

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Karen Bell, *Achieving Environmental Justice: A Cross-National Analysis*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2014. ISBN: 9781447305941 (cloth)

The term *environmental justice* originated within activism, scholarship, and then federal policy in the United States, but over the past two decades it has become current and even commonplace in a growing number of countries throughout the world. As the concept has traveled to new settings, it has taken on new resonances; indeed, the power of the term lies in part in its flexibility, and in its capacity to express the fairness or unfairness of a wide variety of relations between people and their environments (see e.g. Schlosberg 2007). However, although we now have a large body of empirical research on environmental injustices from almost every corner of the globe, efforts to theorize, explain, and compare these injustices in multiple regions have been few. Consequently, it is no exaggeration to characterize Karen Bell's new book, *Achieving Environmental Justice: A Cross-National Analysis*, as a truly groundbreaking volume. The book is as clear and cohesive as it is ambitious and wide-ranging, and I argue that it advances the field of environmental justice scholarship in one of the most valuable ways a monograph can: by defining an important new research agenda, developing an explanatory theoretical framework to guide it, and articulating a set of provocative propositions that can inspire and inform both further investigation and, potentially, political action as well.

Despite the documentation of an ever-growing number of cases and instances of environmental injustice, there remains little consensus on what its primary causes are. Isolating these major causes—so that by addressing them, we can have hope of achieving environmental justice—is the main purpose of Bell's analysis. Although the author recognizes a complex array of factors that contribute to the production of environmental inequalities, she emphasizes one as its

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fundamental root: capitalism. The basis for the comparative analysis then becomes the general orientation toward capitalism within different nation-states. Bell represents this orientation in the heuristic terms of a “capitalist/socialist spectrum”, in which the United States and Cuba constitute the capitalist and socialist extremes, Sweden lies in the middle, and four other countries lie in between: South Korea and the UK on the “more capitalist/market based” end, and China and Bolivia on the “more socialist/state based” end (p.11). This heuristic spectrum provides the structure for the remainder of the book: after three chapters introducing the basic approach, “the concept and measurement of environmental justice”, and “the causes of environmental injustice”, chapters four through ten provide analyses of environmental justice and injustice in each country. Although Bell acknowledges the limitations of an analysis focused on the nation-state, she convincingly defends the choice as useful and important because “it still provides the administration and infrastructure through which social policy is delivered” (p.11).

Some critics may argue that an explanation focused on the capitalist orientation of national economies risks oversimplification, but Bell is careful to avoid any crude form of economic determinism. Deploying a theoretical approach she identifies as Critical Theory grounded in Gramscian neo-Marxism, she argues that in addition to (and in close conjunction with) capitalism, the other most important underlying cause of environmental injustice is “a particular conglomeration of beliefs that are carried in ‘Damaging Hegemonic Environmental Discourses’” (p.9). These include discourses about the necessity and goodness of growth and modern technology, the separation of humanity from an environment it “owns” and “controls”, and the downplaying of the environment as a major factor driving human health outcomes. Bell expands on this approach in Chapter 3, in which she acknowledges the significance of other explanations for environmental injustice, such as discrimination and lack of citizen power, but

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maintains that capitalism and its associated hegemonic discourses play the leading roles. To develop the book's theoretical framework, Bell builds on a diverse array of relevant concepts and theories—including the second contradiction of capital, the treadmill of production, dependency theory, world systems theory, and risk society—arguing forcefully and eloquently against advocates of market-based environmentalism.

What, then, constitutes environmental justice and injustice? Bell recognizes that there is no singular definition of either term, but argues that for the purposes of meaningful comparative analysis a basic set of criteria is indispensable. Her definition focuses on three aspects of justice: “a healthy environment” (substantive justice); equitable protection from harm and distribution of environmental benefits (distributive justice); and inclusive and just decision-making processes (procedural justice) (p.22). The concepts of recognition and capabilities, developed as separate dimensions of justice by David Schlosberg (2007) and others (see e.g. Walker 2009), are largely subsumed here under the procedural dimension. This conceptual aggregation may be worth further debate, but the point here is to develop a clear, straightforward set of indicators that can be applied across multiple countries: the Environmental Justice Indicator (EJI) Framework. Although in this volume Bell assesses environmental justice exclusively at the scale of the nation-state, the purpose here is not to sweep local variation and complexity under the rug in the service of a “one-size-fits-all” index; instead, the framework is “devised to be easily open to influence and verification by ordinary citizens” (p.24). In the empirical chapters that follow, Bell assesses the link between capitalist orientation and EJI Framework scores. She finds the USA the lowest-scoring, despite its early adoption of the environmental justice concept, and Cuba the highest-scoring, while the other countries' scores each correspond to their position on the capitalist-socialist spectrum.

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Although the catalog of volumes on environmental justice has become rather large during the past three decades, it is difficult to find other studies with comparable international scope. With few exceptions, such as Ramachandra Guha, Joan Martínez-Alier's influential *Varieties of Environmentalism* (1997) or the latter's landmark *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (2003), books on environmental justice have typically focused on issues within one country, one region, one continent, one type of place (e.g. indigenous lands and territories), or one substantive kind of injustice. Most other books on global and international environmental justice feature multiple authors presenting separate case studies; although anthologies like these are certainly valuable, they often reflect eclectic approaches that do not necessarily lend themselves well to the task of synthesizing a theoretical framework or research agenda. So the diverse range of countries that Bell considers in this book constitutes an impressive, important contribution to the literature by itself.

Of course, all scholarship involves limitations and tradeoffs, and it is important to recognize what is beyond the book's scope. First, in this case, what must to some degree be sacrificed for the sake of breadth and wide-ranging comparison is depth and complexity; it is simply impossible in a series of 20-page chapters to do justice to the full range of environmental inequities and policy responses in these countries. For instance, Bell rightly notes that the national level remains relevant and indeed crucial for the analysis of policy, but of course in some of these countries—including the US, with which I am most familiar—environmental justice policies and outcomes vary significantly from region to region or among subnational territories. Attending to these variations would require a second book, and perhaps a third. Second, there are tradeoffs involved in the environmental justice indicator framework itself. The strength of the framework is its simplicity, and the use of straightforward qualitative measures (“yes”, “no”,

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“mixed”) avoids creating false impressions of precision. It also provides a useful and unprecedented starting point for cross-national comparison. However, such an approach will inevitably raise questions about how the scores were determined and about the representativeness of the data. In addition, the collection of indicators that compose the framework will likely spark debate and discussion on the question of how ordinary citizens might influence and shape it in practice—as well as the question of its compatibility with indigenous claims about justice, or with other claims that might diverge from dominant Western notions of liberalism and the individual.

Although some critics may point to these limitations as weaknesses, I contend that this would be to misconstrue their value, as well as the book’s purpose. I argue that the most productive way of reading the book is in the way the author asks us to: as an exploratory inquiry designed “to provoke thought and aid understanding of ideas and debates” and as an invitation “to build on this work and help to establish the credibility (or otherwise) of the research for themselves” (p.11). The book represents the culmination of years of careful empirical and comparative scholarship—itsself informed by years more of engagement and activism—but it also constitutes a rich, provocative starting point for future research. Environmental justice scholars should take up the challenge and address the many important questions that Bell’s work raises. Do the framework indicators represent the full range of environmental justice concerns, and do the scores hold up under further analysis? Are there ways to adjust the framework to account for complexity and variation at scales other than the national? Are there other countries or settings that challenge the book’s heuristic model of the capitalist/socialist continuum? Are there limits to the explanatory power of *Damaging Hegemonic Environmental Discourses*, or of capitalist orientation at the nation-state scale? Or, alternatively, are there ways we can develop the theoretical model proposed here to link unjust outcomes even more explicitly to the functioning

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of hegemonic projects? Environmental justice scholarship has sometimes been criticized as insufficiently connected to theory, but the research agenda that this book lays before us is one that I believe can help resign that critique to the past. Bell has given us the gift of a clear, compelling theoretical explanation for environmental injustice, handing us a set of propositions calling out for further empirical exploration, testing, and verification.

Bell also gives us the gift of hope that environmental justice can, indeed, be achieved, even if the road ahead will be extremely challenging. Her recommendation is unambiguously and unapologetically radical, calling for the replacement of both capitalism and its attendant Damaging Hegemonic Environmental Discourses. Both the accuracy of the diagnosis and the feasibility of the cure are worthy of further debate, and I hope that *Antipode* will be one of the spaces in which this debate will unfold.¹ Nevertheless, in a time when optimism about the possibility of progressive social and environmental change seems to be in short supply, Bell's message is particularly refreshing—and it deserves a wide readership among critical academics and activists alike.

References

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¹ Building on the recent special issue “Spaces of Environmental Justice”—
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Ryan Holifield
Department of Geography
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
holifiel@uwm.edu

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