
The State and the Global Ecological Crisis

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Environmental and Ecological Justice: Theory and Practice in the United States

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While much work has been done in the past few years on the definition of environmental justice, this work has focused exclusively on theories of distributional justice and on applying that framework of justice to nature, particularly with a goal of ecological sustainability in mind.¹ My concern, however, is that conceptions of justice can be understood much more broadly than they are in this environmental context. Recent discussions of social justice have pushed beyond the distributive paradigm into questions of recognition, difference, and political participation.² These conceptions have not yet made it into the discussions of justice within environmental political theory, nor have they been central to theorizing about democratic designs and the potential of greener states.

In examining the "justice" of the environmental justice movement in the United States, I have found claims for justice to be about more than just distribution of environmental goods and bads.³ The issue of distribution is always present and always key, but issues of cultural recognition and political participation are crucial components of movements' definitions of environmental justice and are often tied to distributive issues. In particular, the environmental justice movement has been consistently pushing for state agencies, decision-making processes, and administrative procedures to be more open to the cultural recognition of excluded groups and expanded democratic participation more generally. A thorough notion of environmental justice would both reflect the theoretical discussions on expanding the definition of social justice and take note of a similar discourse in the movement. The argument for defining environmental justice in a tripartite manner—in both theory and practice—comes from a theoretical perspective but also from demands made by environmental social movements.