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Decolonizing Environmental Justice Studies: A Latin American Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The “environment” and “justice” of environmental justice are often defined through Western ways of thinking. Empirical environmental justice research, however, increasingly takes place in the context of the global South. As a result, there is a tendency to transpose Western concepts and frameworks to the global South, running the risk of being ineffective and of producing additional injustices. Drawing on decolonial thought, a Latin American and Caribbean theoretical movement, this paper analyses the problems which arise when Western concepts are used as the main organizing principles of non-Western environmental justice movements. Examples include failing to account for cases involving mutually undermining modes of life, hence presenting deliberate exposure to environmental harm as a fair solution; rendering invisible the fact that “participation” may contribute to the reproduction of environmental injustices, sometimes with the consent of those who are likely to be the first victims of environmental injustices; or reproducing the idea that communities in the global South do not produce knowledge, that their knowledge is inferior, or only useful for empirical observation, while Western science provides for the underlying theoretical framework. We conclude by highlighting some of the principles of a decolonial environmental justice.

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Introduction

Over the last three decades environmental justice (EJ) has become a rallying cry for communities and social movements across the world struggling to protect their environment and ways of life against the appropriation, transformation and dispossession of nature. The Environmental Justice Atlas (<http://ejatlas.org>) provides a powerful illustration of this, listing over 2000

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ongoing ecological conflicts, many of them in the global South (Temper, del Bene, and Martínez-Alier 2015). In *The Environmentalism of the Poor* Joan Martínez Alier argued that “the environmental justice movement is potentially of great importance [for the global South], provided it learns to speak ... for the majorities outside the USA” (2002, 14). “Second generation” EJ studies hence have taken on the challenge of broadening EJ beyond its original political, geographical and theoretical boundaries (e.g. Schlosberg 2007; Holifield, Porter, and Walker 2009). These works popularize an idea of EJ as multivalent, nourished by a radical plurality of justice claims.

But conceptual EJ work has nevertheless remained largely a Western endeavour (Reed and George 2011), with the “environment” and “justice” of EJ often defined only through Western ways of thinking (Agyeman et al. 2010). Empirical EJ work, however, increasingly takes place in the context of the global South, as illustrated below. As a result, there is a tendency to transpose Western concepts and frameworks to the global South, running the risk of being ineffective at best, and of producing (environmental) injustices which run deeper and are more perverse than the apparent ecological conflicts referred to above, at worst.

Some EJ scholars have therefore called for the emergence of a critical EJ studies, which questions the universality, framings and concepts underpinning EJ scholarship (Holifield, Porter, and Walker 2009; Pellow 2018; Sikor and Newell 2014). Yet, despite the historic relation of EJ with racial issues, the academic pluralization of EJ and the increasing geographic focus on the global South, there has been surprisingly little engagement with decolonial theory. This paper attends to this gap by critically examining some of the concepts and ideas in the EJ literature using insights of decolonial theory. This theoretical movement, introduced below, focuses on understanding how Western civilization¹ consolidates its power and dominance through economic, political and epistemological means.

The paper starts by briefly introducing both decolonial theory and EJ. Drawing on examples and concepts from the EJ literature, we then identify and discuss some of the colonial pitfalls an environmental scholar may encounter when addressing justice concerns. We show that using Western-centric concepts as the main organizing principles of non-Western EJ movements – at the expense of other, pre-existing conceptual formations – creates new processes of subjugation; which we gather under the new term “coloniality of justice.” We argue that in failing to explicitly include a decolonial analysis, EJ scholarship not only risks undermining its emancipatory power

¹For decolonial theorists, “Western” does not just point to a geographic origin but involves a mode of life, a system of values, and a political and historical project that emerged with the colonization of the Americas.

but may also deepen some of the injustices it claims to address. We conclude by highlighting some of the principles of a decolonial environmental justice.

Coloniality and Decolonial Theory

While the term “decolonial” has been used indistinctly to refer to ideas belonging to different schools of thought (e.g. postcolonial, subaltern or cultural studies), this paper analyses environmental justice through one specific approach: the “Modernity/coloniality-decoloniality project” (hereafter, “decolonial theory”) (see Escobar 2007). Originating in Latin America, it differentiates itself from other perspectives by its epistemological choices, its historical premises, and the aims it pursues.

Postcolonial work has largely drawn on French theory and post-structuralism (particularly on the work of Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault), and tends to over-emphasize culture as a determinant for colonialism, hence inverting economicist tendencies of orthodox Marxism (Mignolo 2011). Decolonial theory, by contrast, draws on social sciences and theories produced by scholars and social movements of and in the global South, mainly Latin America (e.g. the theology of liberation, the active participatory research or the theory of dependency; see Gutiérrez-Aguilar 2017). It argues that theory needs to be grounded in the lived experience, thinking, places and locations of those communities that have suffered from colonialism (Dussel 2013; Mignolo 2007).

Decolonial theorists establish a difference between colonialism and coloniality, a term originally coined by Aníbal Quijano. Colonialism refers to political and historical moments that ended with the political independence of the last colonies in the 1960s, whereas coloniality refers to the diversity of practices that derive from the matrix of power created by colonialism and are still at work within contemporary, post-colonial societies (Maldonado-Torres 2016). Wary of the pitfalls of (cultural or economic) determinism, decolonial theorists argue that coloniality is the result of a complex entanglement of different dimensions of equal importance (Grosfoguel 2012): power, knowledge and being, explored below.

Coloniality of power is organized around two fundamental axes: (1) the codification of racial difference between Europeans and non-Europeans, aimed at making the latter appear naturally inferior; and (2) the use of Western/modern institutional forms of power (like the nation-state) in non-Western societies to organize and control labor, its resources and its products (Quijano 2000), as well as “the relationships between peoples and nature, and among the former in regard to the latter, especially with regard to the ownership of the resources of production” (Quijano 2014, 286, our translation). Although coloniality is intrinsically linked to capitalism, it

cannot be reduced to economics, for it also encompasses cultural, epistemological and ontological mechanisms of subjugation.

Coloniality of knowledge refers to the difference made between European and non-European knowledges and symbolic systems. The latter are seen as inferior and are deprived of scientific validity. Defined as “traditional,” they are considered to have only practical and local applicability, and their theoretical relevance is limited to their status as objects of study which allow for the comprehension of local modes of life. By contrast, European knowledges are described as having universal validity, regardless of the place and moment of their production. Coloniality of knowledge is given shape through scientific and philosophical discourses that depict themselves as being neutral, impartial and detached from geo-historical conditions, producing an “epistemology of point zero” (Castro-Gómez 2005).

Finally, coloniality of being makes reference to the “lived experience of colonization and its ontological impact” (Maldonado-Torres 2016). In his seminal book, *Black Skins, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon argued that to produce identities considered “less than human,” colonialism creates zones of nonbeing. These spaces of segregation, both real and symbolic, are produced by the “color line”: the line separating “normal” and “superior” beings from “inferior” and “unworthy” ones (Du Bois 2007; Grosfoguel 2012). Unlike the two first forms of coloniality above, coloniality of being is not imposed top-down and does not remain external to the individuals. On the contrary, its effectiveness lies in its capacity to distort the self-image of the colonized and the perception of their world. It produces a certain kind of subjectivity, which Fanon (1963) called “the wretched of the earth.”

If coloniality dehumanizes humanity and objectifies nature, then decoloniality refers to “efforts at re-humanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature” (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 10). At a theoretical level this project requires recognizing that theory is always place-bound (Escobar 2008) and should draw on the experience of the wretched of the earth (Dussel 1985). This allows for shedding light on the remainders of colonialism that are still at work in our discourses and practices, while at the same time providing us with alternatives to a Western model of society.

Environmental Justice

Politically, the notion of environmental justice “has its origins in the inequalities of power and the way those inequalities have distinctive environmental consequences for the marginalized and the impoverished, for those who may be freely denigrated as ‘others,’ or as ‘people out of place’” (Harvey 1996a, 95). The concept dates back to the 1980s, with the confluence of a large set of political movements in the United States, increasingly aware of

the unequal distribution of environmental degradation along class, racial, cultural and gender divides (e.g. Bryant and Mohai 1992; Figueroa 2001).

EJ has moved far beyond its original political and geographical framing – from a political driver and policy principle (Agyeman and Evans 2004) it has also become a dynamic object of scientific enquiry. First-generation EJ studies were concerned primarily with documenting environmental injustices in the US, but subsequent work has increasingly focused on the global South in general (e.g. Gonzalez 2015; Schroeder et al. 2008) or specific regions like Latin America (Carruthers 2008), or finally countries such as South Africa (McDonald 2004) and India (Williams and Mawdsley 2006).

At the core of the EJ movement lies a critique of mainstream environmentalism, which triggered greater attention to the “varieties of environmentalism” (Guha and Martínez Alier 2013) and their particularities. Scholars came up with new terminology, including “subaltern environmentalism” (Pulido 1996), “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez-Alier 2002), “post-colonial environmental justice” (Williams and Mawdsley 2006), “third world environmental justice” (Schroeder et al. 2008), “empty-belly environmentalism” (Guha and Martínez Alier 2013), or “environmental justice 2.0” (Carter 2016), among others.

As Pellow (2016b, 18) notes, second-generation EJ studies also triggered “greater methodological creativity and interdisciplinarity.” Drawing on the articulations of justice by different peoples in different places, some scholars develop increasingly popular empirical approaches to EJ (Sikor 2013; Sikor et al. 2014). Theoretically too, the EJ field grew. Schlosberg (2007) turned to critical theorists like Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth and Iris Marion Young to posit that these underlying reasons are rooted in the material, social, cultural and institutional conditions and contexts within which a political process takes place and gives shape to this distribution. Schlosberg’s four dimensions of justice (distribution, recognition, participation, capabilities) have since been turned into an increasingly popular analytical framework (see e.g. Sikor 2013; Walker and Bulkeley 2006).

A more critical EJ body of literature grew somewhat in parallel to this, going back to vision, principles and claims of the early days of the EJ movement (Pellow 2018; Pulido and De Lara 2018). Recent work has started refining the racial roots of environmental injustices in the global South (e.g. Sundberg 2008; Mollet 2015); the links between rural dimensions and EJ are being explored (e.g. Coolsaet 2016; Pellow 2016a), as is the intersection between gender, sexuality and EJ (e.g. Stein 2004); the cultural dynamics of environmental concerns are starting to be theorized beyond their conceptual origins (e.g. Martin et al. 2016) and the contributions of EJ for societal transformations to sustainability is being studied (Temper et al. 2018). And yet, even these more critical approaches have largely left aside decolonial theory (some recent exceptions notwithstanding; see Fraser 2018; Martin et al.

2016; Pulido and De Lara 2018; Rodríguez and Inturias 2018; Ulloa 2017). This paper hence adds to this body of work by providing a decolonial perspective of environmental justice. In what follows we illustrate that decolonial theory can help “push our analyses and actions beyond the human, the state and capital” (Pellow 2018, 20), complementing earlier EJ scholarship by highlighting particular forms of oppression related to communities in the global South and their modes of life.

Coloniality of Justice

We argue that environmental justice scholarship is too geographically and conceptually bound to a hegemonic-Western idea of modernity and Western-inspired political ideals (e.g. solutions to injustices are conceived within the realm of the state). As a result, its concepts cannot be transposed to different contexts without running the risk of triggering new injustices. Doing so is a form of what we call “coloniality of justice.” It involves and combines several forms of coloniality developed above and generates a series of problems described below.

Distributing Harm

A first colonial pitfall in the EJ literature relates to use of “environmental equity” as a solution to environmental injustices, understood as “a fair or equitable distribution of society’s technological and environmental risks and impacts” (Shrader-Frechette 2002, 24). To be sure, this has been the focus of extended critique in the EJ literature, calling for greater attention to the underlying reasons for maldistribution (among others, see Harvey 1996b; Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Schlosberg 2007). However, we argue that decolonial theory provides for a distributive critique that is qualitatively different and relates to the following problems.

First, transposing the idea of environmental equity, a claim originally made by communities of African descent in the United States, from its original context to other minority groups in both the global South (e.g. Afro and Indigenous groups of Colombia, Peru or Bolivia) and North (e.g. native peoples in developed countries) may render claims conflicting with the very idea of environmental distribution invisible. Second, notwithstanding the suitability of distributive solutions in the context of toxic pollution or hazardous waste, for example, environmental equity is intrinsically linked to an idea of environmental exploitation. What it tells us is that this exploitation does not necessarily need questioning as long as its most harmful effects are being distributed equitably within society.

In other words, this approach fails to account for cases which are not amenable to pluralist solutions, i.e. cases involving mutually undermining

modes of life (political ontologies). This is particularly relevant from a colonial perspective, in which the developmental model itself is put into question (Gudynas 2012; Sachs 1992), and with it the need for a distribution of harms flowing from environmental exploitation.

These two observations make up the two components of coloniality of being discussed above. Building on this, the “fair or equitable distribution of environmental goods and bads” faces two problems: (1) it may entail a misrecognition of other modes of life that are incompatible with a capitalist mode of production and/or with anthropocentric ways of understanding justice; and (2) it sets aside the fact that even the requests of minority groups may be the expression of a desire that has been captured by coloniality.

We can illustrate the first point by understanding Marx’s “modes of production” as modes of life, following Coulthard (2014). Coulthard considers that a mode of production encompasses two interrelated social processes: “the resources, technologies, and labour that a people deploy to produce what they need to materially sustain over time, and the forms of thought, behaviour, and social relationships that both condition and are themselves conditioned by these productive forces” (2014, 65). The difference between EJ struggles of US-based African American communities and struggles of other minority groups in both North and South lies in these diverging “thought, behaviour, and social relationships,” which are related to different modes of life (Blaser 2013). While we are aware that these modes of life are simplified ideal types, in what follows they should be seen as serving an analytical purpose.

The first mode of life is characterized by dualist divisions (human/non-human, nature/culture, mind/body, individual/community, reason/emotion, “we”/“them,” etc.) and is centered on linear time and development (Escobar 2014). Nature and land, objects detached from human beings, serve to improve human existence. This mode of life values things and material accumulation over (good) life, resulting in extreme forms of violence against non-European societies and nature in the name of “progress” and “development” (Dussel 1997; Segato 2016).

The second type of mode of life is “relational.” It is organized around radical interdependence and reciprocal relations between the land and those who inhabit it, including non-human beings (Blaser 2013; Escobar 2014). Although land is seen as fundamental for human subsistence, it is not reduced to an exploitable resource. Instead, land and place have social and ethical dimensions. They are conceived, experienced and produced as “a system of *reciprocal relations and obligations*” (Coulthard 2014, 13, *our emphasis*), which define daily practices and sacred rites.

The difference between these modes of life, and the qualitative divergence between the claims of minority groups that flow from them, have important consequences for the conceptualization of EJ as distribution. Distributive

equity implies that nature can be objectified, exploited and turned into a distributable good, a conception challenged by relational modes of life. This can be illustrated through the example of three different communities. According to Coulthard, the struggle of the Dene people² against the dispossession of land is a struggle against colonialism and capitalism. These communities are not fighting for the “distribution of risks and impacts,” but for the right to live “in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms” (Coulthard 2014, 13). Similarly, referring to Afro-Colombian and Colombian Indigenous social movements, Escobar argues that the struggles of these communities go beyond capitalism and human rights, for their struggle is waged “in the name of life,” “on behalf of another conception of development, of a harmonious relationship with nature and a different form of social life... based on another *worldview*” that recognizes that the world is made of many worlds (Escobar 2014, 73–75, 77). Finally, referring to *Bija Satyagraha*, a movement for farmers’ rights in India opposing biopiracy, Vandana Shiva claims that their struggle is “a resistance to the ultimate colonization of life itself – of the future of evolution as well as the future of non-Western traditions of relating to and knowing nature” (Shiva 1993, 279). In this light the very idea of environmental distribution appears to be incompatible with Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Indian peasant modes of life.

One may object to our first point by stressing that environmental equity is grounded in the demands of grassroots movements, hence giving voice to those that have traditionally been marginalized; and that it is therefore a typically decolonial endeavor. However, claims raised by those who are marginalized and racialized are not necessarily free from the risk of coloniality. On the contrary, Fanon’s work shows that the effectiveness of colonialism lies in its capacity to capture the desire of the subjugated. Coloniality does not only function through explicit, violent, and repressive means, but also operates via the consent of colonized subjects (Bentouhami 2014, 101). Colonial reproduction “rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify [with] the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition” imposed by the state (Coulthard 2014, 25). This is the second characteristic of coloniality, described by Achille Mbembe as “the subjugation of the indigenous through his or her desire” (2015, 175, our translation). This too is missing from the conceptualization of distribution in the EJ literature, and creates a twofold problem.

First, from a local perspective, calling for equitable distribution of environmental impacts appears as the symptom of a desire of that which poisons a person’s body against their will and of that which destroys the material

²The “Dene” refers to indigenous people living in the western Canadian Subarctic, including First Nations groups such as the Chipewyan, Tlicho, Slavey, Sathu and Yellowknives.

conditions necessary for their survival, hence creating a problem of misrecognition. In other words, the exposure to environmental risks is not contested (as long as it is equitably distributed), and therefore, neither is misrecognition. To be sure, some scholars do explore the relation between physical integrity and misrecognition (e.g. Schlosberg 2007, 60), but often fail to see the contradiction with calls for deliberate exposure through the distribution of environmental impacts.

Second, even if the distribution of environmental impacts and risks may, in certain cases, serve to temporarily and locally address environmental injustices, in a global context it may legitimize and deepen some of the problems of the capitalist economy. The exploitation of environmental resources in the global South, often in the form of extractivism, is a good illustration (Escobar 2014; Massuh 2012). Decolonial scholars have often argued that extractivism not only impacts the land but also has a direct and disruptive impact on the bodies and daily relations of the affected communities (Machado Aráoz 2012). Concretely, resource extraction turns those places “into privileged spaces of war and death” (Mbembe 2003, 33), forcing people to flee their homes and live under conditions of extreme violence. Extractivism sustains a neo-colonial relationship between the states providing raw materials and those consuming them (Machado Aráoz 2012; Mbembe 2003). Considering this, it is hard to see how a more equitable distribution would address the injustices at hand. It would render invisible the fact that the “development” of certain populations may only be attained at the expense of others. This includes geographical others, but also temporal others, as the continued exploitation of natural resources and its related pollution, even if equally distributed for present generations, will inevitably impact future generations – a point also raised by Pellow (2018).

We will argue below that the lack of importance given to these issues is related to the epistemology that underlies EJ theory. But before addressing this problem, let us turn to the use of “recognition” in the EJ literature, and the problems it may represent from a decolonial perspective.

Misrecognizing the Subjective

Environmental justice scholars have tried addressing some of the problems discussed above by introducing the concept of recognition into their analytical frameworks (e.g. Martin, McGuire, and Sullivan 2013). The possibility of achieving EJ in the global South through distributive approaches lacks a crucial pre-condition, namely a “general consensus about the primacy of distributive issues and applicability of utilitarian or libertarian notions of justice” (Sikor 2013, 16). In *The Justices and Injustices of Ecosystem Services* Sikor and colleagues find remedy in the recognition of other ways of knowing, other conceptions of value and other forms of legitimizing environmental

governance interventions, which may reflect “a selective viewing of human-environment relations” (199). And yet they leave the reader guessing about how exactly this recognition would come about.

Recent EJ work has shown that the concept of recognition too entails very different views of human-environment relations (Fraser 2018; Martin et al. 2016; Pulido and De Lara 2018). We agree that recognition is an important element of EJ. But, following Coulthard, Escobar and Fanon, we reckon that calling for recognition implies a more radical and thorough interrogation of the conditions that are at the basis of injustices suffered by minority groups, to be effected by (1) expanding recognition beyond State-based solutions, including solutions of self-recognition, a dimension which is currently under-addressed in the EJ literature; and (2) acknowledging the role psychological processes play in the misrecognition of communities who have been deprived of their material and symbolic modes of subsistence and historically excluded, racialized and oppressed.

The EJ literature on recognition largely draws on Nancy Fraser. Fraser’s work consists in combining the new identity-based imaginaries of the “post-socialist age” without erasing the materialist paradigm of the “old” socialist imaginary. The former refers to claims for “difference-friendly” societies, while the latter is about economic redistribution, which continues to be relevant today. Regarding recognition, in her discussions with Axel Honneth (Fraser and Honneth 2003) Fraser moves from a Hegelian idea of recognition as a matter of individual psychology or consciousness, to the idea that recognition should be attained within the public/political sphere, which depends on structural conditions (Fraser 2001).

From a decolonial perspective Fraser’s approach provides two advantages. First, the idea that injustices are grounded not only in economic but also in cultural and institutional structures is related to the idea that colonial power is complex and diverse, permeating all aspects of society. Second, the idea that (mis)recognition is intrinsically dependent on structural, social conditions avoids grounding the injustices solely in the individual “distorted structure of the consciousness of the oppressed” (Fraser 2001, 27).

However, decolonial theory also objects to Fraserian recognition in a number of ways. To begin with, Fraser’s status-model does not provide the tools to problematize the role of the state in the (re)production of injustices and of colonized subjectivities. Secondly, the negative idea that Fraser has of identity-based recognition, established on psychological and cultural grounds, downplays the importance of the subjective dimension in overcoming injustices.

While “having a voice” within the state apparatus is important and often perceived as a “low-hanging fruit” to overcome injustices, EJ research has shown that it may also be an ineffective, even counterproductive measure to address injustices (Agyeman et al. 2010; Pulido, Kohl, and Cotton 2016).

A closer look at existing processes shows how different sorts of neo-colonial mechanisms may shape decision-making processes to serve opposing interests. Analysing the struggle of the Dene and the Kluane First Nations against a pipeline project, Coulthard explains how the Government of Canada, through processes of deliberation guaranteeing participation of minority groups, managed to transform “how Indigenous peoples now think and act in relation to the land” (Coulthard 2014, 78). Over 25 years these processes made Indigenous representatives accept extractive projects they had always opposed. Coulthard argues that this change results from a smooth process of domestication through the creation of spaces where the First Nations of Canada had, to borrow Fraser’s terms, “the possibility of participating on a par with others in social interaction” (Fraser 2001, 27).

To be sure, Fraser is aware of this danger, explicitly noting that the sole creation of such spaces is insufficient (2001). Nonetheless, the result is that the use of her theories in the EJ literature often does not allow for a sufficient critique of the appropriateness of state-led solution to the problem of participation of minority groups. Fraser’s critique of identity-based and communitarian recognition has kept EJ scholars from fully grasping the importance of local autonomy and self-recognition in overcoming injustices. Yet it is through the affirmation of the local that minority groups create alternatives to liberal institutions embodied by the state. Without reifying the differences between groups, they hold in common a call for and the construction of decentralized social institutions that give strength to the community, departing from a logic of private property. From the *sistema comunal* (“communal system”; Paco 2009) in Bolivia to *Bija Satyagraha* (“self-rule is our right”; Shiva 1993) in India, they are characterized by economic communalization (i.e. collective instead of private property) and self-governance, including inter-cultural mechanisms. Struggles “reorganize society on the basis of local and regional autonomy, characterized by social relations and forms of organizing which are neither capitalist nor liberal” and are conceived in terms of “self-organization focusing in the construction of non-state forms of power” (Escobar 2014, 53–54, our translation).

This, however, is not tantamount to a complete detachment from the state, as transformative political struggle “inevitably confronts institutions” (Dussel 2011, 29–31, original emphasis). Alternative political organization has the capacity to expose and modify the colonial rationale of the state (Dussel 2011; Mbembe 2003; Walsh 2008). In Colombia, for example, the black peasant organization *Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato* (ACIA, Comprehensive Farmers’ Association of Atrato) played a significant role in deconstructing the idea of the state as uni-national by securing constitutional recognition as a distinct cultural group. As a result ACIA also secured collective rights over its traditional land, which provided “an important new political opportunity for the [population] to mobilize” (Oslender 2016, 3);

grassroot movements were strengthened and rearticulated around the right to territory of Afro-descendant communities as an essential element of their identity (Oslender 2016).

This tells us that in the case of minority groups EJ cannot simply be based on recognition as understood by Western authors. It is necessary to include self-recognition, *i.e.* the re-valorisation of one's mode of life (Coulthard 2009). This inevitably implies to acknowledge the importance of the subjective dimension, an element that lacks in Fraserian recognition, leading to the second point.

Fraser dissolves the psychological dimension into the social one, ignoring the specificity of the subjective dimension (Coulthard 2014). Consequently, and while recognizing that misrecognition may have psychological negative effects on individuals (e.g. Fraser 2000), EJ work based on Fraser's writing does not contemplate the possibility that distorted identities may be the very cause of misrecognition (and not solely an effect; see e.g. Schlosberg 2007). As discussed earlier, decolonial studies have showed how the desire of the oppressed may be co-opted. Such a misrecognition of the subjective dimension is the consequence of conceiving the psychological dimension as Western authors traditionally do, that is, as a sphere detached from social forces, enclosed within the limits of the so-called private or individual sphere (as found for example in Honneth's work). Decolonial authors provide a different conception of psychology which may help improve Fraser's conception of recognition.

Fanon shows how psychological processes cannot be detached from structural, material conditions. On the contrary, the psychological structure results from a process of internalization, or, properly speaking, of *incorporation*, of social forces (Fanon 1967).³ The aim of coloniality, in Fanon's view, is to anchor racial ideology in the psychological structure of the oppressed, to disempower them, to fix them to certain spaces, and to assign them certain tasks. At the same time the psychological dimension actively informs social structures through the actions of individuals. There is a dialectics between these spheres. Thus, even if they are intertwined, the psychological dimension of misrecognition has its own logic, which differs from one based in structural conditions (Coulthard 2014; Fanon 1967). This means that the sole transformation of objective conditions is as insufficient as the sole transformation of the subjective sphere. The crucial point here is that if the subjective dimension is not considered, patterns of oppression will be continuously reproduced through the desires of those who are oppressed, as discussed previously.

³Fanon calls this process of internalization "in-corporation" and "epidermalization"; the conceptual nuance is key to grasp how environmental coloniality works quite literally by disempowering the colonial subjects through the destruction of their environment and the poisoning of their bodies.

Speaking for Others

Alcoff (1991) has warned about the dangers of speaking across differences of race, culture, and power. The location of where one speaks from – whether defined geographically, culturally or philosophically – not only has epistemic significance, but can also be discursively dangerous: “Certain contexts and locations are allied with structures of oppression, and certain others are allied with resistance to oppression. Therefore, all are not politically equal, and, given that politics is connected to truth, all are not epistemically equal” (Alcoff 1991, 15).

Environmental justice scholars are aware of this risk. Schlosberg (2013), for example, acknowledges the importance of context for the construction of subjectivities, its relation to knowledge, and the necessity for a reflexive engagement with the practice of EJ. But his position is more ambivalent than it seems. While asking the necessary questions on how to acknowledge diversity within the EJ movement, and going a long way into theorizing this plurality for US-based movements, the discussion of EJ in other parts of the world does not trigger the same theoretical conceptualization. Despite Schlosberg’s call for empirical EJ work to “expand upon” justice theories (2007, 5), when applied to the global South, there does not seem to be much expanding taking place.

This problem concerns what decolonial scholars refer to as coloniality of knowledge, as discussed above. Like Alcoff, they point to the fact that knowledge is always situated and stress the (self-conferred) “power to institute, represent, build a vision of the social and natural world recognized as legitimate ... It is a representation in which ‘enlightened men’ define themselves as neutral and impartial observers of reality” (Castro-Gómez 2005, 25, our translation). To be sure, EJ scholars seldom, if ever, claim to be neutral or impartial. But by framing the claims of global EJ movements within Western and/or liberal theories of justice only, they unwittingly or deliberately position themselves on point zero, producing two interrelated issues. First, EJ scholars seem to think that a theoretical framework developed in the context of US EJ movement can serve the empirical observation of justice claims regardless of the context, the object and/or the subject. While acknowledging the existence of alternative forms of knowledge, EJ literature often builds on the implicit presumption that critical discourse is an intrinsically Western endeavor. The recognition and acceptance of difference and multiplicity requires mainly that the concept developed for and from a Western context and worldview “must now be opened up to contestation by those who were previously excluded from them – but always, to be sure, on terms set [by Western epistemologies]” (Allen 2016, 30). By considering that there exists a unity around the conception of justice, EJ scholars fail to see that many social movements in the South have organized their struggles on the basis of non-Western

conceptions of justice, nature, difference, culture and identity, as we have illustrated above. This opens the door to an erroneous use of Schlosberg's framework and underlying conceptual construction in the context of non-Western struggles of justice.

Second, when applied to the global South, the transfer of knowledge is surprisingly unidirectional. As Santiago Castro-Gómez puts it, "the 'recognition' that is given to non-occidental systems of knowledge is pragmatic rather than epistemological" (2007, 441). Non-Western communities are attached to the "empirical" or the material, while Western societies are able to provide the theoretical framework to conceptualize such practices. The conceptualization of EJ through Western theories leads to a division of object and subject when transposing the concept to another, non-Western context (Santos 2015). In order to avoid coloniality of knowledge, EJ theories should embrace the idea that a variety of knowledge configurations exist, going beyond the ones recognized by academia. "Inter-epistemic studies" (Escobar 2014, 21), "epistemological democracy" (Castro-Gómez 2007, 444) or "cognitive justice" (Santos 2015) are the names given by decolonial thinkers to such an approach.

The relevance of these approaches for EJ studies is threefold. First, at the epistemological level, they help identify how certain theoretical ideas or practices may reinforce or contribute to environmental injustice. Tensions between them are conceived as positive contradictions that render their mutual critique possible and lay bare their respective limitations. Second, they require an active participation of communities in and of the global South not only as subjects of study but as knowledge-holders capable of reimagining the meaning of EJ and its underlying concepts (Pulido and De Lara 2018). Third, decolonial EJ demands a detachment from the false idea of scientific neutrality. The inter-epistemic scholar explicitly engages in the defence of the very first victims of capitalist and neo-colonial system. In other words, this form of epistemology does not simply recognize the existence of a multiplicity of knowledges, nor does it stress the primacy of one system of knowledge over the other. Taking a step further, it emphasizes the possibility and the importance of interactions and conflicts between different forms of knowing.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to discuss some of the epistemic limitations that environmental justice work may entail. We have argued that these limitations not only marginalize certain conceptual formations but can also produce new injustices or perpetuate existing ones – a situation we have termed coloniality of justice. The problem is not, however, that Western academics use Western justice theories in trying to conceptually frame EJ. Rather, the problem arises when Western-centered EJ frameworks, and their

underlying philosophical theories, are used (deliberately or not) as the sole sources of critical reflection to comprehend EJ concerns. This may result in policy which would present deliberate exposure to environmental harm as a fair solution. It may likewise prevent scholars or policymakers from seeing that the exploitation of natural resources may only be attained at the expense of some peoples, even when distributively offset. Finally, it may render invisible the fact that parity of participation may contribute to the reproduction of environmental injustices when detached from a radical transformation of the institutions where participation takes place. The difficulty, moreover, lies in understanding that this may happen with the consent of those who are likely to be the first victims of environmental injustice.

Although we have adopted a deconstructive approach throughout the paper, we want to conclude by highlighting some of the principles underpinning decolonial EJ studies. If it wishes “to speak ... for the majorities outside the USA,” EJ research will need to engage more thoroughly with the colonial difference. Not, however, from a (critical) Western perspective “but from the perspective of the receivers of the alleged benefits of the modern world” (Escobar 2007, 189) in “racial/ethnic subaltern locations” (Grosfuguel 2007, 212).

Epistemologically, this means that researchers need to question the universal relevance of their theoretical frameworks and develop a “victim-centered” justice. It requires drawing on place-based perspectives that will serve as the basis for confronting different modes of life and how they are being affected by capitalism. This will inevitably lead to an acknowledgement of capitalist destruction of nature as operating through heterogeneous mechanisms that are typically more brutal in places marked by colonialism and constructed as the periphery of the world-system. Politically, a decolonial EJ takes the “differentiated responsibilities” principle to the local level. It creates heterogeneous strategies deliberately targeting those individuals, communities and ecosystems that bear most of the environmental burdens. These strategies need to be constructed by and with the most heavily affected communities. This implies not only a broadening of the group of movements who are listened to and heard, but also helping set in motion processes of self-recognition.

The divergences between Northern and Southern conceptions of EJ should not lead to a dualist distinction between human societies, and therefore of an irreducible gap between modes of life. On the one hand, internal colonization of Southern communities must be critically addressed and deconstructed. On the other, the global North comprises a great variety of movements struggling for life through relational political ontologies and against capitalism. Therefore, a decolonial theory of EJ should focus on finding both the contradictions and commonalities between them, to render the possible underlying injustices and solutions visible. Through affirmative encounters and intercultural

dialogue EJ research can lay the groundwork for tackling the economic, cultural and institutional structures that contribute to the reproduction of coloniality.

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