

Demands for justice and responses to socio-spatial and environmental injustice in the global South

International symposium

Montpellier, April 24-26, 2024

In many parts of the global South, people are subject to exclusion from the land and natural resources, and exposed to serious environmental risks often linked to brutal forms of extractivism. Researchers increasingly turn to concepts of socio-spatial and environmental (in)justice to describe these situations and analyze the various forms of resistance and contestation they generate. But implicitly, globally circulating concepts of (in)justice are based on theories of the state and citizenship that are assumed to be universal. The symposium aims to confront these concepts with the specific relationships that emerge between state and citizen in different parts of the global South.

Notions of justice and means of obtaining justice differ radically from one context to another. This diversity is linked to the multiple configurations of the state, local communities, legal traditions, local normative pluralisms, and the intermediary institutions and actors that link communities to state, juridical, and commercial bodies. It is these specific configurations that explain, in part, the perceptions of justice and the strategies mobilized by actors seeking redress.

On the one hand, representations of the just and the unjust, the equitable and the inequitable, vary from one social context to another, depending not only on the extent of inequalities but also on the ways in which they are or are not legitimized through institutional and political processes operating at different scales. On the other hand, contrary to the liberal postulate that citizenship and law (and therefore recourse to the state) underpin the conceptualization of justice and its implementation, demands for redress are not necessarily addressed to the state. They may not mobilize the law and the judicial system, for a series of reasons that have to do with the relationship between the law and society, confidence in the judicial system, its accessibility, etc. In practice, a whole range of social, spatial and political relations are implicated in framing how justice is conceived, used and exercised; and the ways in which feelings of injustice are expressed by individuals and – sometimes - by groups mobilized to seek collective redress.

In interrogating the diversity of conceptions and practices of justice, the national scale is particularly relevant as concepts forged in the colonial and post-colonial periods shape the role of law and the judiciary in state-society relations, and often provide the framework within which local struggles take place. . The national scale also determines the institutional channels and registers through which notions formalized in global forums, such as environmental justice or human rights, are grasped, interpreted and mobilized. Yet it is at local levels that we can best appreciate how international, national and local registers and instances

of justice meet, adjust and hybridize; and here too that we can understand the diverse actors who play mediating roles.

The aim of the symposium is to mobilize field-based research on different situations of socio-spatial and environmental (in)justice in the global South, to forge a better understanding of what justice means for local actors (how they formulate the issues at stake and seek redress), and how states deal with these demands. More broadly, the goal is to draw on specific studies of (in)justice to shed light on different configurations of citizenship and the state.

Conceptions of justice, access to the law and citizenship practices in the global South: key questions

To approach the question of socio-spatial and environmental justice, we propose to focus on situations where major public or private projects transform space and its uses, resulting in the exclusion of people from access to land and natural resources, and/or their exposure to significant environmental risks. We aim in particular to investigate the political, legal and social processes that make these exclusions and exposures possible. These include, among others, the racialization, invisibilization, or inferiorization of particular people and/or places that result in situations where rights do not exist, are not recognized, or cannot be effectively realized. We also want to understand how demands for justice are framed in the face of these exclusions and exposures, and the ways in which the state does or does not address them. By investigating (in)justice in this manner, we hope to contribute to debates on the forms of the state and corresponding forms of citizenship as they are lived in practice, in different parts of the global South.

The following questions serve as a guide for our inquiry:

1/ In what contexts and under what conditions does exclusion from access to land and natural resources and/or exposure to significant environmental risks give rise to feelings of injustice among the social groups concerned? In what terms and through what processes do they express these feelings?

2/ Are these feelings expressed publicly, and if so, in what forms and to which audiences? How is the problem of injustice constructed? Which actors are denounced as responsible? What repertoires of action are mobilized (appeals to the courts, appeals to executive bodies, mediation, political mobilization, recourse to violence, etc.)? Which allies and intermediaries are involved in (re)formulating and supporting demands? What kind of state is imagined and demanded in this quest for justice?

3/ How are these demands for justice handled by various bodies (local, national or international; state or non-state)? How are these bodies accessed, and what intermediary figures are involved? What roles do the judiciary, local government and law enforcement agencies play? What forms does the law take, and what is the place of coercion, violence and repression in the handling of these demands for justice?

4/ How does political history (pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial), and in particular the history of relations between the state and its population, structure the forms of injustice, the demands of local actors, and their representations of the state? How have local forms of state presence and intervention been influenced by conflicts and mobilizations demanding justice? What role have law and judicial institutions played in the evolution of situations of injustice and relationships with the State?

5/ Finally, what do these demands for socio-spatial and environmental justice, and the ways in which they are handled, tell us about local experiences of citizenship (e.g. whether or not people are effectively able to claim local, national or international rights)?

Practical details

The colloquium will take place in person in Montpellier. Members of the audience who cannot attend in person may connect by video conference. To encourage collective debate, all papers will be presented in plenary session.

Presentations may be in French or English. Discussions will be bilingual. To facilitate comprehension, where the presentation is in English, the PowerPoint presentations should be in French, or vice versa. Automatic translation of oral presentations will be available via zoom.

Session 1 Wed April 24	14.00-18.00
Session 2 Thurs April 25	09.00-12.30
Session 3 Thurs April 25	13.30-18.00
Session 4 Friday April 26	09.00-12.30
Session 5 Friday April 26	13.30-18.00

Organizing committee

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