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Social movements for environmental justice through the lens of social movement theory

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Environmental justice movements (or EJMs) are environmental social movements confronting a diverse array of issues, including conflicts over resource extraction, pollution and contamination, and climate justice. EJMs are embedded in a web of other social movements including movements for racial equality and the rights of Indigenous people and the poor, farmers, workers and many others. While environmental social movement groups range widely in size from small informal groups to large organizations fully institutionalized into political systems, EJM groups tend to be grassroots groups at the smaller end of the scale (Brulle 2000). Eschewing the “Cult of Wilderness” that privileges pristine environments over the needs of people, EJM groups everywhere champion the “environmentalism of the poor” (Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier 2014). In this chapter, we focus on EJMs through the lens of social movement theory.

Social movement studies in sociology

Although a relatively new area of inquiry for sociologists, the study of social movements has grown steadily since its inception in the mid-1970s to become one of the largest subfields in US sociology, and, to a lesser degree, in others around the world. It emerged out of a critique of the dominant structuralist–functionalist view of “collective behaviour” as irrational and an aberration that disturbed the smooth functioning of society. By the late 1960s, this view had come to seem an outdated artefact of the 1950s as the rise of Civil Rights, anti-Vietnam war, feminist, gay liberation and reform-oriented environmentalism in the US challenged the distribution of rights and resources. Instead, sociologists began to view social movements as rational, self-interested and instrumental social action (McAdam and Boudet 2012).

Political economy (which emphasized a Marxist view of the relationship between social movements and systems of economic production) was the first theoretical perspective to challenge existing structuralist–functionalist theory (Tilly et al. 1975). It was soon followed by Resource Mobilization Theory, which held that activists must form organizations and gather resources such as adherents and money in order to effectively challenge existing arrangements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Some Marxist-inspired researchers used historical work to
emphasize the continuing importance of structural strains giving rise to collective behaviour, which they argued was not irrational but instead a disruptive tactic used in the social movement actions of poor people who lacked access to “resources” (Piven and Cloward 1977).

Political Process Theory (also called Political Opportunity Theory) soon supplied another perspective that challenged (or supplemented) Resource Mobilization Theory. Political Process Theory focused on elements of the political scene such as opportunity and threat, state repression, and elite alignments as factors either sparking or constraining mobilization (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982). At present, the three perspectives above are the dominant theoretical perspectives in the social movement subfield of US sociology (McAdam and Boudet 2012).

Social movement theorists have criticized the methodology of social movement studies, claiming that researchers tend to focus exclusively on large, successful social movements rather than small or failed movements. They argue that this has obscured the true frequency of both mobilization and movement success, thus keeping researchers from understanding how external conditions affect the likelihood of mobilization (McAdam and Boudet 2012).

Emergence and nature of environmental justice movements

In the United States, EJMs emerged in the late 1970s from a critique of bureaucratic “reform” environmentalism (Brulle 2000), and of the wilderness conservation focus of environmental organizations, which ignored the environmental concerns of urban, poor, and racial/ethnic minority communities (Taylor 2000). Since that time, the discourse and issue focus of environmental justice has “gone global,” and EJM groups are found throughout the world, although sometimes taking on a form different from that of the grassroots groups common to US EJMs (Walker 2012; see also Chapter 39).

Although EJMs first emerged in a wealthy Global North nation, EJM activism coalesced around environmental threats to human rights, health and safety. The focus of EJMs on these issues of survival, together with the rapid emergence of EJM groups in the Global South, contradict the “New Social Movements” theory of environmentalism, which holds that the emergence of new environmental movements was generated by the transition from scarcity to relative affluence and security (Inglehart 1977). While US environmental activists tend to be highly educated middle-class people, EJM activists tend to be drawn from a wide spectrum of society including the poor and marginalized (Rootes and Brulle 2013). Instead of regarding social inequality as a problem separate from environmental degradation, EJM activists hold that social inequality is closely related to (and even a cause of) degraded environments (Taylor 2000).

Although environmentalism provided an overarching framework for EJMs, they also originated from many other social movements. In urban areas, EJM groups originated from movements for urban hygiene and occupational and public health, which is reflected in their current inclusion as issues of environmental justice (Faber and McCarthy 2003; Gottlieb 2005; Taylor 1997). With the recent emphasis on energy justice and climate justice among EJM groups and actors, EJMs have expanded their focus to gas drilling, oil trains and pipelines transporting oil and gas, international treaties restraining greenhouse gas loading, and justice in mitigation and adaptation to climate change at all geographic scales (Roberts and Parks 2009).

This multi-issue focus has meant that, in every part of the world, EJM groups tend to be “hybrids,” in which activist groups work on more than one issue, and are part of a network of activist groups. But social movement theorists disagree about the efficacy of hybrid activism. Some theorize that it enhances the strength of social movement groups because it stimulates
recruitment of activists from other movements, and increases connections with other social movements (Heaney and Rojas 2014). Others argue that the focus and power of EJMs have been weakened because they attempt to address too many issues (Benford 2005).

**Political process/political opportunity**

Political Process (also called Political Opportunity) theorists argue that, prior to mobilization, there must first be some type of political opportunity that gives EJM actors hope that they can succeed (Tarrow 1994). Although it adds a vital contextual dimension to understandings of social change efforts, the concept of political opportunity has been critiqued for its elasticity, and the under-specification of the conditions under which it might give rise to or constrain mobilization (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). But in general, social movement theorists define political opportunity as increased or increasing access to the existing political system, divisions within the elite, the availability of elite allies, and decreases in violent repression by the state (McAdam 1996).

The timing of the emergence of EJM groups (in Argentina after the end of dictatorship in 1984, in Chile during the return to civilian rule in 1989, and in South Africa in the post-apartheid era of the early 1990s), seems to confirm the importance of reduced repression to EJM mobilization (Khan 2002; Urkidi and Walter 2011). In the US, the passage of Executive Order 12898 directing federal agencies to consider the disparate environmental impacts of their activities was signed by President Clinton in 1994. Although its passage was the result of sustained EJM activism, it also signalled that US EJMs had an elite ally, which seemed to coincide with increased EJM activity. This illustrates the “intrastate and dynamic” nature of political opportunity, in which social movement activists modify the actions of the state, creating their own political opportunities (Tarrow 1996).

However, David Pellow has critiqued this view of political opportunity as too focused on the state, and thus lacking an understanding of the entire context that confronts EJM groups (also see Chapter 4). The political and economic changes taking place from the 1970s to the mid-1990s have increased the power and influence of multinational corporations, while decreasing the relative power of nation-states (Pellow 2001). In the US, the oversized influence of corporate interests on the political system and close alliances between politicians and corporate campaign funders constitutes the major obstacle in the political opportunity structures confronting EJMs. Legislation limiting US greenhouse gas emissions has failed to pass, due to Republicans funded by fossil fuel corporations, factions in the Democratic Party dependent upon fossil fuels, and the political polarization of the public between climate change believers and climate “sceptics” (McCright and Dunlap 2011). But severe storms such as Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy constitute political opportunities to link costly and devastating disasters together with human-driven climate change, and to underscore the unequal vulnerability of poor people of colour when facing disaster (Caniglia et al. 2015; Bullard and Wright 2009).

**Mobilization**

For poor people, who are used to hardships, examples throughout history show that collective action as a response to even the worst provocations is relatively uncommon; thus, something beyond miserable conditions must take place in order for people to mobilize. For structural strain theorists, this “something” is a “sequence or combination of severe social dislocations” (Piven and Cloward 1977). This strand of social movement theory posits that social
movements result from ruptures or strains in the sociopolitical order, and seeks to specify under what conditions these will result in activism (Snow et al. 1998).

The rupture or strain can take the form of an accident or disaster, the intrusion of an unwanted facility or process into the sacred territory of people’s land, home, neighbourhood or family, or a disruption in people’s subsistence routines (Snow et al. 1998). One or more of these are frequently the conditions around which EJMs form. Many groups recently brought into the EJM social movement family by the new focus on climate change (e.g., La Via Campesina) address threats to local survival that go beyond climate change, such as low prices for and limited access to the food grown by farmers (McKeon 2015).

McAdam and Boudet, who studied communities “at risk for mobilization” against energy-generating facilities in the US, theorize that the causes of mobilization for rights-based movements (such as Civil Rights, Anti-Apartheid or feminist movements) differ from those of EJMs (which they refer to as “NIMBY movements”). They argue that rights-based movements are sparked by cracks or ruptures in existing power structures, which constitute political opportunities for marginalized groups; EJMs are instead sparked by threats to local health or quality of life (McAdam and Boudet 2012).

Other theorists take issue with structural strain theorists, and instead focus on “resource mobilization,” or the availability of resources (moral and cultural resources, as well as time, effort and money) as the strongest factor predicting collective action. These may be resources that come from within the movement, or they may come from sources external to the movement. Generally, resource mobilization theorists hold that larger, more formalized organizations allow social movement actors to aggregate resources, which increases the effectiveness of the social movement (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). Given this perspective, private funding from philanthropic foundations created to distribute monies from wealthy donors should be an important resource fuelling environmental justice activism; yet, in 2000, US environmental justice groups received only 1.5 per cent of all foundation grants given to environmental groups. The bulk of the money went to preservation and conservation groups, which lack EJMs’ radical critique of social inequality (Brulle and Jenkins 2005). However, a group of activist funders reacted to this neglect of EJM groups by coordinating efforts to support EJM groups (Faber and McCarthy 2005).

McAdam and Boudet (2012) argue that all social movements begin as local struggles, but not all are successful enough to undergo a “scale shift” from local to national. The issue of scale is of much interest to scholars of EJMs, for both empirical and theoretical reasons: aside from the spatial ambiguities that are inherent in each effort to determine whether environmentally unjust conditions exist, scale also shapes how EJMs present themselves and their grievances (Kurtz 2003). But regardless of scale, McAdam and Boudet found that EJMs mattered greatly: the absence of EJM mobilization was highly correlated with the building of new energy-generating facilities (McAdam and Boudet 2012).

Collective identity and framing

Within the field of social movement studies, collective identity can be defined as a person’s broader cognitive, moral and emotional connection with a broader community. Collective identity is theorized to be an important factor in many aspects of movements, including recruitment, retention, collective claims of injustice, tactical decision making, and the outcomes of social movement efforts (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Collective identities connected with histories of struggle against racism are very important aspects of EJM groups and movements in the US and South Africa (Bullard 1993; Capek 1993; Walker 2012).
But in order to be maintained, collective identities require activists to draw and police boundaries between their identity and that of others; thus, they can also have a divisive effect on social movements (Gamson 1995). In the US, the strong focus on racial/ethnic identities, and on EJMs as struggles against environmental racism, are powerful sources of solidarity between people of colour, and between people of colour and anti-racist whites. But this solidarity carries with it risks, as the focus on racism has factionalized US EJMs and overshadowed other sources of environmental injustice, such as social class inequality and poverty (Agyeman 2005; Brulle and Pellow 2005). The mistaken impression that poor and working-class whites are safe from environmental hazards can tactically weaken US EJMs by excluding these groups (Brulle and Pellow 2005).

Outside the US and South Africa, collective identities in EJMs tend to cohere around issues other than race. In Latin America, collective identities in EJMs tend to be associated with struggles against colonialism (Urkidi and Walter 2011), while in the UK, collective identities based on social class inequality are more salient (Walker 2012). In India, EJM activists’ distrust of the government stems from its post-colonial brand of environmentalism, in which elite voices dominate and a true public sphere does not exist (Williams and Mawdsley 2006).

Almost everywhere in the world that EJMs cohere, they seem to begin as local struggles rooted in intense attachment to place and to local identities (Anguelovski and Martinez-Alier 2014; Fresque-Baxter and Armitage 2012; Pena 2005; also see Chapter 47). Although this aspect of EJMs has been examined more by geographers than by social movement theorists, place-based collective identity determines much about EJMs, including their mobilization and their choices of strategies and tactics. This aspect of EJMs seems to align with the idea of environmental hazards as a “threat” people with more intense attachments to a place tend to fight for “their” place when it is threatened (Kaltenborn 1998; Stedman 2002).

Framing is the process through which EJM activists present both collective identities and grievances to the world. Through collective action frames, social movement actors characterize situations as unjust, attribute blame, propose solutions, and try to mobilize onlookers into their struggle (Snow et al. 1986). EJMs have spoken to the public through the process of “frame bridging,” through which they have incorporated two powerful ideas (“environment” and “justice”), thus creating a more broad and inclusive frame (Snow et al. 1986; Taylor 2000). It is this linking of local troubles to wider social inequalities (such as racism) that has allowed EJMs to address social inequalities on the national (and even global) scales (Kurtz 2003).

These “scale frames” have allowed local EJM groups to link up with national-level groups and diffuse collective action frames from the local to the national level and vice-versa (Capek 1993; Kurtz 2003). Yet, as with collective identities focused around race, some aspects of the emphasis on local identities and injustices can keep EJMs from succeeding. The plurality of local, place-based perspectives embedded in the collective identities and collective action frames of EJMs can keep them from recognizing common struggles and becoming part of a much broader movement (Harvey 1996). When this occurs, EJM protest can sometimes take the form of many isolated local struggles that do not coalesce around a common definition of the problem (Sicotte 2012). This is not a trivial manner, as researchers have found that when local EJMs fail to attract attention and resources from outside the local area, they are less likely to succeed in blocking the building of an unwanted polluting facility (Toffolon-Weiss and Roberts 2005).

Others argue that including the concerns of these varied local struggles has made the collective action frames of EJMs too broad and inclusive, which prevents them from speaking
in one coherent voice and dilutes their radical critique of existing social and economic arrangements (Benford 2005).

**Strategies and tactics of EJMs**

Although EJMs are mostly local movements, they do best when embedded in large networks of activists (Pellow 2001; Toffolon-Weiss and Roberts 2005). In this respect, the spread of the Internet and other electronic forms of communication has enabled collaboration across borders, and facilitated ties between activists (Castells 2012).

Both strong and weak ties between activists have diffused protest strategies and tactics used by EJM groups rapidly throughout the world (Strang and Soule 1998). Strong ties between EJM groups networked through the same NGO, Global Community Monitor, resulted in the diffusion of bucket brigades from Louisiana in the US to Durban in South Africa. Bucket brigades are used by EJM activists on the fence line of large, polluting industrial sites. Activists use a simple plastic bucket to sample ambient air, which is then analysed to measure concentrations of toxic air pollutants (Scott and Barnett 2008; also see Chapters 8 and 23).

Weak ties can also diffuse protest tactics when activists see EJM protest activities covered in the media, and adopt particularly memorable tactics for their own protests. This was done by survivors of the 1984 release of deadly MIC gas from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, when the Dow Chemical Corporation (which had purchased Union Carbide) announced that it would be a corporate sponsor of the 2012 Olympics in London. On opening day, the survivors held a “die-in” at the games, dramatizing the suffering and death of Bhopal survivors for international media (Botelho and Zavistoski 2015). The disaster at Love Canal in the late 1970s had been an international story, and newspapers had disseminated images of die-ins mounted by EJM activists (Shabecoff 2003).

But this does not mean that the tactical choices of EJM groups are totally their own. As EJMs become increasingly embedded within both domestic and transnational networks of other NGOs, their tactical choices are constrained by the group: each EJM group must craft a message and an arsenal of tactics that is in harmony with their NGO partners, but different enough to stand out from them (Hadden 2015).

**Climate justice and transnational EJM networks**

Within the last twenty years, EJM organizations have of necessity become increasingly integrated within transnational networks as they work on environmental injustices generated by climate change (see Chapter 29). These injustices include deaths from climate-related disasters, sea level rise that threatens the existence of low-lying countries, and inequality in the financial capacity to adapt to climate change (Ciplet et al. 2015). The sector of EJM organizations addressing these conditions is the climate justice movement, a loosely linked international network of organizations and individuals focused on the earth’s changing climate and the extraction and burning of fossil fuels (Caniglia et al. 2015; Ciplet et al. 2015; Roberts and Parks 2009). Some researchers mark the beginning of the climate justice movement at the COP-6 climate change negotiations in the Netherlands in 2000, when US-based EJM leaders such as sociologist Robert Bullard and UK-based grassroots groups such as The Rising Tide began to focus on the victimization of the poor due to climate-linked conditions (Roberts and Parks 2009). The Rising Tide called for repayment of the “ecological debt” owed by wealthy nations in the north to the south, the control of land by Indigenous peoples, and a “just transition” to a low-carbon society (The Rising Tide UK 2012).
According to some observers, climate justice in the US is no longer understood as an “environmental” issue: environmental damage is linked together with (and caused by) social and economic inequality (Ciplet et al. 2015). Such frame-bridging is a typical feature of EJM discourse. But the turn toward climate change among EJMs may have made the collective action frames of EJMs more coherent by uniting harms from climate change with harms from fossil fuel extraction and burning (such as threats to health and safety from mining, oil and gas drilling, fuel transport and refining, and air pollution). The climate justice collective action frame attributes blame for both disproportionate harms, and the profligate and continuing use of fossil fuels, to societal power imbalances (Harlan et al. 2015).

The discourse of EJMs working toward climate justice illustrates the multi-scale social processes of the capitalist world economy (Williams 1999) and makes conceptual links between local “sacrifice zones” where the dirtiest and most destructive extractive activities occur, the policy decisions of national leaders, and the actions of multinational fossil fuel corporations (O’Rourke and Connolly 2003). Unconventional gas drilling (or “fracking”), a risky and environmentally damaging new technique for extracting natural gas from rock formations, has created a fossil fuel feeding frenzy, drawing more people into EJMs (Food and Water Watch 2015). Fracking also gives rise to new hazards such as the transportation of flammable oil and gas through pipelines and on railroads (Burton and Stretesky 2014), and uses enormous quantities of freshwater, which pulls in more EJM activists. Climate justice is the latest in an increasing number of EJM issues that are transnational in nature (such as the export of banned pesticides, e-waste and plastic waste to the Global South), which makes it necessary for EJM activists to work together across borders. Accordingly, EJMs embedded in international networks do not limit themselves to targeting only environmental regulators, but also target corporations in campaigns such as the Computer TakeBack Campaign, which demanded that computer manufacturers deal with the e-waste they produce instead of dumping it in the Global South (Pellow 2007). While activists must work to overcome the tensions inherent in working together across a gulf of economic inequality (Pellow 2007), the number of EJM groups involved in transnational EJM networks is steadily growing. Some argue that transnational social movements present the best chance for global solidarity generating a political force powerful enough to ensure human survival (Ciplet et al. 2015). However, Global South EJMs that tend to embrace more radical views of social justice are being marginalized and excluded from meetings on climate change (Caniglia et al. 2015).

Responses to EJMs

According to social movement theorists, marginalizing and excluding activists is only one of many possible ways that societal power players can respond to pressures from EJMs. Other responses include providing some concessions while denying activists access to true power; or “buying off” activists with money or positions of pseudo-power in place of any real change, a tactic known as co-optation (Gamson 1990).

Co-optation can be discerned when challenging groups alter their claims and tactics to ones that can be pursued without disrupting politics as usual (Meyer and Tarrow 1998). At climate treaty negotiations, the co-optation of some of the largest US-based environmental organizations has legitimized the drafting of treaties that are ineffective in limiting deadly greenhouse gas emissions, impeding the work of EJM activists (Ciplet et al. 2015). Within EJMs, it can occur through community partnerships with academic researchers, particularly when there are pressures to divert energies away from their communities and into activities...
that benefit universities (Wing 2005). Co-optation has also occurred through disagreements between EJM actors, which in the US have led to federal environmental justice grants that fund non-controversial projects rather than confronting environmental situations that threaten health and violate human rights (Harrison 2015). Social movement theory suggests that EJMs should not seek to be at the table with power players, as their only power lies in disrupting the smooth functioning of the society that oppresses them (Piven and Cloward 1977).

Co-optation is useful to those in power because it preserves the illusion of democratic functioning and the appearance of legitimacy. But when these factors are not of concern, power players may simply respond to EJMs with violent repression. Repression of social movements has been defined by social movement theorists as violence or the threat of violence by government authorities aimed at increasing the cost of activism (Davenport 2007). These types of responses to social movements have always menaced activists in Global South nations with authoritarian histories or military governments; in such nations, EJM activists have been killed, imprisoned or executed for coming into opposition with ruling elites (Osaghae 1995; Wolford 2008). But violence has also been used against US social movements, particularly labour movements (Goldberg 1991).

In confronting issues of fossil fuel extraction and climate justice, EJMs are inevitably brought into conflict with multinational corporations and their allies (see Chapters 38 and 45). While these dynamics are not new to EJMs (who have long confronted mining, chemical and waste disposal corporations), oil and gas corporations have almost unlimited economic resources, and can call on corporate-supported government officials in every nation; and it is naïve to suppose that these officials would not respond with violent repression if EJMs mount militant attacks on corporate interests.

Social movement theorists have identified two conditions that seem to predict violent repression of social movements: radical goals which threaten established power structures; or social movements that are (or are perceived to be) weak, such as those of poor people (Earl 2003). Unfortunately, EJMs are at risk for repression due to both characteristics.

Social movement theory on the future of EJMs

Since the early 1980s, EJMs have forced the broader environmental movement and society to redefine “the environment” as including not just wilderness areas but also urban communities and rural sacrifice zones, and to recognize the connections between social inequality and environmental damage. While they have enjoyed some important successes (such as stopping the proliferation of incinerators in the US), it is not certain whether they will be able to generate enough power to prevail in the daunting struggles that confront them at present (Pellow and Brulle 2005).

EJMs are theorized to arise from disruptions in people’s daily lives caused by environmental threats perceived to invade their bodies and homes, placing their survival at risk. These threats are perceived as deeply inequitable assaults on people who are poor, or are of racial or ethnic minority groups. The linking together of environmentally degraded conditions with social injustice has given rise to powerful collective action frames, but also shaped EJMs into localized, place-based movements. While some are linked into transnational networks, others remain small and localized.

But social movement theory suggests that localized EJMs are much less likely to succeed; in order to grow, gather resources, and effectively resist environmental threats, EJMs must recognize their local struggle as part of a much larger one, and must reach across the borders of their collective identity to recruit others dealing with environmental threats (Harvey 1996).
This will involve the establishment of new, broader collective identities, which will allow them to shift scale and become more unified.

Climate injustice may be a type of environmental injustice so all-encompassing that only the most privileged remain untouched by fossil fuel extraction and transport, heat waves, droughts, storms or flooding disasters. The climate justice movement thus has potential as the basis of a broader identity through which to mobilize for extensive, systemic change. However, realizing this potential will mean the creation of a truly global movement, in which activists all over the world work closely and effectively together; this will not be easy.

EJMs present a radical critique of the rampant and extreme social inequalities that create environmental injustice. In their analysis, it is not possible to bring about environmental justice without fundamental changes in the distribution of money and power. If EJMs succeed in becoming institutionalized into society, this puts them at risk for co-optation, which would completely undermine their effectiveness. Instead of striving for acceptance or a seat at the table, social movement theory would direct EJM activists to try to create political opportunity by targeting and breaking the smooth alignment of corporations with the political order. This implies the use of disruptive (rather than conciliatory) tactics, which may be greeted with repression.

But EJM activists argue that their lives are already threatened due to climate change, chemical contamination, mineral or fuel extraction, water privatization or some other environmentally unjust condition; regardless of the results, they must fight (Perreault 2008). Social movement studies can contribute theories about the characteristics of EJMs that may lead to their success or failure, but ultimately cannot predict either outcome.

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