

Social movements as agencies for collective action: Redefining urban commons in South Africa

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to situate a debate about the prospects of the environmental justice movement to redefine the urban commons and investigate the prospects for collective action in South Africa. Common property resource literature is clear about the rights of individuals on private and public lands. Yet situating the environmental justice movement means negotiating and redefining the rights and privileges of private ownership. I will argue in this paper that in the environmental justice discourse, private land maybe more like common property in more ways than is usually recognised. Indeed these contestations require that there is a redefinition of rights of use on private land in order to take care of the “common good”. Social justice movements require that those aspects of land use that affect the community’s quality of life and shared environment be managed as common property. I will use cases from South Africa to look at the “carving” out of new urban commons in South Africa. This will be reviewed drawing from common property literature that point to the important aspects of defining “successful commons” and successful collective action for commons management. According to Ostrom (1990) a successful common is defined by the extent to which a system is facing significant environmental uncertainty and there is a social stability in the group of users. While there may be doubts to the existence of a single, coherent environmental movement mobilizing under the comprehensive banner of environmental justice in South Africa, there is evidence that there is an expansion of space for collective action. Evidence shows an environmental awareness awakening in civil society particularly amongst those most affected by threats to the urban commons. There is evidence that the carving out of the urban commons may also yet present opportunities for the redefinition of private rights which will affect management institutions in South Africa.

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Introduction

What is the environment: Contestations over definition?

It is important to situate this discussion in the broader framework of analysis which calls to defining "environment". The 'environment' is a problematic concept as it is difficult to define- it refers to a variety of things, entities and processes covering a wide range of issues. Its definition can thus be used to justify particular positions and arguments. It is a very elastic term, which can mean different things depending on how one defines and understands it. The term has no universally agreed and singular meaning or definition. It is also a value-laden term in that how it is defined can also be used to express, justify or establish particular values or judgements, courses of action and reaction, policy prescriptions and ways of thinking. Environment can also be a relational concept in that one needs to know what or who the subject of discussion is in order to define an environment.

Given this problematic, different theorists have described the environment differently and each definition portrays the central values enshrined in each position. The environment has been seen as 'wilderness' by a dominant view that sees the wild nature as dangerous, uncontrollable, and an unstable permanent threat to the human social order. The wildness of nature even gave rise to some mentality not only about wild nature but also even the inhabitants of wild areas. A conception of nature as wild also reflects on how one can also conceive of collectives, especially national identities. This view of the environment has also positive reflections as the environment can be celebrated and valued specifically in the face of much degradation and transformation of the landscape due to the 'bureaucratic, mundane and stultifying processes of modernisation' (p.23).

The environment has also been seen by some as a countryside/garden; denoting a humanised natural environment. This environment has been worked on and transformed by humans. These theorists place the countryside environment between the 'wild' and urban environment. These environments are typical hideouts of 'refugees of modernity', running away from the drudgery of the city. It is a value-laden conceptualisation saving as a reminder of the life before crime, stress, competitiveness and materialism that came with modernity and industrialisation. This other life is enshrined in the urban environment, which is the human made spaces, buildings, developments and structures in cities. The development of the urban environment has effectively affected how people view and think about nature as they have become increasingly removed from direct contact with nature. This is what, according to Giddens, has given rise to environmental consciousness, the aesthetic appreciation of nature and concern with the preservation of the natural world.

Explaining environment consciousness and movements

Environmental consciousness and movements grew dramatically from the early 1970s in both Europe and America. A number of postulations have been forwarded to explain this trend. Environmental deterioration began after WWII, peaking by the late 1960s.

The environmental consciousness that began in the early 1970s could be explained as a direct response to this continued environmental deterioration. The perceived seriousness of ecological conditions also explains the extent of environmental concern. According to Hannigan (1995), in countries where the pollution of rivers, forests, and soils is unarguably more acute, environmental concern congruently highly developed. He however cautions that there is data suggest that there is not always a correlation between perception of environmental problems and the magnitude of the problems themselves. He also points to the possibility that public concern is partially independent of actual environmental deterioration and is shaped by other considerations, e.g. mass media coverage. Scientific experts, media and environmentalists play an even more important role in raising awareness of modern environmental problems that are not likely to be visible to the naked eye such as acid rain, global warming, ozone depletion and toxic contamination.

Another explanation for the rise of environmental consciousness postulated by Inglehart is that there is a possibility in every society for values to shift. Following on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, he contended that when economic worries have been surpassed, people can divert their attention to non-material needs "for belonging and individual fulfilment". Post materialist values such as concern for ideas, the pursuit of personal growth, autonomy in decision making and improving the quality of the physical environment can have space in individuals' lives once economic well being has been achieved. Environmentalists have a heightened environmental awareness coupled with a set of alternative, post-materialist values, which does not necessarily have anything to do with the actual extent of environmental deterioration. Others would contend that grassroots environmental activism in poorer countries are evidence to refute this thesis of the origins of environmental concerns. I will address these varying views as I analyse the "rise and wane" of environmental action in South Africa.

Is environmentalism about class? The new middle class thesis places environmental consciousness into occupational class segments that include journalists, teachers, social workers, artist and professors probably due to their social situation where they can witness first hand the victimisation of society and the weak at the hands of the "heralds of industrial progress". According to Hanigan (1995) they tend to become personally involved in environmental problems. Such a classist grouping of environmental awareness has been challenged on the grounds that there is evidence of diversity in social composition that goes beyond class. The fact that everyone, regardless of class is affected by environmental problems, leads to the conclusion that environmental consciousness can go across class lines.

This paper aims at looking at the history of environmental movements and seeks to provide an analysis of the scope, opportunities and threats to a strong environmental movement in South Africa. It seeks to answer to the promise of a strong environmental movement as evidenced in the apartheid period with the formation of such groups as Earthlife Africa and looking at how and why today there is just but a semblance of stirrings of environmental concerns championed by a handful of organisations that do not necessarily consider themselves neither a social movement or an environmental

justice movement.

Environmental movement and the environmental justice movement

Social movements in general are historically productive. According to Castells (1999), they are very crucial and have the potential to impact on cultural values and society's institutions. The environmental movement's possible origins can be traced to the above discussion on the rise of environmental consciousness. Environmentalism according to Castells is concerned with all forms of collective behaviour that in their discourse and practice aims at correcting destructive forms of the relationship between human action and its natural environment essentially in opposition to the prevailing structural and institutional logic. It presents a challenge to the status quo (Castells, *ibid*). The environmental justice movement grew out of this orientation.

Environmental justice refers to the spatial distribution of environmental goods and bads amongst people. It has been defined as "fairness in the distribution of environmental well-being". Broadly it calls on every one to define and achieve their aspirations without imposing unfair, excessive or irreparable burdens and externalities on other and their environments, now and in the future (Scott & Oelofse, 2005).

Environmental justice calls for a far much broader definition of what the environment is and what should be on this environmental agenda. The environment is thus typically defined as the 'place you work, the place you live and the place you play' (DiChiro, 1998). People are very high up on the agenda of environmental justice discourse as they are considered an integral part of the environment. The daily realities and conditions of people's lives shape and direct the people's relationship with the environment. Environmental justice is also concerned with issues of social justice as a central part of the environmentalism discourse. This has been guided by the numerous evidence that reflect how environmental hazards and costs are unequally distributed mainly affecting the poor, and along racial divides. Environmental justice as such calls for fundamental redefinitions, reinvention and construction of innovative political and cultural discourses and practices (DiChiro, 1998) to enable social and environmental change. The environment justice movement has also been instrumental according to DiChiro in producing a coherent analysis of the causes and consequences of environmental problems (DiChiro, 1998).

Harvey (1999) has a view that membership of the different movements reflect different concerns and intense politics of space. Divisions are typically along race, class and gender and most members of the environmental justice movements as highlighted earlier are of colour, mostly women, and are from low-income societies. It is also not a coincident that most environmental ills are spatially located in areas where the poor and mostly people of colour are resident. Toxic dumps are typically located in areas of lower property values, which is where the poor and disadvantaged, forced by their impoverished circumstances can afford. Another defining feature of most environmental justice movement groups is their resistance to cooptation and absorption into middle-class and professional based resistance "to that impeccable economic logic of

environmental hazards that the circulation of capital defines" (Harvey 1999; 371). According to Harvey, the justice movement is the only discourse that has proven far less amenable to corporate or governmental cooptation. Inequalities that this discourse fights against have been felt in very tangible ways to make elimination of environmental hazards and compensation for such inequalities a pressing issue not to be sidelined. Another characteristic feature of the environmental justice movement is that they do not frame their arguments in the scientific mode of conventional environmental discourses. Whilst they may use science, medicine, economics and the law as important ingredients, they do not allow these fields to frame their arguments too much. This means they can draw on moral force and moral outrage in explaining their search for rationality or according to Harvey (1999) "even irrationality" should it be necessary. This sets them apart from simple environmentalism.

Different understandings about the environment account for the different orientations of those who are part of the environment movement in general and the environment justice movement in particular. The environment movement and particularly as encapsulated in the mainstream agenda is concerned with curbing species loss and habitat destruction, which according to Cock (1999) are "green issues". On the other hand the environment justice movement call for a broader definition of what constitutes the environment as highlighted above. Cock calls to an understanding of the "different shades" of green as far as the environment movement is concerned. According to her there is no single environmentalist ideology. Harvey in the same light points to the strength of situating the environment justice within a discourse analysis (1999). According to him, discourses do not exist in isolation from beliefs, social relations, institutional structures, material practices or power relations. As such construing the environmental justice in this framework permits a closer analysis of how a discourse about environment justice might work "within other moments of social processes thereby affecting beliefs, imaginaries, institutions, practices, power relations..." (*ibid*, 372).

Environmental justice movement in South Africa as agencies of social transformation
Social movements have been defined as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. Social movements have played a very crucial role in South Africa's history being very crucial during the fight against apartheid. After independence the nature and scope of operation for movements changed moving away from their political inclination towards encompassing a broader variety of concerns aimed at redressing past injustices to create a more equitable society. It is against this background that we can situate the rise of the environmental justice movement in South Africa.

The grassroots environmental movement in South Africa grew out of the opening up of space for civil society engagement after Independence in 1994. Increasingly people from disadvantaged groups in South Africa started to rally around environmental issues. The following analysis shows that though there has been increased rallying around specific environmental justice issues, the movement remains weak and has stagnated to isolated, issue related agitations. Environmentalism has a long way to go as it is and the aim of the paper is also to reflect on opportunities and scope for collective action.

The movements in S.A represent agencies of social transformation or new social struggles within capitalist production over toxic waste production and disposal. Whilst there is no coherent body organised around environmental justice issues, the organising principle for the isolated cases of environmental justice collective efforts is that poor, people of colour and indigenous people have been at risk from environmental hazards. According to Cock (1999), the embryonic environmental justice movement in South Africa is located at the confluence of three of the greatest challenges for the country; the struggle against racism, the struggle against poverty and inequality and the struggle to protect the environment. The cases that will be reviewed here show that there is an inequity in the citing of toxic waste sites, hazardous materials landfills, incinerators and polluting industry.

Environmental justice in South Africa reflects an orientation towards a struggle for the “urban commons” as they champion issues around air pollution, toxic wastes and incineration. They demonstrate the abilities of real people to create collaborative institutions for the protection, management and use of urban commons. In 2002 The Steel Valley Crisis Committee mobilised and took South Africa’s leading steel producer ISCOR to court for the pollution of groundwater in the area surrounding Van der Bijl Park. South Durban Community Environmental Alliance was formed to in an effort to bring together communities from different ethnic groups, religious background and colour backgrounds “to share our common resources and to bring those resources to bear on our common problem”. The common problem was pollution and effort was aimed at challenging industry with an environmental justice and human rights perspective, not from a “not in our backyards” position, but from a not in any one’s backyard position (Nieuwenhuys, 2004).

The Environmental Justice Movement and the Urban Commons

The social justice movement has meant a redefinition and broadening of public concern. Land can be either public or private, yet situating the environmental justice movement in the commons debate means renegotiating land redefining the rights and privileges of private ownership. Localised concerns about pollution, the effects of toxic waste disposal and the contamination of water for industrial neighbours have translated private property into common property, rights and regulations of which need to be defined. It is striking that private property can be more like common property in more ways than is usually recognised. This is particularly as one reviews the contestations and zoning and environmental regulations who may not allow private landowners to do anything and everything on land they so own. The environmental justice movement represent contestations over what should happen on private property. This is essentially because there are aspects of land use that affect the community's quality of life and shared environment and which, through the representation of the justice movement necessitate that they be managed almost like common property.

Challenges to South Africa Environmental Justice movement

Organisational capacity deficiencies seem to be a cause for the demise of environmental justice groups in South Africa. It is most telling that Earthlife Africa

considered one of the most important and prominent environmental justice organisation in South Africa was founded in 1988 constituting a group of students from the Witwatersrand University. They were very revolutionary when they started yet one gets the impression that they do not necessarily consider themselves an environmental movement organisation today. They have essentially moved away from their progressive inclinations of going out and educating communities and trying to mobilise grassroots awareness. They seem to have settled into the orthodox, mainstream engagement with government and worrisome of getting their hands dirty with grassroots action. Mainstream environmental organising seems too distant, paternalistic and unresponsive. It has also been traditionally characterised by representation by white middle class males whose separatist/ protectionist ideological position is based on separating humans and the natural world (DiChiro, 1996). Environmental justice challenges this orientation for being “deceptive, theoretically incoherent, and strategically ineffective in its political aim to promote widespread environmental awareness” (DiChiro, 1996; 124).

Yet there was a much scope when the organisation was founded and more so, with their championing of the formation in 1992 of the Environmental Justice Networking Forum. The forum has so far dwindled and largely lost its membership through the years. According to Nieuwenhuys (2004), most of these organisations lost their members to post apartheid government structures. Earthlife has also struggled with the transition from an apartheid organisation oriented towards confrontation to a negotiation tactic with the post apartheid ANC government.

The major problems is that the isolated environmental lobby activities have not sufficiently forged (strategic alliances) links with other citizen groups, political officials, public interest groups trade unions etc. There are possibilities of these alliances forming an alternative network of power poised to resist powerful and entrenched interests who often subordinate environmental concerns to other political and economic interests. Yet civil society has so far proved too weak to challenge the government as well as industry that are the main culprits in the deterioration of the urban commons.

A deeper analysis by Nieuwenhuys (2004) points to a fundamental limitation of the process of engagement in environmental justice movement in South Africa. Where alliances have been formed between communities and environmental groups, there has been a gap in understanding between the 2 groups in terms of the articulation of problems and required efforts to minimise the problems. He particularly cited the case of the SDCEA where communities were more concerned about issues of compensation than reducing pollution. Communities were demanding medical facilities, employment for residence of the area, community hall computers, and rehabilitation of houses and infrastructure. This has a huge bearing on the output of collective action if problems are not perceived in the same light by members of a group. More importantly this has been problematic in the articulation and definition of environmental justice concerns. This may also account for the waning in collective action that has been witnessed in South Africa.

Cock contents that there is no single, collective actor that constitutes the environmental

movement in South Africa and no 'master frame' of environmentalism. Over the years the movement has continued to be an inchoate sum of multiple, diverse, uncoordinated struggles and organisations with no coherent centre and no tidy margins. Collective action literature would point to a limitation in such an orientation. Whilst a nascent environmental justice movement has continued to brew at the surface, its potential for mass mobilisation remains necessarily just that; a potential. A deeper analysis need to be carried out to unleash the possibilities that lies in collective action for urban commons management.

Prospects and constraint from a common property perspective

The environmental justice movement suffers a number of limitations that affect its potential to change society and society's values and institutions. The first is the structural limitations in the nature of the problem that they seek to rectify. Environmental problems will remain because their treatment requires a transformation of modes of production and consumption as well as social organization and personal lives, which is a major challenge. Where there are no alternatives (or rather attractive alternatives) it will prove a major challenge to change the capitalist mode of production and the consumption patterns that it has engendered amongst humanity for the justice movement.

Another constraint cited by Tesh and Williams (1996) is that the movement is extremely reliant on scientific knowledge, but that knowledge is easily challenged. The movement is also extremely reliant on experiential knowledge but that knowledge, too, is easily contested. As such it is continuously enmeshed in a battle of knowledge in which a draw from community knowledge of circumstances and experiences becomes even weaker and irrelevant. This, in practice, has reflected in governments and policymakers taking few concrete actions specifically to protect minorities and the poor from environmental pollutants. Those actions they do take will be widely construed as politically necessary (or worse, politically forced), but not scientifically or "really" necessary

What makes a successful common?

According to literature on common property, the system must face significant environmental uncertainties and there must be social stability in the group of owners and users. Commoners must share a past and expect to share a future. Resource users must also be capable of having not just short term maximization but long term reflection about joint outcomes. Given this brief account of common property management and the conditions for successful commons, one has to analyse the urban commons as characterised by the debate and enshrined in the environmental justice movement. One then needs to answer to questions of whether the justice movement presents itself as a necessary driving force to translate into common property what happens in factories; particularly looking at pollution- toxics and dangerous contaminants, as well as air pollution.

Conclusion

While there may be doubts to the existence of a single, coherent environmental movement mobilizing under the comprehensive banner of environmental justice, there is

evidence that there is an expansion of space for resistance. It is apparent in many circumstances that environmental resistance movements are running “on many engines” evidenced by the number of issue specific grassroots mobilisation that have been witnessed. Evidence show an environmental awareness awakening in civil society particularly amongst those most affected by threats to the urban commons. There is evidence that the carving out of the urban commons may also yet present opportunities for the formation of common property management institutions in South Africa. The challenge is formidable, yet one can see scope for positive outcome in the experience of past confrontations and the literature on common property resource management.

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