they might reveal elsewhere. What does it mean to employ the language, tools, or assumptions of EJ in Latin America? Latin American EJ might not share the hypotheses, images, or policy implications that U.S. analysts would expect. Little EJ scholarship has been translated into Spanish, and few Mexican writers have approached it (Leff 2001). According to Carla García Zendejas of the Border Power Plant Working Group, “Mexican scholars and activists for the most part . . . don’t use that language. They have experienced environmental injustice first hand, but haven’t put that name on it” (interviewed in Tijuana, August 21, 2002).

Consider the racial dimension. In the United States, the EJM built directly on the experience and institutions of the civil rights movement. If we think of EJ so strictly, only in parts of the Caribbean and Brazil do we find a counterpart legacy of slavery, segregation, and racial struggle. Yet race-based struggles for rights and citizenship have been present across centuries of Latin American history. Indigenous people, for instance, face some of the region’s most egregious environmental inequities and are a significant presence in its EJ movements.

The geographic assertions of U.S.-styled EJ should likewise not form the benchmark for other settings. For example, in urban northern Mexico we do not find clear correlations between poverty or race and environmental risk. Industrial hazards are widely distributed throughout the metropolitan zones and outskirts; toxic threats do not differ markedly by social class. While scholars sometimes identify higher risks to the poorest, most recent immigrants, they stem mostly from growth patterns that produce squatter settlements within walking distance of factory jobs (Kopinak and del Rocio Barajas 2002). This is distinct from deliberate imposing hazards on minority communities—what David Pellow (2000b) calls the “perpetrator-victim scenario.”

Another important distinction concerns the relative lack of legal protections and limited opportunities for democratic political participation. Like many countries in Latin America, Mexico modeled its environmental policy architecture along U.S. lines, starting with the 1988 General Law of Ecological Equilibrium and Environmental Protection (LGEEPA). While democratic space has opened considerably since that time, Mexican environmental groups still face much greater constraints on participation than do their U.S. counterparts (Alfie Cohen 2003). As we saw with both Metales and right-to-know, Mexico’s laws and institutions have not functioned as well in practice as on paper, in part because they cannot rely on that degree of regulatory capacity and political openness (Alfie Cohen and Méndez 2000).

The EJ Promise and Popular Participation

In spite of these challenges and differences, EJ has tremendous potential as a framework for analysis and as a call to political action, not just in northern Mexico but also throughout Latin America. While siting of industrial hazards is part of the picture, environmental concerns are central to many wider community movements for social justice. Popular environmentalism in Latin America is taking shape in the arenas most salient to people’s lives and livelihoods. Environmental resistance becomes enmeshed in existing struggles for justice because people feel environmental injustices in their daily lives—in poisoned urban air and water, the pesticide-drenched

fields of export agriculture, the eroded slopes and disappearing forests of the countryside, and the toxic shadows of the export factories. In the language of the movement, Latin America's call for environmental justice has emerged where people "live, work, and play" (Novotny 2000).

Greater political participation is a core demand of EJ movements everywhere. Affected communities suffer "procedural injustice" when excluded from the decisions that determine the distribution of environmental risks. We saw this participatory aspiration expressed in earlier discussion in this article, in dozens of borderland organizations and networks in environmental, labor, gender, community health, human rights, and other arenas. Northern Mexico reflects a broader regional trend of growth in popular movements demanding greater political voice in all matters of social justice (Lievesley 1999; Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley 2003). Strong, diverse traditions of education, organization, and networking are built into the Latin American popular experience, presenting an established organizational infrastructure that readily fuses environmental and justice concerns.

David Schlosberg describes the character of the EJ movement by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome metaphor (1987). Rhizomes are a root system that spreads 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, 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 years of military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. As environmental consciousness and activism have exploded across a democratizing Latin America, they continue to spread in this "rhizomatic" fashion among multiple networks, demonstrating connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity.

Thus, a diverse mosaic of existing popular struggles has taken on an environmental cast in Mexico and throughout Latin America. Urban popular movements are incorporating environmental health along with their agendas of housing, crime, and public services. Women's movements propel EJ leadership in the face of threats to households, workplaces, and children's health. Independent labor movements seek basic rights, including protection from toxic exposures in substandard workplaces. Latin America boasts a strong tradition of "organic intellectuals" with one foot in the academy and another in activism—leading, supporting, and providing technical expertise to grassroots groups. Indigenous rights struggles are resurgent, as native communities stand against the forces that threaten to fragment and displace. For *campesinos* (peasant farmers), spoiled landscapes, poisoned watersheds, and agrochemicals now share the platform with traditional issues of land, credit, and commodity prices. Human rights activism and legislation increasingly incorporate "environmental rights" as a component of human rights. The popular church of liberation theology is a powerful force in the struggle for justice in Latin America, now linking environmental rights to human rights.

This is a mere glance at the many ways environmental concerns mesh with the quest for social justice in multiple arenas of contemporary political participation in Mexico and Latin America. EJ has taken shape in webs of organizations demanding greater voice in the political decisions that affect people's lives. Many of these activists might not identify themselves first as environmentalists, yet all are increasingly mobilized by interlinked social, economic, and environmental injustices.

EJ and Globalization in Latin America

Some grass-roots environmental struggles in Latin America derive principally from the political realm—efforts to circumvent predatory bossism, problems of state corporatism, unresponsive states or party systems, local challenges to patronage and clientelism, and so forth. Other struggles build more fundamentally from the quest for recognition and the politics of identity—ethnic, campesino, gender, religious, and so on. However, the economic imperatives of economic globalization establish a critical context for understanding much of the contemporary EJ mobilization in Latin America.

Starting with the debt crisis of the early 1980s, Mexico and other Latin American governments acceded to the mandates of international creditors and financial institutions, implementing strict 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. While the controversies surrounding the “Washington Consensus” economic program are beyond this essay’s scope, it has by now provoked broad resistance across Latin America, as people have reacted against crippling austerity programs, deepening economic polarization, the collapse of small farms and businesses, and insurmountable debt. Efforts to constrain or renegotiate the process, character, and terms of international economic integration are key to the region’s politics today (Finnegan 2003; Kingstone 2006).

The U.S.-Mexico border hosts one of the world’s most dense concentrations of the “transnational advocacy networks” that aspire to humanize the workings of the global economy (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Brooks and Fox 2002; Hogenboom, Alfie Cohen, and Antal 2003). An important thread of this story originated in the early 1990s with a trilateral network of labor and citizen’s campaigns to challenge and renegotiate NAFTA. Transnational citizen activism captured the world’s attention a few years later in the street protests of the 1999 World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle. Since then, a broader global justice movement calling for debt relief and reform of the institutions of global trade and finance has made its presence felt at dozens of meetings of regional and international institutions across the globe.

This transnational activism incorporates EJ concepts and principles on a global scale. 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, 8). Globalized production parcels out costs and benefits unfairly, accruing special benefits to international capital, domestic subsidiaries, and local elites. Consuming classes enjoy a profusion of inexpensive manufactures and foods while the “poor neighborhoods” of the global south pay disproportionate human and environmental costs in the form of low-wage labor and environmental exploitation. Without corrections, free trade regimes reward producers for pushing the negative externalities of production onto nature, the poor, and future generations.

Pressed up against the First World, northern Mexico’s EJ activists are acutely attuned to this global dimension. In the words of Magdalena Cerda of the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental: “If we think of the world as neighborhoods, then it’s obvious—the poor countries pay the environmental costs. Mexico is a poor neighborhood” (interviewed in Tijuana, September 27, 2002). And from Carla García Zendejas: “We live with this every day. We know that there are many things

that we have to put up with on this border—the maquiladoras, the contamination from the maquiladoras, the fact that all of the things that we assemble, that we build, that we sew together, are not even for us—[this] is very clear in everybody’s minds” (interviewed in Tijuana, October 10, 2005).

Conclusion: The Environmentalism of the Poor

Rather than framing this question mainly as a U.S. discourse or movement migrating abroad, we should focus our attention on the forms of EJ that are emerging organically, not just along the border but also throughout Latin America. While ideas or policies transplanted from other countries are most often dysfunctional in implementation, elements of environmental experiences from other places have sometimes reemerged in creative new forms in Latin America, generating important successes. These are not simple transplants, but have evolved instead as hybrid fusions of notions from abroad with local, indigenous ideas or experiences. We can identify hundreds of illustrative examples, including biosphere reserves, ecological tourism, traditional medicine, sustainable agriculture, social forestry, fair trade networks, creative tax policies, and innovations in urban planning (Collinson 1996; Roberts and Thanos 2003).

I believe we should view environmental justice in this mold, as a malleable discourse representing elements of both northern and southern environmental consciousness. According to Joan Martinez-Alier, EJ is but one element of a larger category of “environmentalism of the poor” found in every corner of the globe (2003). We have seen how claims for justice are embedded in independent, locally evolved forms of environmentalism in Mexico and regionally. The language, principles, and tactics of environmental justice reveal new insights and ways of understanding the social and environmental challenges facing Latin America. “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, 9).

As with many stories of EJ activism around the world, the lessons from northern Mexico are mixed. While the victory at Metales is surely significant for the people of Chilpancingo, industrial hazards remain omnipresent along the border. Mechanisms for participation and accountability have increased in Mexico’s official discourse and even in legislation, yet implementation still lags behind. Public demands have helped close the country’s notorious enforcement gap, yet powerful industrial interests largely feel entitled to a business climate of limited regulation and enforcement.

Nonetheless, EJ has emerged as a force for change on the border. Local victories and cross-border collaborations have fueled a sense of community power. Activists and organizations have linked local struggles to national claims for transparency and accountability. Embedding environmental concerns into existing campaigns for justice, they have continued to enrich Mexican civil society and expand the boundaries of Mexico’s political opening. Hundreds of EJ activists, residents, scholars, workers, and professionals have also linked across borders, participating in an ongoing international dialogue about justice, the environment, and the global economy.

Environmental justice has emerged as an important movement, discourse, and framework for analysis in many corners of the world, including Mexico’s northern border. It operates locally, nationally, and transnationally. It highlights macro issues of global justice, and is sufficiently adaptable to take on diverse, localized meanings.

Like the activists, advocates, and analysts operating under its banner, I believe it will continue to present openings for a more just and sustainable future for Latin America.

Notes

1. For EJ around the world, see Leff (2001); Westra and Lawson (2001); Byrne, Glover, and Martinez (2002); Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans (2003a); and Anand (2004).
2. For more thorough accounts, see Bandy (1997), Alfie Cohen and Méndez (2000), Bejarano (2002), Kelly (2002), Kopinak and Barajas (2002), Alfie Cohen (2003), Antal (2003), Kopinak (2004), and Clough-Riquelme and Bringas Rábago (2006).
3. Phase 1 was “removal action,” involving the removal of the highest-risk wastes. Phase 2 was the “cleanup alternative analysis,” consisting of analyzing and selecting cleanup remedies. At the time of this writing, the project is in Phase 3, “design remedy,” to develop the final cleanup plan and award the engineering contract. Phase 4, “complete cleanup,” will restore the property to productive use (U.S. EPA 2007, 13–14).
4. For more complete listings, see Bandy (1997), Interhemispheric Resource Center (1997), Bejarano (2002), Kelly (2002), Alfie Cohen (2003), and Antal (2003).
5. The Mexican Action Network on Free Trade, the Authentic Labor Front, and the Regional Border Worker Support Committee.
6. The Citizen Participation and Ecology Group, the Bravo International Ecology Alliance, and the Ciudad Juarez Ecology Committee.
7. Baja California Ecologist Forum, Mexican Ecology Movement in Baja California, “Seagull” Ecology Group, and the Border Environmental Education Project.
8. The Border Environmental Education Project, the Civic Committee for Ecological Disclosure, and Ecological Linkage.
9. This argument is developed more expansively and applied to a set of Latin American case studies in Carruthers (2008).

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