Environmental Justice as a Social Imperative of the Near Future

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze environmental justice as a reflection of the issue of social justice. The authors analyzed the term “environmental justice,” which is directly related to “social justice.” The basis of environmental justice is the principles of a social organization projected onto the interaction between people and the environment. The authors theoretically and empirically analyzed the focal points of environmental justice using the socio-ecological method. The paper focuses on (1) the content of “environmental justice”; (2) its structural elements; (3) the content of its core; (4) comparisons between the concepts of “environmental justice” and “social justice”; (5) their subject-object relations. The authors analyzed three types of the human environment (natural, object, and social), paying close attention to the primary and fundamental social communities. Out of these three, the social environment, responsible for ecological and social crises, is analyzed more closely. The authors conducted the cause-effect analysis of environmental and social problems that lead to environmental and social injustice. Moreover, the authors consider the possibility of using the principles of environmental justice to analyze the environmental imperative.

Keywords: Ecological crisis · Social crisis · Social justice · Environmental justice · The values of environmental justice · Principles of ecological justice · Environmental imperative · Social imperative · Socio-economic injustice · Socio-ecologic injustice

1. Introduction

Environmental justice is a part of the problem of social justice. Therefore, it is impossible to study it without introducing the terms “environmental justice” and “social justice” and comparing them. The basis of these terms is the social organization of human relations. Thus, they both are studied by sociology. However, the term “environmental justice” is relatively new, as it appeared in the 1920–1930s and became relevant only in the second half of the century. It emerged due to the ecological crisis and the clashing of human society with the “environmental imperative,” which demanded immediate measures to overcome the crisis. Social ecology, a branch of sociology, was developed to study the dire ecological situation and research the social technologies of its amelioration. Its subject matter is the connection of social communities with the environment and the rules of environmentally just organization of social life.

2. Materials and Methods

This research aims to demonstrate that the right response to the negative impact of the environment on human life and society (the environmental imperative) is the social imperative, based on the principles
of environmental justice.
The study examines the notion of environmental justice as a possible alternative to the modern socially and environmentally unjust society.

The research objectives are as follows:
1. to examine “environmental justice” as a term of sociology and explain its connection with “social justice”;
2. to presenting ways of overcoming the worldwide ecological crisis using the principles of environmental and social justice.

The primary method of research is the theoretical and empirical socio-ecological method.

3. Results
During the research, the authors compared the terms “environmental justice” and “social justice,” paying particular attention to the former. This study accounts for subjects with different views on environmental justice. The authors analyzed the notion of environmental justice, the relations between these subjects, and the socio-economic and political bases of modern society. The analysis allowed us to substantiate this notion in answering the environmental imperative and supporting positive social development.

The authors conducted a questionnaire survey on the notion of environmental justice and its role in overcoming the ecological crisis. The obtained results were compared with the results of a survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center [VCIOM]. The results, other than the environmental situation attitude index, varied considerably. The groups surveyed by the authors of this study showed higher positive results in:
1) The awareness of personal responsibility for the environmental crisis – 77% (compared to 12%–25% at VCIOM);
2) The provision of amenities at the place of residence – 80% (12% at VCIOM);
3) Anxiety caused by the destruction of architectural monuments and cultural heritage (94%).

The latter is noted as the most significant problem related to social and environmental injustice. During the research, the authors found one of the possible means of implementing ecological justice. It involves educational and cultural norms that can transform environmental concerns into social and ecological activities, allowing society to answer the environmental imperative appropriately.

4. Discussion
The authors examine “environmental justice” as a social notion. It exists in the framework of the ecological branch of sociology, which uses sociological methods to solve ecological problems. This fact encourages ecological sociology to work closely with the natural sciences and medicine. The term “environmental justice” is defined as a system of views and actions that govern interpersonal relations about the immediate and overall environment.

The structure of these views is complex and is connected mainly to the simple consciousness of the individual or the personality of the subject of social and ecological action. Most of these views are also complemented by the elements of scientific knowledge about justice. These elements are strengthened continuously in consciousness by daily testing this knowledge in social and environmental activities. These views can contain ideas, theories, socio-environmental objects and events, and ecological interpersonal relations.

Social life is entirely based on these views since they embed into individual, group, and social consciousness. The core of these views is the values of social and environmental justice. These views are integral to this study, as their very notion corresponds to the projective knowledge. Depriving the idea of its value structure is sure to have consequences to the existence of these views.

The structure of the view-bearing subjects is also quite specific. It contains only the primary and fundamental forms of human communities that serve as the basis to the secondary forms – the social
ones. Such primary communities include:

1) Gender, ethnic, settlement, family, labor, household, and leisure social communities;
2) Social groups forming them;
3) Individuals representing the interests of both in society.

The uniqueness of these communities (i.e., the subjects of social and environmental justice) is explained by their special socio-biological nature, which needs direct and indirect links with the natural and social environment. The artificial (technical) environment acts as a mediator in this process. Therefore, these subjects are concerned about the quality of both environments.

In this study, these three types of environments are considered objects for the interaction of subjects who identify themselves with the values of social and environmental justice. The social environment plays a dominant role, bearing full responsibility for ecological crises and ecological problems. However, it is more accurate to call these problems “socio-ecological,” since they are determined by certain conditions for developing the social environment and its main problems. These problems include the overall quality of the social environment and environmental justice, which is a part of the problem of social justice [4].

The collocations “social justice” and “environmental justice” have the same root “just.” It brings attention to the fair and just organization of social life, the basic principles affecting the interaction between people, their immediate environment, and the fragments of the natural environment. These notions were always in demand, but even more so during social and environmental crises. The demand for social and ecological justice has significantly increased since the second half of the 20th century. It can be explained by social disillusion in:

1) The anthropocentric paradigm of “human exclusivity”;
2) The economic and social models of a society, which result in the environmental and social crisis;
3) The technological progress itself.

The disappointment in the anthropocentric principle, based on human superiority over nature, is a sign of the crisis of social values and the crisis of views on society and nature. These views, formed for nearly ten thousand years in Holocene, were shattered in the switch to a new epoch called “Anthropocene.” This epoch is marked by violations of natural laws and social deterioration. The main result of this switch is transgressing the “planetary boundaries.” Violating several of these boundaries may render Earth uninhabitable. These boundaries, jointly developed under UNESCO auspices, include climate change, destruction of vegetation cover due to land exploitation and grazing, loss of biodiversity due to species extinction (the sixth major extinction event), and changes in phosphorus and isotope cycles [3]. Such boundaries as the depletion of air and water resources, metals, oil, uranium, and natural gas are soon to be transgressed.

The disillusion in anthropocentric values is parallel to the doubts about the continuous unsustainable economic growth of the society. This policy, lobbied by the business elites and built on capitalistic principles, is disfavored by the mass population of countries with varying development levels [5]. Due to the inherent features of the market economy, this policy is incapable of mobilizing the social, economic, and political resources to develop the social mechanisms of overcoming the crisis. This fact is proved by the time that passed since the problem was first identified at the Stockholm Conference in 1972 and the lack of progress in implementing the documents of the International Earth Summit, signed by most heads of state in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It is also proved by the continued use of environmental problems as a source of profit, for example:

1. Transnational companies purchasing freshwater in different countries and forcing the population to buy water;
2. The gentrification of urban areas in the interests of real estate developers, who ignore the protests of the community;
3. The “appropriation” by a narrow circle of people of ecologically favorable regions of water, land, and forest space while depriving access to them for the rest of the population;
4. Solving the garbage problem by exporting it to less developed countries or areas;
5. Outsourcing ecologically harmful manufacturing enterprises to less developed countries.

In general, one can make a point that the environment quality has become a privilege. Socio-ecological researchers in different countries trace the direct correlation between the lack of environmental justice and economic and socio-ecological inequality. For example, J. Boyce, Professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts, argues that “…as the gap between rich and poor people widens, the extent of environmental damage increases.” According to him, the central question of justice is why those who derive profit from any environmentally harmful activity “make others pay the price for environmental degradation” [3]. R. Sapolsky, Professor of Neurobiology at Stanford University, arrived at a similar conclusion. In his research, he revealed a natural connection between the socio-economic status of an individual and their ability to be unaffected by the poor ecological living conditions and physiological diseases, e.g., chronic inflammations, telomeric aging, and degradation of brain functions [7].

The disillusion in technological progress leads to the increasing frequency of technical incidents. The artificial environment demanded its creators to adjust their lifestyle to new standards and accept the technological risks as a normal social situation. The new social requirements further strengthen this disillusion. The switch to the sixth techno-economic paradigm and the unrelenting profit increase the expectations posed by the economic elites. At this stage, the attitude to technology has been replaced by a certain sense of fear, explained by the following threats:

- Socio-economic threats warranted by the expectations of mass technological unemployment, the consequent reduction of quality of life, and the disruption of social and biological needs.
- Ecological threat explained by the danger of transforming into a physical machine, losing every cultural achievement, depriving themselves of genetically-motivated self-development.

Thus, the authors concluded that the central values of social and environmental justice, included in the core views on them, are:

1. The preservation of the social system, outside of which a human can no longer be considered such;
2. The protection of biological life, through which a human can meet their vital needs.

These values form the basis of socio-ecologic values. They result from the need to improve social relationships and bring their content into the interaction with the natural, object, and social environment. The quality of the domain is the logical continuation of these values. It serves as a foundation for the quality of social life. Eco-centricity must become the cornerstone of social well-being, logically displacing the economic centricity (only the ecological is economically-viable).

The authors note that the core values of environmental justice are not an artificial construct. They naturally evolve from the vital and social needs of a human involved in socio-ecological actions. However, the described core values of the concept of environmental justice cannot function without appropriate social and political conditions of their implementation. These conditions include:

1) The policy of harmonization of human relations, correlating with the policy of humanization of environmental interactions;
2) The basic principles of organizing social life based on the principles of social and environmental justice.

These principles of organizing social life may include:

a) The recognition of the values of personal health and the health of the nation as a priority of social and environmental policy;
b) Equitable access to all natural, material, and intellectual resources;
c) Equal participation of different social groups in the process of environmental decision-making;
d) The priority of the right to the arrangement of the living environment at the place of residence, at leisure, and everyday life over the interests of business and bureaucracy.

The mentioned values and principles of the social organization make the notion of environmental justice attractive to all social groups (from entrepreneurs to blue-collar workers and college students). Several socio-ecological surveys, conducted by VCIOM, RAS Institute of Sociology, and Special Communications Service of the Federal Guard Service of Russia, from 2001 to 2019, confirm this. These surveys record the growing importance of ecological problems (up to 78% of the respondents). They note a significant connection between the environmental situation and social tensions (72%). The experts are even more concerned about the problem (negative assessments reach 94%) [8].

In this study, the authors surveyed the workers of the oil industry and students of an economic college majoring in the oil and gas industry. The total sample contains 82 questionnaires, 62 of which were filled by the oil workers. The concern with the environmental situation was similar to that in the studies mentioned above. Of all respondents, 77% rated the environment as “worrying” and “very worrying” in their place of residence. Moreover, 70% consider the environment in their place of work “worrying.” The respondents mentioned three main problems:

1. the destruction of architectural monuments and cultural heritage objects (94%);
2. air, soil, and water pollution produced by the enterprises (94%);
3. littering (94%).

Combating littering was reported by 68% of the surveyed. These indicators show that the respondents are worried about the quality of the natural environment and subjects with spiritual, historical, and aesthetic content.

The fact that “the principles of environmental justice can change life for the better” was indicated by 48% of the respondents. Another 48% agree with the above statement to some extent. No one stated that the problem is unjustifiably inflated.

The surveyed responses were internally contradicting: despite the high concern level, only 18% stated that socio-environmental justice is an essential value for them.

The respondents consider social and environmental justice to be two separate and variably valuable notions. Ecological justice is valued by 73%. Only 56% of the surveyed valued social justice. “Radical transformation of the world, based on completely new social relations” is essential for 30% of respondents.

The connection between the recognition of this responsibility for solving environmental problems (77% blamed themselves on themselves, and 44% on the federal and regional authorities) with the choice of conditions for the onset of social and ecological justice, which is seen in 1) appropriate education and upbringing (77 %), 2) intensifying the struggle for justice (63%) and 3) accelerating scientific and technological progress (43%).

Personal responsibility for solving the environmental crisis was indicated by 77% of the respondents, whereas 44% assigned the responsibility to federal and regional governments. This trend directly correlates with the following results:

- 77% said that environmental education and upbringing is an effective means of achieving social and ecological justice;
- 63% stated the importance of a push for social;
- 43% insist on intensifying technological progress.

This data contradicts the corresponding involvement indexes – 80% stated that they participate in community clean-ups and beautification projects. In comparison, only 25% of the surveyed shared environmental information on the Internet. All types of citizen activism scored less than 1%. 


Our data differed from the VCIOM survey results [6]. From 2010–2017, VCIOM showed an increase in the indexes of personal environmental responsibility. The option “people themselves” fluctuated around the 12–25% mark, option “Federal government” decreased from 27% to 7%, and the option “regional government” increased from 14% to 25%. VCIOM figures on the arrangement of the living environment were only 12% (compared to 80% in our survey).

Some figures in the results of the two compared surveys significantly differed. The groups surveyed by the authors showed higher positive values. However, our survey results and the data of VCIOM, Federal Guard Service, and RAS Institute of Socio-Political Research are overall similar. The deviations in the data positively correlated with the logically connected indexes. This fact can be accounted for by the strong respondent engagement in our survey and their strong cultural and educational potential.

5. Conclusion
Social and environmental justice helps people overcome difficulties and strengthens their belief in change for the better. However, these beliefs are contradictory due to the differences in the ideas of people supporting ecological justice, who belong to different ideologies and social classes.

Therefore, to unify the principles of environmental justice and use them to answer the environmental imperative, one must unite the efforts of supporters of environmental justice with civil initiatives and democratic freedoms [1]. Failing that, one can only partially or locally use the principles of ecological justice, which prevents its primary goal – establishing an environmentally just future. It is not the unattainable future of primitive-like harmony with nature; it begins nowadays, right before our eyes, and can only be brought closer by the environmentally just reconstruction of society.

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