

David N. Pellow

What is Critical Environmental Justice?

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David Pellow and Robert Brulle first introduced the idea of Critical Environmental Justice in the introduction to their edited 2005 collection *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement* (Pellow and Brulle, 2005). Despite 25 years of effort, they argued, the Environmental Justice (EJ) movement had failed to significantly alter the political economic structures of the USA, and they proposed that academics could therefore help to strengthen the EJ movement by increasing its reflexivity and critically assessing successful and unsuccessful strategies (Pellow and Brulle, 2005: 3). Pellow subsequently developed this call for critical reflexivity into a paradigm he labelled ‘Critical Environmental Justice Studies’ (CEJ), which ‘seeks to expand the field of EJ Studies to move beyond its conceptual, theoretical, disciplinary, and methodological limitations’ (Pellow, 2016: 232). *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* seeks to develop and codify CEJ through a book-length study. In Chapter 1, Pellow introduces the core theoretical and methodological contributions of CEJ. In particular, this involves a focus on what he calls the ‘four pillars’, each of which responds to a perceived deficiency in ‘traditional’ EJ studies:

1. Greater focus on *intersectionality* (including species justice);
2. A move to a *multiscalar* and inter-temporal focus;
3. Moving away from ‘appeals to the state’, in other words a *critical view on the state* and its mechanisms of power; and
4. The idea of *indispensability* and expendability. (pp. 16–17)

In Chapters 2–4 he applies this ‘four pillars’ approach to interrogate three case study areas: Black Lives Matter, Prisons, and the Israel/Palestine conflict. The material is chosen based on pre-existing work (e.g. Pellow, 2016), and Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the intersections between *movements* and EJ, whereas Chapter 4 frames a *conflict* as an EJ struggle. Pellow is deliberately pushing EJ thinking into new terrain and context here. In the concluding chapter he explains that he wanted to ‘explore sites and issues that are rarely connected to and theorized as examples of environmental justice struggles’ because ‘what scholarly and practical staying power does an academic field of study hold if we cannot extend its reach into spaces and topics well beyond what were previously believed to be its boundaries’ (p. 149).

The text is logically organised and easy to follow, and each chapter stands fairly independently of the others. While CEJ draws on a wide body of theory (p. 31), it clearly emerges from and speaks primarily to the EJ community in

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the USA – even in Chapter 4, which frames the Israel/Palestine conflict as an EJ conflict. Readers from outside this context should read it with this in mind, and be aware that it does not engage with the growing literature on *global* EJ. This was particularly apparent to me because I read Chapter 1 while travelling in India, where the faultlines of indispensability and expendability are drawn along caste and religious – rather than racial – lines. The point here is not that the theoretical construct of CEJ is invalid, but that it is geographically and historically situated. Any extension of the theoretical or practical EJ programme will necessarily need to grapple with these questions.

In this light, I found the provocation of the CEJ framework applied to Pellow's cases helpful. Initially unsure about the choice of case studies, I found that they did force me think more carefully about the environmental dimensions of movements and conflicts which I had not previously viewed through an EJ lens. I think that the sustained focus of CEJ on intersectionality and its critical approach to the role of the state are both very helpful, even if I question the call to extend agency to non-human animals and objects, and question the tendency towards anarchism that emerges at several points. Pellow envisages CEJ as a framework for expanding EJ studies, and *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* undoubtedly does this. But my sense is that EJ has the most scholarly and political power when its boundaries are clearly defined. Some things are EJ problems and some are not, without devaluing either. Why else would we have a concept of *environmental* justice, as distinct from merely *justice*? So my lingering question – and the one I would pose to readers – is 'how far it is productive to extend EJ thinking?' In my view the key contribution of *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* is the way it forces us to decide where the boundaries of EJ lie.

GARETH A. S. EDWARDS
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REFERENCES

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