

## **Call for Papers - Business and Environmental Justice: a Political Economy Perspective**

### **Special Issue Editors**

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### **Introduction to the Special Issue**

Over the past few decades, there has been increasing resistance by communities all over the world opposing destructive operations of multinational corporations and demanding Environmental Justice (EJ) (Temper et al., 2015, 2018). At the same time, companies are expanding their extractive activities driven by the green transition, new energy frontiers, carbon offsetting (especially by Big Tech) and the corporate space race. Climate change mitigation is driving a new era of "green extractivism", in which the material requirements for low-carbon production extend corporate extractive activities to new mineral frontiers, especially in the Global South (Voskoboynik & Andreucci, 2022). Materials and energy consumption are at historically high levels resulting in a proliferation of environmental conflicts that corporations attempt to address by deploying ambitious CSR programs. Glossy corporate sustainability reports are awash with terms like circular economy, green growth, climate neutrality, Sustainable Development Goals, shared value, triple bottom line and socially responsible investment. However, the facts indicate an increasing "circularity gap" in so-called circular economy – which is the difference between the approximately 100 Gt of materials per year entering the world economy and the less than 10 Gt which are recycled (Haas et al., 2015, 2020).

Understanding the political economy of extraction helps reveal power relations and the ethical concerns at play. Political economy analyses how political processes and institutions affect markets and economic dynamics, and vice-versa. It describes how globalization, international trade, international inequality, and development are shaped by, amongst others, international organizations, multinational corporations, and sovereign states. In environmental conflicts, political economy dialogues with political ecology, which addresses the political dimensions of interactions between humanity and the environment (Robbins, 2004). Environmental impacts of political and economic processes can be understood from a political ecology perspective. Political ecology reflects relationships between economic, social, and political conditions that create and manage environmental problems, combining ecological concerns with natural resource exploitation (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987). It describes relations between cultural practices and resource management and searches for ways to integrate the biophysical, the cultural and the economic in an attempt to produce just and sustainable outcomes (Escobar, 2006; Peet & Watts, 1993). The "political" in political ecology refers to contestations over land use and struggles by communities for social and ecological justice. Both perspectives, political ecology

and political economy, emphasize political processes and power relations, often to understand social or environmental injustices.

In this Special Issue, we wish to focus on how energy and material consumption are distributed in unequal ways globally and on how corporations become the vectors of asymmetric power relations between dominating and dominated societies (Martinez, 2008). An ever-growing economy increases demands on earth's natural systems and the people that live within them. This social metabolism reflects a set of flows of materials and energy that occur between nature and society, between different societies, and within societies, which expands extraction and waste disposal frontiers (Martínez-Alier, 2021). The economies of the Global North, for example, oriented as they are to information, knowledge and services, depend heavily on human and natural resources, and are thus associated with grave social and environmental impacts found throughout the Global South (Dorninger et al., 2021). So whilst extractive corporations located in the Global South might seem a world away from consumers entering a clean, pristine, and ever-so-white Apple store in a city like San Francisco, the reality is that the activities of these people, and the societies they live in, could not exist without those extractors (Clarke & Boersma, 2017).

Despite the emergence of a new professed sustainability agenda by large multinationals, including numerous pledges towards CSR, carbon neutrality, and the adoption of carbon and biodiversity offsetting schemes, corporate activities continue to place stresses on natural systems, which are experienced disproportionately by poor and marginalised populations. Corporate strategies primarily focused on narrow business interests often lead to unsustainable and unethical practices. CSR, as an instrument to legitimise and consolidate the power of large corporations, can reinforce harmful actions by excluding the interests of marginalised and vulnerable groups (Banerjee, 2008, 2021). For instance, Industry Standards certifications are generally based on pledges and reporting, but these often obscure and negate the real experiences of people affected by corporate activities and have frequently been exposed as failing in their stated missions (Counsell & Loraas, 2002). Voluntary CSR standards embody a serious gap between genuine ambition and corporate adoption that locks the schemes into written pledges that lack sufficient teeth to drive a change commensurate with the social-ecological challenges we currently face. This Special Issue aims to map, address and confront these inequalities by acknowledging and enlarging scholarship and activism on Environmental Justice (EJ).

In the face of current global environmental threats, EJ movements were considered a promising force to promote environmental sustainability and social justice (Scheidel et al., 2018, 2020). EJ may be defined as a social movement that fights for a non-discriminatory and egalitarian distribution of environmental goods and bads (Martínez-Alier, 2012). It comprises a sizeable interdisciplinary area of social science literature including theories of sustainability and justice, and political ecology (Schlosberg, 2007; Weber et al., 2019). EJ struggles reveal and denounce corporate (un)sustainability, pressing for corporations to be held accountable for their socio-environmental liabilities. Drawing on insights from ecological economics and political ecology, scholars have analysed these conflicts by addressing energy and material consumption (social metabolism) that sustains the global economy and the political power relations within society (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). While substantial empirical research links conflicts, social metabolism and EJ movements, efforts are still needed to unpack the role of corporations in these dynamics (Boele et al., 2001; Bontempi et al., 2021; Saes et al., 2021; Saes & Muradian, 2021). In this Special Issue, we aim to further articulate these theoretical fields and explore a critical approach to business based on a political economy perspective that helps us to shed light on the power relations and

the ethical concerns at play. Ethical considerations around justice are critical to the framing and sample questions.

### **Type of papers and suggested topics**

We welcome theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions. Themes and questions include, but are not limited to:

- How can we use case studies, country and firm comparative case studies to identify and confront contradictions and inconsistencies between corporate sustainability initiatives and environmental justice impacts?
- What is the interplay between the adoption of CSR instruments and environmental conflicts, claims for justice and business ethics, and clashing of valuation languages?
- What is the role of ecological distribution conflicts in revealing corporate misconduct related to the environment? What can we learn from cases of international litigation on environmental damages against large corporations (such as Total in Myanmar, Chevron-Texaco in Ecuador) and from historical firm misbehaviour (for example, Total's and Exxon's climate change denial in the 1980s; Bonneuil et al., 2021)?
- What is the role of tech companies – often considered amongst the most powerful in the world and having a huge (indirect) influence over total levels of consumption and extraction in local and global ecological conflicts as well as social metabolism?
- How and why have social movements emerged from irresponsible firm behaviour? How have firms confronted these movements? (Peredo & McLean, 2020; Bontempi et al., 2021)
- How can political ecology or political economy perspectives enhance our understanding of firm misbehaviour and corporate irresponsibility? How can we bring together concepts of political economy (e.g. role of government and power relationships) and political ecology as well as EJ (e.g. role of environmental conflict and social movements) to enhance our understanding of multinational firms and their social and environmental impacts?
- How can concepts such as social metabolism, degrowth, or corporate social irresponsibility improve our understanding of the environmental and environmental justice impacts of multinational corporations and their sustainability initiatives?

### **Submission instructions**

Authors are strongly encouraged to use the Journal of Business Ethics guidelines. Please submit manuscripts through the Editorial Manager (<http://www.editorialmanager.com/busi/default.aspx>) by **10<sup>th</sup> January 2024**. The online submission system will be opened 60 days prior to this submission deadline. Submitted manuscripts will go through a double-blind peer-reviewed process as indicated in JBE's guidelines. Please contact the guest editors through the contact details provided above for any informal enquiries related to the Special Issue.

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