

Retrospective Environmentalism and Environmental Justice Movements Today

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An Environmental Justice movement is growing in the world. It is a local and global force leading society and economy towards ecological sustainability. Geographers, environmental sociologists, and anthropologists have increasingly studied environmental justice conflicts, which are now framed as Political Ecology, the study of ecological distribution conflicts. This movement is also called Livelihood Ecology,¹ the Environmentalism of the Poor,² even Liberation Ecology.³ Environmental Justice as a current of environmentalism was not identified until the 1980s because actors in ecological distribution conflicts often have not used an environmental idiom to express their grievances.⁴ But such struggles are social conflicts over who bears or sheds pollution burdens, who shares or shirks environmental risks, and who gains or loses access to natural resources and environmental services. Many such conflicts, whether inside or outside the market, whether local or global, come about because economic growth occurs at the expense of the environment.

¹J.A. Gari, *The Political Ecology of Biodiversity* (Doctoral Thesis, Oxford University, 2000).

²R. Guha and J. Martínez Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (London: Earthscan and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997); R. Guha, *Environmentalism: A Global History* (New York: Longman, 2000).

³R. Peet and M. Watts, eds., *Liberation Ecologies* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴R. Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, revised edition, 1999).

The unrelenting clash between economy and environment, with its ups and downs, new frontiers and hinterlands, and urgencies and uncertainties, is analyzed by Ecological Economics, another new field created mainly by ecologists and economists who endeavor to “take Nature into account” not only in money terms but also in physical and social terms. Ecological Economics puts incommensurability of values at the center of its analysis. These struggles not only determine an allocation of environmental and economic resources; they affect the sustainability of the economy.

Economic growth unfortunately means increased environmental impacts. Thus, the oil and gas frontier, the aluminum frontier, the copper frontier, the eucalyptus frontier, the shrimp frontier, the gold frontier, the transgenic soybeans frontier, the nuclear waste frontier, the search for carbon sinks, and advances into new territories. These create impacts which, before there is time to redress them through economic policy or changes in technology, are felt disproportionately by some social groups which often complain and resist.

There are many historical and recent cases of ecological distribution conflicts in copper mining, including ones from Japan, Irian Jaya, and Ecuador that illustrate ecological distribution conflicts and their implications for sustainability. Japan has a tradition of pro-peasant environmental justice (and forest and urban ecological management rather than wilderness preservation), although within a national context of industrialism and militarism which put environmentalism on the defensive. Environmentalists in Japan remember Ashio as the infamous site of Japan’s first major industrial pollution disaster. Ashio was a large copper mine not far from Tokyo owned by the Fukurawa Corporation, which witnessed a workers’ riot against working conditions in 1907.

Japanese social historians have debated whether the riot was spontaneous or organized by ancient brotherhoods. While the miners rebelled sporadically, tens of thousands of peasants along the Watarase River fought persistently for decades against pollution from heavy metals which damaged not only crops but also human health. They also fought against construction of a large sediment basin to store Ashio’s polluted waters, which threatened destruction of the village of Yanaka in 1907, including its cemetery and sacred shrines.

The Ashio struggle yielded one of Japan’s earliest peasant environmentalist: Tanaka Shozo (1841-1913), the son of a peasant headman of a village in the polluted area, became in the 1890s a member of the Diet in Tokyo famous for his fervent speeches. A man

with deep religious feelings, he is considered in retrospect an early leader of Japanese environmentalism.

The mine's refinery belched clouds containing sulfuric acid that withered the surrounding forests, and the waste water...ran off into the Watarase River, reducing rice yields of the farmers who irrigated fields with this water....Thousands of farming families ...protested many times. They petitioned the national authorities and clashed with the police. Eventually their leader, Tanaka Shozo, created a great stir by directly petitioning the emperor for relief....As environmental destruction reemerged in the 1960s as a major social issue, and popular concern with the impact of pollution intensified, so Ashio's legacy as "the birthplace of pollution in Japan" has endured....At that time copper played a major role in the Japanese economy, ranking second to silk among Japan's exports.⁵

Fukurawa acquired the Ashio mines in 1877, then in 1888 contracted with a French syndicate to supply 19,000 tons with copper over two and a half years. Employing three thousand miners, the target was met in full from Ashio; later the labor force increased to 15,000 workers.⁶ Fukurawa procrastinated for decades on anti-pollution measures, profiting from the novelty and uncertainty of the chemical pollution in question, and from the close relationship between government and business in Japan. In cost-benefit language, Fukurawa officials argued: "Suppose for the sake of the argument that copper effluent were responsible for the damage to farmlands on either side of the Watarase — the public benefits that accrue to the country from the Ashio mine far outweigh any losses suffered in the affected areas. The damage can in any case be adequately taken care of by compensation."⁷

⁵K. Nimura, *The Ashio Riot of 1907: A Social History of Mining in Japan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 20-21; K. Strong, *Ox Against the Storm: A Biography of Tanaka Shozo: Japan's Conservationist Pioneer* (Kent: Paul Norbury, Tenterden, 1977).

⁶Signing the contract with Fukurawa for the French syndicate was the manager of Jardine Matheson, a firm founded by Sir James Matheson of the Lews, an uncle of Hugh Matheson, the founder of the Rio Tinto mining company (Strong, *ibid.*, p. 67).

⁷Article in the *Tokio Nichi Nichi Shinbun* of February 10, 1892, in *ibid.*, p. 74.

Ashio is not the only case of Japanese early popular environmentalism related to copper mining.

When the Nikko company built its copper refinery on the tip of the Saganoseki peninsula (in Oita Prefecture) in 1917, local farmers objected strenuously. They feared that acrid refinery smoke would blight the mountains and ruin their mulberry trees, on which their silk production depended. Ignoring the farmers, town officials agreed to the refinery. The farmers felt betrayed, angrily swarming into town. They cut through the village leader's house pillars, a tactic (*uchikowashi*) drawn straight from the Tokugawa period....The police brutally suppressed this protest, beating and arresting 100 participants. Nikko built the mill, and it operates to this day.”⁸

Ashio is not unique in the world for its copper mining impacts. These two “environmental justice” conflicts were internal to Japan, and no colonial or post-colonial interpretation can be put on them. Let us move now to one international conflict.

Vast quantities of tailings from the world's largest gold mine and the third-largest copper mine have been dropped in the rivers of Irian Jaya (western New Guinea, under Indonesia's sovereignty). These depredations accompanied major environmental damage and human rights abuses, including many tribal and activist killings by the Indonesian military and police. Water pollution has been up to now the major complaint. The ecology of the island is particularly sensitive, and the scale of operations is enormous. Freeport McMoRan is building with Mitsubishi a large smelter at Gresik, for export of copper to Japan. Freeport McMoRan also happens to own Atlantic Copper in Huelva, Spain, which is the successor of the copper smelting and refining operation of the Spanish Rio Tinto company formed after 1954. It is all as a large family.

In another case, Broken Hill Proprietary, one of Australia's largest companies, settled a lawsuit brought by indigenous leaders from the area surrounding its Ok Tedi mine, 300 miles east of Freeport's operation in Irian Jaya. This is a smaller mine than Freeport's. A

⁸J. Broadbent, *Environmental Politics in Japan: Networks of Power and Protest* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

settlement of about \$400 million was agreed on, while the initial claim against Freeport had been for more than \$6,000 million.

In Irian Jaya, many complaints against Freeport McMoRan (and also Rio Tinto Zinc, which participates in this mine) led to an unsuccessful lawsuit in New Orleans in April 1996 by Tom Beanal and many members of the Amungme tribe.

It is interesting to reflect on the line that the new Indonesian government will take. Will claims for an ecological debt to be paid by Freeport McMoRan be made through a private class-action suit or as a result of a governmental action, an international replica of a Superfund case in the United States? Is the case helping the Irian Jaya separatist movement? Attempts to obtain indemnities for international externalities caused by TNCs outside their legal country of residence are interesting ingredients in the calculation of the environmental liabilities which the North owes to the South, the sum of which would amount to a large ecological debt.

The region of Intag (Cotacachi, province of Imbabura) in northern Ecuador is a beautiful and fragile area of cloud forest and agriculture, with a mestizo population. I know this case first-hand, because of my relation with *Accion Ecologica* (Quito) which helped Decoin, a local non-governmental organization led by a local schoolteacher. Here in the late 1990s, Mitsubishi proposed relocating 100 families to make way for open-cast mining, bringing in thousands of miners in order to extract a large reserve of copper. Rio Tinto Zinc had already shown interest, but its previous incursions in Ecuador (at Salinas in Bolivar, at Molleturo in Azuay) ended in retreats.

In the early 1990s Mitsubishi subsidiary, Bishi Metals, started some preliminary work in Intag. After many meetings with authorities, on May 12, 1997, members of affected communities resorted to direct action. Most of the company's goods were inventoried and removed from the area (and later given back to the company), and the remaining equipment was burnt with no harm to persons.

The government of Ecuador reacted by bringing a court case for terrorism (a rare event in Ecuador) against two community leaders and the leader of Decoin but the case was dismissed by the courts one year later.

Attempts to bring in Codelco (the Chilean national copper company) to set up mining operations were also defeated, when *Accion Ecologica* from Quito sent one activist, Ivonne Ramos, to downtown Santiago to demonstrate with support from Chilean environmentalists,

on the occasion of a state visit of the president of Ecuador. She was arrested but the publicity convinced Codelco to withdraw. *Accion Ecologica* also organized a visit to copper mining areas in Peru by the schoolteacher and other women belonging to Intag communities. Visiting Cerro de Pasco, La Oroya, and Ilo the Intag women did their own interviews in those areas, and came back to Intag with sad miners' music and lyrics which became an immediate hit in Intag. These triumphant local women still deny to this day that they are environmentalists, or, God forbid, ecofeminists.⁹



⁹*Accion Ecologica* (Quito) and Observatorio Latinoamericano de Conflictos Ambientales (Santiago de Chile), *A Los Mineros: Ni un Paso atras en Junin-Intag* (Quito, 1999). (On the way no music, p. 66.)