Review of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Studies
https://doi.org/10.1007/s41130-018-0078-5

BOOK REVIEW

David Naguib Pellow, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?*

Cambridge UK and Medford MA, Polity Press, 2018, 206 pp.

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Received: 6 September 2018 / Accepted: 10 September 2018/Published online: 19 September 2018

Environmental justice (EJ) studies is sometimes portrayed by critical and radical social scientists as an inspiring but undertheorized field of primarily empirical research, with a largely reformist, policy-focused approach to change. In this concise, remarkable book, David Naguib Pellow moves EJ studies far beyond this depiction, taking up his own earlier challenge to develop a more critical, transformative approach to the field (Pellow & Brulle 2005). However, instead of following the influential program of Marxist political ecology and focusing on the dynamics of class and capital accumulation, Pellow forges a distinctive and compelling new path. Drawing on concepts from anarchism, posthumanism, and intersectional feminism, the author shows through provocative readings of unlikely case studies how the concept of environmental justice can be transformed into a lens for seeing and critiquing familiar struggles in unfamiliar ways.

This is a book that readers should certainly not judge by the cover, which shows an overflowing trash bin at the side of a mountain trail. The cover suggests a conventional environmental justice book: one that might, for instance, analyze ways in which solid or hazardous waste disproportionately affects a marginalized population. But a quick glance at the topics of the main three chapters—Black Lives Matter, prisons, and the Israel/Palestine conflict—makes it clear that despite the cover, this volume is far from conventional. My own initial reaction to the chapter titles was skeptical, and I wondered how Pellow would not only weave together these three disparate issues in a coherent narrative, but also make the case that they all pertained directly to environmental justice. However, the author's analysis—written in careful and refreshingly clear prose—won me over, and by the end, I had come to regard the book as groundbreaking.

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One effect of the book is to show what happens to EJ analysis when the wide-ranging scope of the Principles of Environmental Justice—a well-known document produced by activists at the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Justice Leadership Summit—is taken seriously. The Principles defined environmental justice in exceptionally broad terms, calling for profound social transformations and addressing issues that might not at first appear to be "environmental," such as military occupation. Such a wide-ranging scope is also at the heart of Pelllow's distinctive approach: to identify environmental justice struggles associated with "spaces of conflict and collaboration that are not always typically defined as 'environmental'" (p. 3). At the end of the book, Pellow contends that "in many ways, the EJ movement and EJ studies have yet to catch up to the vision of the EJ movement's founding principles," and a Critical EJ perspective offers a way both to realize this vision and to sharpen it (p. 153).

Pellow introduces the book with a brief overview of EJ studies as an interdisciplinary field of research. This overview concisely traces the origins of the environmental justice movement in the US, definitions of key terms, and the trajectories of EJ research. He then proposes four "pillars" that distinguish Critical EJ Studies from more conventional approaches: (1) emphasis on the intersectionality of multiple inequalities and axes of oppression—including domination of nonhuman species—rather than on single categories of difference; (2) attention to multiple spatial and temporal scales of environmental justice problems and solutions; (3) a focus on state power as reinforcing and reproducing deeply embedded social inequalities; and (4) recognition of the indispensability of marginalized populations and species that are often treated as expendable.

Throughout the remainder of the book, the pillars become lenses through which Pellow critically analyzes the dynamics of different struggles. For example, the chapter on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement highlights the movement's commitment to intersectional framings, while showing how the movement's rhetoric sometimes slips into the same problematic "social discourse of animality"—one that devalues nonhuman species—that it otherwise condemns (p. 41). Pellow's analysis also foregrounds other nonhuman elements of BLM discourse and practice that mainstream interpretations of the movement usually overlook, ranging from oxygen to the urban built environment, showing how such elements implicitly or explicitly connect the movement to concerns about environmental racism. While praising the BLM movement for its focus on deeply entrenched racism in US society and its emphasis on the indispensability of Black lives for broad-based liberation, Pellow argues that its failure to recognize "state force itself" as the fundamental problem prevents it from moving beyond reformist solutions that themselves inadvertently risk reinforcing state power (p. 57). He concludes the chapter by drawing parallels between environmental racism and the policing practices that sparked BLM activism, suggesting that both can be understood as forms of state-sanctioned violence and "collective punishment," oriented primarily towards controlling communities of color. The last of these claims is provocative and intriguing, but it is also debatable. It is appropriate to note, as Pellow does, that the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) poor record in the implementation of environmental justice shows the limitations of state-based solutions. However, to reframe environmental racism, in all its diverse manifestations, as "a form of state violence" requires us to ignore state support on behalf of local struggles for environmental justice, ranging from the infrastructure for community-based participatory

research provided by the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences to the EPA's small grant programs for community organizations.

The next chapter, on "Prisons and the Fight for Environmental Justice," uses the pillars in a similar fashion, and in many ways, it struck me as the most powerful of the case studies. For me, this chapter best clarified how a critical EJ perspective can illuminate connections among movements that have otherwise remained obscure. It shows how on the one hand, ecological and environmental health concerns are a central part of the US anti-prison movement that mainstream analyses have often overlooked, and on the other, EJ policy and activism alike have not fully taken on board the implications of prisons as ecological threats or of prisoners as a population disproportionately exposed to environmental harm in unique ways. Overall, the chapter makes an innovative and compelling case for linking environmental justice with the movement for prison abolition.

The last chapter, on the Israel/Palestine conflict, may prove to be the most controversial, although Pellow takes pains to be even-handed in his consideration of the opposing sides. Again, the author views the conflict through the four pillars, arguing that access to the environmental resources of land and water make environmental justice more central to the conflict than interpreters typically recognize. Pellow turns his critique not only to state power, but also to the animating ideas of the nation-state that in this case are particularly salient.

An aim of all three chapters is not simply to reveal hidden environmental dimensions to what might first appear to be exclusively "social justice" struggles, but rather to demonstrate how an environmental justice perspective helps us see and understand struggles over justice in new ways. In this way, the case studies provide lessons for social justice activists and scholars who might fail to recognize the ecological significance of their movements. At the same time, struggles like the three featured in this book—"sites and issues that are rarely connected to and theorized as examples of environmental justice struggles"—offer important insights and lessons for activists and scholars focused on conventional environmental justice issues like pollution and waste (p. 149). For both audiences, among the key lessons are that a deep intersectional perspective demands attention to nonhumans and that a truly transformative vision for addressing injustice requires seeking solutions beyond the state.

The book is brief (153 pages of text), and it is limited by a lack of room to develop all four pillars to the extent that their complexity might warrant. Indeed, each pillar could provide the basis for a book by itself, and some readers may complain that Pellow's reviews oversimplify ongoing debates over intersectionality, scale, the state, or indispensability. For example, the author's arguments focused on the state may be unsatisfying or unconvincing to some readers, whether aligned with radical political economic traditions or with reformist liberal traditions. Even while Pellow focuses attention on the role of the state as a cause of injustice, his engagement with state theory is limited, and the dynamics of capitalism play little to no role in the analysis. At times in the narrative, "the state" seems to become a homogenous, undifferentiated, and completely oppressive terrain; there seems to be little room, for instance, for the possibility that different nation-states (or different US States, for that matter) might address Black Lives Matter or anti-prison protesters in distinctive ways.

My own assessment, however, is that the restricted discussion of each pillar is ultimately a strength of the book. By concisely presenting an innovative framework

for critical EJ studies and showing through compact examples how it can be put to work in the empirical analysis of unlikely issues, Pellow challenges EJ scholars with an original and compelling agenda that others can help develop and sharpen. This does not mean applying the four pillars uncritically; it means examining each of them in greater detail, from the same critical perspective that Pellow brings to movements for justice. I would not necessarily recommend that readers brand new to the concept of environmental justice start with this book; to appreciate its originality fully requires some familiarity with the trajectory and range of EJ studies. However, for experienced scholars of social and environmental justice movements, I would characterize the book without hesitation as an essential read. Among the steadily increasing number of new EJ articles and books, this is a rare find: one that broadened my perspective and truly challenged my thinking about environmental justice.

Reference

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