

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE MOVEMENTS. THEORETICAL VIRTUES AND LIMITATIONS

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Abstract

Since their emergence, Environmental Justice Movements have become increasingly influential in national and international governance systems. Their leaders claim they create bridges between civil society and institutions – either international organizations, nation states or local governments – thereby enhancing public deliberation. This claim had drawn some political theorists' attention, contending these grassroots movements have a remarkable cognitive potential which includes playing an avant-garde role by integrating and redefining political concepts. Since climate change has become established as the preeminent environmental issue, these movements have evolved into climate justice movements and have begun to pose new challenges to national and international governance systems and institutions. Do contributions made by both waves fit the cognitive requirements to think properly about an ecological era shaped by humans? By applying the Anthropocene framework, my claim is they do not. After analyzing two key concepts endorsed by these movements - global justice and environmental sustainability – I argue they should not be considered preeminent theoretical agents as their defenders argue. That is because they lack an open and dynamic conception of sustainability, as well as enough awareness of outcomes' uncertainty in their conception of global justice.

Keywords: Environmental Justice Movements; Climate Justice Movements; Anthropocene; sustainability; global justice.

Introduction

Environmental and Climate Justice Movements occupy a unique place inside liberal democracies. Their nature and public interventions allow them to differentiate from green

parties as well as from classical environmental movements. By nature, they are grassroots movements, therefore they organize differently from traditional parties. With respect to their interventions and discourse, they replicate -in a climate-oriented way- several features of early survivalism. Hence, they interpellate governments rather than intermediate political actors, and endorse non-conventional actions based on civil disobedience. On the one hand, these features allow justice movements frame themselves as political outsiders. On the other hand, their ends could not be more conventional. Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future, probably the best-known contemporary Climate Justice Movements, share the same goals with all the national governments of the world: limiting global warming to 1,5 celsius degrees above preindustrial levels, established as the Paris Agreement's most ambitious aim.

This contrast between means and ends would be surprising if not for the particularities exhibited by climate change: namely, its wickedness (Rittel and Weber, 1973; Rayner, 2017). This fact implies asymmetries between the consolidated scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of climate change and the existing disparity when it comes to tackling it politically. In other words, the current CJM singularities consist not in “what”, but “how” to achieve Paris agreement goals: giving up economic growth, considered inherently impossible to decouple from its ecological impacts, by drastic political measures whose content differs substantially from the existing liberal democracies' normative framework.

These new movements build on idea previously developed by Environmental Justice Movements, which emerged in North America in the last two decades of the twentieth century before being replicated all around the world. After analyzing their organizational structures, discourses and public interventions, some political theorists have concluded that they are key agents of ecological change. From their point of view, their virtues are not only practical – for instance, bringing new issues to political agenda and changing its course-, but also theoretical. David Schlosberg is the most influential defender of this hypothesis, contending these movements have been playing a starring role in public deliberation by redefining key political concepts. Accordingly, we can look to these movements, rather than to normative theory, for guidance about how to think about climate justice.

In this paper, I will examine Schlosberg's hypothesis in the following way. Firstly, its content is clarified and contextualized more broadly within the contemporary political

thought. Secondly, I will explain how this hypothesis ought to be examined, arguing the Anthropocene framework is the most suitable to accomplish the paper's goal. After that, I analyze the key theoretical contributions Schlosberg argues have been made by EJM and CJM. My conclusion is that these do not fully satisfy the requisites established to think about justice and sustainability in the new ecological era. Therefore, these movements should not still be considered *avant-garde* theoretical agents in public deliberation.

From practice to theory. Schlosberg's hypothesis

Schlosberg's framework belongs to a tradition developed within Environmental Political Theory, which defends the primacy of empirical phenomena as a guide to identifying normative principles. As John Meyer argues (2008:786), this "real world" impulse would be provided by two key actors: third-world Environmental Resistance Movements and Environmental Justice Movements. The latter are analyzed in this paper.

In this sense, Schlosberg contends the EJM's theoretical role arises because it is better situated than other actors to integrating and redefining 'thick' concepts which have been thought since the beginning of the western political thought tradition. However, he points out these movement's theoretical impacts do not result from their creating new concepts – in his words, they do not expand the "theoretical literature" (Schlosberg, 1999:99). This fact is important to understand accurately Schlosberg's expectations placed on these movements.

Nevertheless, EJM and CJM made two remarkable theoretical contributions. The first, by the EJM, is to redefine and to integrate two essential notions: justice and pluralism. Secondly, CJM not only advance our conception of justice further, but also redefined another concept: climate adaptation (Schlosberg et. al, 2017). The former is the most remarkable one, as it enables to formulate Schlosberg's hypothesis and helps better to exemplify it.

Analyzing the development of contemporary political theory, Schlosberg highlights the differences between the two most influential conceptions of justice: justice as distribution and justice as recognition. The first, developed most notably by the Rawlsian tradition, is

guided by universal principles and emphasizes material outcomes. The second, considered postmaterial and conceptually enhanced by authors like Axel Honeth (1995) and Charles Taylor (1994), focuses attention on political awareness of the difference, as well as the identity of subordinate social groups. A third conception of justice, added by Schlosberg after analyzing EJM, is justice as process and participation, guided by procedures whose aim is to include all actors and their necessities -either distributional or recognitional -by their active integration in political and decision-making processes.

After examining EJM's claims and methods of organization, Schlosberg argues they have the potential to reconcile and integrate these three conceptions of justice. If this promise is fulfilled two theoretical achievements will result: a conceptual integration between justice and the environment, filling an existing gap in the Academia – see a notable exception in (Dobson, 1998); and the appearance of a “comprehensive political project” (Schlosberg, 1999:78), which may transcend revindications made by fragmented social groups.

The second contribution of these movements would be the redefinition of political pluralism, a term which is generally used to describe one of the normative features of liberal political systems. Nonetheless, Schlosberg contends these movements' practices transcend liberal conceptions of pluralism. The following elements would illustrate this (Schlosberg, 2003:69): unity without uniformity, exemplified by sharing common aims that do not eliminate differences within the movements; intersubjective and networking organization and communication, developed by decentralized and non-hierarchical structures; and agonistic respect, -intragroup and extragroup-, which would go beyond the consensus-polarization dichotomy.

Having outlined Schlosberg's hypothesis, this paper will now assess its accuracy by consider how CJM and CJM movements have developed two important concepts: global justice and sustainability

The Anthropocene. New normative requirements for a new geological and ecological era

Did EJM accomplish the theoretical promises posed by Schlosberg? If not, are their heirs achieving the desired results? As an epistemic framework, the Anthropocene establishes concrete requisites which allow me to answer properly these questions.

The Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000; Crutzen, 2006) is a thick and complex concept. Its primary dimensions -the ecological and the geological – made it evolve towards a substantive way of conceiving the relations between nature and society, characterized by the coupling of both instances (Liu et. al, 2008). The most prominent consequence of the latter is the following: if human activity has altered the planetary system's functioning, we can neither conceive nature as independent from its human conditioning, nor a society determined by stable ecological conditions. Thus, the coming of this new, unstable and uncertain era forces us to rethink the political theory's concepts in relation to their natural environment.

Acknowledging this, Dryzek and Pickering (2019) establish reflexivity requirements, in a formative deliberative sphere, which all its agents ought to accomplish in order to think properly this era. These are the following: uncertainty consciousness; deep engagement with a prominent expert knowledge on planetary systems; and a global perspective of environmental issues and solutions, as well as enough awareness about their inescapably provisional feature in a destabilized world. Nonetheless, the two most important are 1) a conception of justice beyond national borders (Dryzek and Pickering, 2019:69) and 2) an open and dynamic conception of sustainability (Arias Maldonado, 2013; Dryzek and Pickering, 2019:88-91).

It is especially important to bear in mind what the second condition means. On the one hand, an open conception of sustainability emphasizes the eminently normative nature of this concept, far from technocratic or exclusive conceptions. In this sense, it recognizes that there is more than one single way to reach sustainable societies, and each one should persuade the public without expelling the others from the debate. On the other hand, a dynamic conception of sustainability implies to abandon futile pretensions of returning to a non-anthropogenic world. Some expressed this idea by establishing “a safe operating

space for humanity” (Röckstrom, et. al, 2009), having characterized this space by the Holocene parameters.

Global Justice and Sustainability

If we apply these reflexivity requirements to analyze EJM and CJM contributions, Schlosberg’s theoretical expectations are not fulfilled. Nonetheless, there are remarkable differences between both waves. Each one will be explained.

EJM lacked a global perspective about environmental issues, because these movements were predominantly local and therefore constituted a paradigmatic example of “parochial politics” (Vanderheiden, 2016). Their dispersed and reticulate organizational structures (Dryzek, 2013: 203) neither helped to break this dynamic, as well as their demands to the political systems. These demands often emerged as spontaneous reactions to classical environmental issues and hazards, like exposure to toxic gases by afro American communities, as well as their neighborhoods’ proximity to landfills (Tokar, 2018:17). Although these movements were replicated all over North America by other ethnic minorities, they did not fulfill basic Anthropocenic reflexivity requirements because of the following reasons.

As it has been said, EJM never had a global vision on environmental hazards, issues and political solutions. Albeit that these movements were replicated in many parts of the world (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014:10) and reached a world scale, this fact did not produce an international conception of justice. Therefore, the expansion of these movements did not produce either a systemic vision of environmental hazards and issues, nor any global conception of justice which could generate political solutions to global challenges. In other words, high path-dependence and institutional rigid states, guided by the traditional Holocene framework, could satisfy these movements demands.

Secondly, EJM lacked any shared conception of sustainability – either open, closed, static or dynamic. It could be said these movements could not accomplish this condition to fulfill their aims. Nonetheless, given that Schlosberg’s expectations were higher and far from mere practical purposes – i.e., being key actors in a deliberative sphere, by providing and redefining properly political concepts-, the cognitive deficiencies of EJM are clear.

In the final years of the twentieth century, some of the most prominent EJM American leaders switched their demands. The latter were no longer focused on classical environmental hazards and issues – water, soil and air pollution – but on climate change. This change marked the emergence of the new CJM, which expanded quickly via three waves (Tokar, 2018:17-19).

These new movements clearly do come closer than their predecessors to Schlosberg's theoretical expectations. Firstly, because the movements' claims engage with emerging scientific evidence. One of the most prominent examples (Tokar, 2018:14-15) is the convergence between activists and one of the most remarkable results presented by the fourth and the fifth IPCC reports (2007;2014): even though there are high uncertainties around how climate change will affect different regions of the world, it is clear that concrete populations, situated on the tropics and governed by dysfunctional economic and political institutions, will have to deal with more and worse environmental hazards and issues. This engagement between experts and activists is exhibited by movements like Extinction Rebellion (ER, 2019) and Fridays for Future. The latter, founded by Greta Thunberg (FFF, 2019), has articulated an explicit political action principle: unity from the evidence provided by climate science.

Secondly, CJM have a global and progressively systemic vision of the environmental issues they want to address. Reasonably, climate change's transnational nature helps to cultivate this vision. However, this is not a sufficient condition to explain this difference between EJM and CJM. Movements like Climate Action Network or the World People's Conference on Climate Change reflect.... The former was one of the first to blame the global fossil-fuel industry as a main climate change driver, while criticizing technological and market-oriented solutions; both points were expressed in an important public statement during the Copenhagen COP-15, which helped to formulate explicit and coherent demands to International Organizations (Klimaforum, 2009). The latter, celebrated in Cochabamba a year later, deepens in this vision. In their statement, the existing economic systems and laws are characterized as the fundamental drivers of the environmental issues and hazards, exposing the most vulnerable populations (WPCC, 2010).

Given these claims, it is obvious that these CJM endorse a distributional conception of justice – about resources for climate change adaptation and burdens (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014:10). This would be an initial step towards a transnational -though neither

integrated nor redefined- conception of justice which, from the Cochamamba Conference, is conceived as incompatible with any kind of market economy.

Albeit closer to Schlosberg's expectations and to the Anthropocene's epistemic demands, CJM's conceptual improvements are nevertheless not fully satisfying. The first problem appears when it comes to analyzing how they address uncertainty. This notion has two meanings: uncertainty as a scientific probability of climate change related events; and as a way of interpreting political outcomes.

Analyzing the first meaning, again the bonds between IPCC and activists are easy to find. This is evidenced by the precaution principle, endorsed by both, which consists in the following: even not fully evidenced, the mere existence of irreversible threats is enough to adopt prevention and anticipation-oriented politics (UN, 1992:8). Nonetheless, things get problematic when addressing the second meaning. It is known that one of the most remarkable consequences of the Anthropocene is that, in a sustainable society, redistributive justice cannot not be guided by the same old certainty of outcomes. This is because in a destabilized world, uncertainty arises as to how natural systems could respond to human actions (Stumpf et. Al, 2015:7446). CJM agents, like the Cochamamba participants, do not bear in mind this fact. They take for granted that international compensation policies, implemented by post-capitalist economies, could reach exclusively a sustainable and fair world, well below its ecological boundaries. This planet, as the Paris Agreement posed later, would be a world below two degrees compared to preindustrial levels (WPC, 2010).

Things get more problematic when it comes to analyze these movements' conception of sustainability. Again, the most notable example is the outcome of Cochamamba Conference: The Mother Earth's rights declaration. The latter has an immovable political axiom: any sustainable society is incompatible with anthropocentric values, with any form of capitalism, as well as with any form of economic growth. The reason why is simple: these values and institutions generated unsustainable societies along with patrimonial and patriarchal conceptions of the natural environment (CMPP, 2010). This declaration is a paradigmatic example of a closed conception of sustainability: independently from its content and prescriptions, its definitive requirements and shape are established before the political deliberation takes place. This closed conception, in all its multiple versions -also technocratic conceptions like the Sustainable Development paradigm- is neither conceptually nor normatively attuned to think properly a desirable,

sustainable and -inescapably- destabilized world. That is also because this conception excludes from deliberation, either directly or indirectly, divergent political options. The successor of this declaration (CMPCC, 2015) persists in this conception.

At the same time, these movements also endorse a static conception of sustainability. Ironically, this is a non-expected outcome of the engagement between some experts' framework and the activists. As was pointed out, the planetary boundaries framework is the best example. Unavoidably, this static conception is reflected in the meanings considered by movements like Extinction Rebellion to reach a sustainable world. Conceived the latter as a carbon neutral world in 2025, it would be achieved through an energy lock-down in the developed countries, which would end in 2040 -when renewable energies' supply could satisfy half of the current energy demand (ER, 2019:168)

Conclusions

After analyzing EJM and CJM theoretical contributions by the perspective of their Anthropocenic requirements, these movements do not accomplish Schlosberg's hopes and expectations. Albeit CJM made considerable advances in this manner, two remarkable elements do not allow them to be theoretical *avant-garde* agents among other formative agents in a deliberative sphere: insufficient awareness about uncertainty of outcomes in their conception of justice and a closed as well as static conception of sustainability.

As a concluding remark, it can be said that even had these agents fully satisfied these requirements, they would lack a fundamental feature: conceptual creativity. Albeit these agents could shed light about some concepts' content deficiencies, by nature they would not exhibit a higher abstraction level, required to perform this creative task.

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