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Exploring environmental justice in France: evidence, movements, and ideas

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the distinctiveness of French and francophone approaches to environmental justice. While off to a slow start, environmental justice research has received increased attention in France in the last 15 years. But there has been little to no attention to the French debates and movements in the English-language academic literature, with both bodies of knowledge largely evolving in parallel, conceptually and politically. This article attends to this gap by first taking stock of the empirical evidence of environmental injustices and inequalities in France. We then introduce some of the theoretical origins and discuss some of the main insights from the French literature in light of contemporary environmental justice scholarship. In so doing, our aim with this paper is to contribute to current scholarly efforts on diversifying the meanings and understandings of environmental justice in different academic and political contexts.

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KEYWORDS Environmental justice; environmental inequality; ecological inequality; French political ecology; France

Introduction

In October 2018, a spontaneous grassroots movement, known as the ‘yellow vests movement’ (*gilets jaunes* in French), emerged in France in reaction to a projected increase in carbon taxes on gasoline. While rooted in larger frustration fuelled by a sense of disempowerment, misrecognition, and abandonment, the movement became a powerful symbol of the association between environmental change and social injustice. It embodied the need for attention to the unequal distribution of social and economic burdens generated by environmental policy. Raising fuel taxes disproportionately hits

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already marginalised groups living in rural and peri-urban environments, where poor public transport has gradually led to car dependency.

The intertwining of environment and social inequality has long been absent from public debates and policy making in France (Theys 2007). The diffusion of the environmental justice framework that emerged in the 1970s in the USA has been so slow as to appear resistant. In part this is due to the French republican ideal that envisions a uniform identity and society, and its practical consequences on national census counts (collecting data on race or ethnicity was long illegal in France¹), rendering invisible ethno-racial difference in the country. While the issue of ‘unequal living conditions’ had been raised in the French Senate as early as 1976 (Massard-Guilbaud and Rodger 2011), it is only with the advent of the sustainable development discourse, and its concerns for (particularly intergenerational) equity, that the issue started receiving attention (Deldrève and Candau 2015).

The issue of environmental justice emerged in France in the early 2000s through the concept of ‘ecological inequality’, originally defined as ‘considerable differences in risk exposure or access to resources’ (Theys 2000, p. 71; our translation). Unlike in other places, grassroots activism has had little influence on the emergence of the environmental justice framework. The concept of ecological inequality initially gained policy attention through its inclusion in the *White Paper of the French Actors of Sustainable Development* – a document outlining the position of French stakeholders ahead of the second United Nations Earth Summit in Johannesburg in 2002 – and was later the subject of a first government-commissioned report on the social and environmental challenges of urban development (Laigle and Oehler 2004). As a result, environmental movements have been slow to claim environmental justice/inequalities as a framework for action (the recent climate justice movement notwithstanding).

And yet, beyond the yellow vests movement, other recent examples are illustrative of the numerous environmental justice challenges in France. Most visibly, the occupation of the so-called ‘Zone to Defend’ (ZAD for the French acronym for *Zone à Défendre*) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, opposing an airport construction project near the city of Nantes is said to have been France’s longest running struggle for land (Deléage 2018). Other examples have seen local communities oppose rewilding projects aiming at reintroducing large carnivores in the Alps and the Pyrenees, generating important human-wildlife conflicts (Doré 2015). And in Overseas France, France’s former colonies, long-standing injustices have made possible the disproportionate exposure of local populations to generalised use of chlordane, an organochlorine pesticide classified as carcinogen by the WHO since 1976 (Ferdinand 2015).

While off to a slow start, environmental justice research has received increased attention in France in the last 15 years. But there has been

little to no attention to the French debates and movements in the English-language environmental justice literature (for an overview, see Coolsaet 2020), with both bodies of knowledge largely evolving in parallel, conceptually and politically. In this paper, we attend to this gap by exploring the particularities of French approaches to environmental justice. We start by providing an overview of the empirical evidence of environmental injustices in France. We then take stock of some of the theoretical origins and main insights from the French literature in light of contemporary environmental justice scholarship. We argue that with its leaning towards environmental inequalities, the French environmental justice field can help inform the gradual confluence of the twin issues of inequality and (social) justice in the field of the environment. In so doing, our aim with this paper is to contribute to current scholarly efforts on diversifying the meanings and understandings of environmental justice (see e.g. Álvarez and Coolsaet 2020; Pellow 2017).

Empirical evidence of environmental injustices in France

As is the case elsewhere, environmental injustices in France come in many different shapes and forms. But the near-complete absence of the issue in public debate has led to a deficit of socio-spatial evidence of environmental inequalities in the country. The first studies documenting (primarily health-related) environmental inequalities in France were led by government research institutes and agencies in the country's poorest regions and/or low-income communities (Faburel 2013, Caudeville *et al.* 2021). As early as 1986, however, the then French national Institute for Transport and Safety Research (INRETS) noted that low-income populations were four times more likely to be exposed to noise pollution generated by transport (Maurin *et al.* 1988, cited in Faburel 2013). Theys (2002) highlighted that this is due to low-income suburbs in France being disproportionately crossed and/or bordered by heavy transport infrastructure such as motorways.

The French Institute for the Environment (IFEN), France's former environmental data and statistics institute, was the first to systematically highlight the strong correlation between the disproportionate siting of Seveso plants² in low-income areas and cancer-related excess mortality rates (IFEN 2006). For example, a survey conducted by IFEN between 1994 and 2001 in the vicinity of the Metaleurop plant, a former foundry turned brownfield in the Pas-de-Calais region (North), showed that 10% of children living in the area suffered from lead poisoning. The severe level of zinc and cadmium pollution of the site and the associated risk have resulted in severe property value loss and led to 'social polarisation of the area' (IFEN 2006). The

depreciation of property has induced an influx of low-income residents looking to acquire affordable property, while trapping-in those already living in the area.

More recently, the French National Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks (Ineris) published an 'atlas' mapping the concentration of heavy metals and the associated daily exposure rates for the country's different regions.³ Such processes of socio-spatial disqualification (Faburel 2010), known to be inherent to so-called locally unwanted land uses (or LULUs, see Bullard 1990), can be observed across former industrial areas, particularly in the low-income suburbs of Paris and Marseille or the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region (Laurian 2008). Industrial brownfields, polluted sites, abandoned infrastructure, transport-induced nuisances, and land devaluation mark the territory in a way that is difficult to reverse.

In the absence of historical data on national origin, race or ethnicity, the issue of environmental racism is artificially absent from French environmental justice literature. However, some studies have tried to circumvent the issue by looking at birth location data. For example, studying all 36,565 French metropolitan municipalities, Laurian (2008) established a fine-grained correlation between the disproportionate presence of hazardous facilities in a municipality (e.g. waste-treatment facilities, landfills, Seveso plants, nuclear plants, etc.) and the rate of foreign-born low-income inhabitants. The salience of race in explaining environmental inequalities has also been observed in Overseas France, where unemployment rates are much higher than in mainland France and social-economic inequalities are strongly marked by their environmental conditions (water and soil pollution with chlordecone in particular) and by natural risks (earthquakes, floods, etc.) (IFEN 2006). This is confirmed by qualitative studies showing that the level of vulnerability in the event of marine flooding is much higher in the Antilles – where the population living on the coastal strip is predominantly black and low-income – than it is in mainland France – where it is whiter and wealthier (Claeys *et al.* 2017).

The environmental and health-related impacts of large-scale infrastructural projects (such as the previously mentioned Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport) and industrial activity (such as the Marseille Fos port, one of the largest petrochemical industrial-ports in Europe) or of the widespread use of pesticides in agriculture (particularly in viticulture), are giving rise to growing resistance movements. The risk to workers are the subject of established health studies, which reveal the factors of individual exposure (see, for example, the Agrican database on farmers' exposure to cancer-related risks⁴). More recent qualitative studies, however, propose an interpretation in terms of environmental inequality with regard to the overexposure of workers with the most precarious status who are less technically qualified and often of immigrant origin (Degbelo *et al.* 2023; Diaw *et al.*, *forthcoming*).

Environmental injustices are also manifested in the area of access to green spaces, sustainable land use, and conservation. A recent quantitative study shows how access to nature remains socially determined: low-income or unschooled populations frequent it little, while men are more likely to use nature for leisure activities than are women (Gauthey *et al.* 2021). Moreover, qualitative studies show how collective actions and public policies for nature conservation tend to disqualify working classes' use and experiences of nature. To the 'good use' of nature, public authorities often oppose the overuse or misuse by low-income and immigrant communities (Claeys *et al.* 2017, Hérat and Deldrève 2021). When participation takes place, such as in the case of the French National Parks since 2006, it tends to include only those users recognized as 'traditional' and/or sufficiently organised to participate in the consultation mechanisms (Bouet *et al.* 2018).

More transversally, we observe that the environmental effort required to protect biodiversity or water, and to fight climate change is unequally distributed in France, as it is in other European countries (Pye *et al.* 2008). It tends to be disproportionately borne by low-income populations, fuelling a strong sense of injustice and distrust of public institutions, as evidenced by the yellow vests movement (Thiann-Bo and Tabau 2018, Levain *et al.* 2022) or the opposition from Creole resistance movements to the Réunion National Park (Bouet 2019), for example. Our own studies of farmers and small-scale fishermen in both mainland France and in the overseas territories show that the environmental effort they bear is not proportional to their environmental impact. It is, however, inversely proportional to their capacity to find alternatives and to their collective capacity to make their voices heard (Coolsaet 2016, Candau and Gassiat 2019, Claeys and Deldrève 2021).

Intellectual and political origins of French environmental justice research

Tracing the intellectual and political origins of French environmental justice work is less straightforward than the title of this article suggests. There is no such thing as an environmental justice movement in France and while the number of French academics self-identifying as environmental justice scholars is undoubtedly growing, we cannot really talk about a French school of thought either. Unlike in other places, current conceptual developments in France – such as the concept of environmental inequalities discussed further below – have not grown out of the intersection of critical social sciences and environmental studies, but rather as a part of scholarship on sustainable development policy emerging in the 1990s. The intellectual roots of environmental justice can be traced back to broader developments within two fields: i) environmental sociology, and ii) French political ecology. Both disciplines

help make sense of not only the intertwining of the social and the natural, which can be found in some influential strands of environmental and political theories in France, but also of the gradual confluence of the twin issues of inequality and social justice, which we will argue below is one of the issues the French literature can help us understand.

An early intellectual figure central to francophone environmental theory is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, even though recognition of Rousseau's contribution to the field in the late 70s was long overdue.⁵ Interestingly, Rousseau is known both for his work on the origins of inequality and for his indirect contributions to modern environmental thought. While not going as far as to outline an explicit environmental ethic, Rousseau made a distinction between two forms of inequalities: the 'natural' inequalities – e.g. age or health-related physical characteristics – and the 'moral' ones established by political or legal conventions. This distinction allowed Rousseau to explore the deeper social and behavioural factors of what appeared at the time to be natural phenomena. His dialogue with Voltaire on the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake, for example, is seen as 'perhaps the first attempt to conceptualise what is now known as "vulnerability"' (Dynes 2000, p. 111).

The influence of French sociology

Debate on the social dimension of inequalities, including those that were thought to be determined by nature, subsequently emerged in France at the end of the 18th century, fostered by a new interest in the quantification of social phenomena through the advent of statistics as a scientific instrument (Fassin 2020). With the industrial revolution triggering increasing poverty, the first socio-medical surveys (1830) on working-class mortality rates in the districts of Paris showed that the workers tend to suffer more from precarious health conditions and disproportionate mortality rates (Fassin 2020). While these health inequalities were often attributed to the 'depraved morals' of these classes, they are also increasingly seen as an unjust consequence of tearing industrial capitalism and rapid urbanisation (Chevalier 2002 [1958]). As for the environmental factors, although present indirectly through the focus on living and working conditions, they were largely ignored in favour of the tendency in French sociology, following Durkheim, to 'explain the social by the social'. To be sure, in his seminal study *Le Suicide*, Durkheim (2009 [1897]) did consider the influence of environmental conditions in explaining suicide rates but gave them a secondary role in view of the statistical correlation he established between suicide and so-called 'social bonds'.

The predominance of the social has long been the guiding principle of French sociology. Since the 1960s, issues of income distribution, which were at the heart of working-class struggles at the time, as well as differences in

cultural practises, educational success, and intergenerational social mobility have been analysed predominantly in terms of social classes and socio-professional categories,⁶ through which the whole stratification of French society was thought (Desrosières and Thévenot 1988). This exclusive class-based reading of inequalities has increasingly been questioned since the 1990s. According to Bourdieu *et al.* (1993), ‘the experience of the world’ cannot be reduced to class belonging alone. The ‘misery of condition’ – i.e. the share of material resources and wealth – is only ever part of the equation: each group also finds itself in a ‘misery of position’ in which legitimate aspirations and personal fulfilment are constrained by external factors. Moreover, faced with the massification of unemployment and of job insecurity, the crisis of the welfare state and growing poverty, sociologists increasingly started studying the phenomena of social ‘disqualification’ (Paugam and Schnapper 1991) and social disaffiliation (Castel 1995) of certain groups.

Studying individual or collective pathways of inequality (rather than class-based ones), as well as intersecting forms of oppression, allowed expanding the focus to new societal divides and new objects (Paugam and Plessz 2019). Gender inequalities are now increasingly studied, for example, as are the issues of school segregation and educational inequalities in low-income and immigrant suburbs (Kokoreff and Lapeyronnie 2013). These forms of inequality do not invalidate a class-based reading, but the boundaries are being rethought. The ‘working class’ is redefined as a broader ‘popular class’ (*classes populaires*), a perennial group characterised by low professional and social status, by the weakness of its economic resources, and by the absence of its cultural capital (Schwartz 2011).

These different approaches also influenced the ways in which environmental issues were initially taken up within the field of French sociology – before they took hold more ostensibly in recent years alongside concerns about global change and the Anthropocene (Masset, 2019) and the debates around so-called ‘collapsology’ (Larrère and Larrère 2020, Villalba 2021). The initially rather discrete field of French environmental sociology was born in the 1970s and 80s, in the wake of rural sociology (Mathieu and Jollivet 1989). Without explicitly talking about inequalities, it analysed the naturalisation of the countryside, the social demand for nature or the ideology of its conservation in the light of the Bourdieusian theory of habitus and social distinction (Chamboredon 1985, Kalaora and Larrère 1986). Nature-based practices were then (and still are to some extent) defined as cultural practices, obeying the same social determinants. The link between inequality and the environment was therefore established and analysed without being named.

However, this link has been challenged from the 1990s onwards, under the impulse of new influences from German (Beck *et al.* 1992)

and Anglo-American (Giddens 1994) sociology, but also from the French sociology of science (Latour *et al.* 1991) and a pragmatist sociology focused more on the objects, representations, and actions, than on the actors (Chateauraynaud and Torny 2005). These influences contributed to renewing the field of environmental sociology by giving it a more ecocentric paradigm (Catton and Dunlap 1978), while Callon and Latour's actor-network theory conferred agency to non-humans (Callon 1986). Objects in this field were then imposed both by their materiality and by their increasing publicity: technological risks, environmental and health controversies, ecological crisis, the erosion of biodiversity, water pollution, climate change, etc (Candau and Deldrève 2015). Little attention was paid at that time to the political dimensions of these environmental objects, to the power relation and inequalities associated with them. According to Leroy (2001), these were overshadowed both ideologically and scientifically by the aspirations for consensus inherent in the theory of ecological modernisation (then dominant in Northern Europe) or in the Habermasian theory of communicative action, which strongly influenced the research carried out on the consultation mechanisms of French environmental public action (Mermet and Salles 2015).

Studies on inequalities and environmental justice, as they have developed in France over the last twenty years, are both a return and a renewal of critical approaches in the way environmental issues are framed in French sociology. It is a return of Bourdieusian analysis (Comby 2015) on the damaging effects of capitalism on the use of natural resources and the geopolitical distribution of environmental burdens (Keucheyan 2014). It is also a renewal, influenced by the concomitant deployment of intersectional approaches to analysing social difference (Fassin 2015) as well as by the increasing focus on global change, which leads to overcoming the binary between the social and the environmental.

Political ecology 'à la française'

Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, French political ecology is dominated by the study of the social and economic processes of alienation brought about by what Serge Latouche referred to as the 'economisation of the world' (Latouche 2001; our translation). The environmental question is framed as a larger threat to the survival of civilization and the focus is not on environmental marginalisation and inequality but on the risks of the techno-scientific rationality of modernity, on political-economic processes of capital accumulation, or on the transition to postcapitalist societies (Bourg 2020). French political ecology can best be described as 'First

World political ecology' (McCarthy 2002) with a resolute ecosocialist framing.

The ecology in French political ecology was perhaps best described by André Gorz as born originally from a spontaneous protest against the destruction of everyday culture [...] [that is to say] all intuitive knowledge, vernacular know-how (in the sense that Ivan Illich gives to this term), habits, norms, and self-evident behaviours through which individuals can interpret, understand, and accept their insertion in the world around them (Gorz 2008: 49; our translation). Political ecology hence focused on the environmental experiences of (mostly working-class) communities anchored in concrete living and working environments, on the destruction of their culture, and the dispossession of their knowledge and their dignity, erased by capitalism and by the science and technology-oriented perspective of mainstream environmentalism. The political of French political ecology, then, was a quest for individual and collective autonomy, a struggle for emancipation of the working class, and a radical critique of capitalism.

At the heart of French political ecology lies the idea that, if it is not explicitly politicised or if uncritical – in other words, if not anticapitalist – then environmentalism runs the risk of being co-opted by the concerns of the ruling capitalist class – or worse, by racist and fascist ideologies (Gorz 2005). While largely limited to a class-based reading, it undoubtedly helped pave the way for different scholarly efforts aiming at diversifying the political framings of environmentalism to introduce other closely related issues within the field, including the issues of growth, of human exceptionalism, and of colonial environmentalism.⁷ Degrowth scholarship, for example – which has been particularly influential in France, was instrumental in uncovering some of the root causes of growing inequality and of environmental degradation (Georgescu-Roegen 1995). In so doing, it helped see environmental change in social and political terms, in contrast to the ecocentric and modernist tendencies of mainstream environmentalism and of European sociology.

Latourian politics of nature has also done much to render visible the inherent political and conceptual dimensions associated with environmental degradation (Latour 2004). While it has often been criticised for ignoring inequalities and for failing to extend the focus to systematically marginalised human groups (e.g. Holifield 2009, Balaud and Chopot 2021), Latour's last work seemed to be coming to terms with this critique (Latour and Schultz 2022). Making the case for a new 'geosocial' politics, Latour and Schultz recognized that, in order to stay relevant, the environmental movement needs to take stock of 'the new sources of injustice it has detected' (2022, p. 10; our translation); even though these injustices are never further developed or made explicit.

Perhaps one of the few theoretical efforts in France which is explicitly in keeping with environmental justice as a social movement driven by racial minorities and indigenous movements, is the recent post- and decolonial turn in French political ecology, most notably through the work of authors such as Malcolm Ferdinand (2019) and Fatima Ouassak (2023). Through different ways and grounded in different geographies – the French overseas territories for Ferdinand and the working-class and immigrant neighbourhoods in mainland France for Ouassak – these authors highlight the symbolic capture of the environmental experience of racial minorities in France by an overly white, affluent environmentalism. Drawing on francophone postcolonial insights, they identify a ‘decolonial environmentalism’ (*écologie décoloniale*; Ferdinand 2019) or a ‘popular environmentalism’ (*écologie populaire*; Ouassak 2023) voiced from the margins of French society, where power imbalances, racial injustice, and the colonial experience co-shape the environmental problematic.

While necessarily partial and incomplete, political ecology allowed introducing the ideas of political emancipation and social (in)justice within French environmental thought – even though there has been little effort in empirically documenting environmental inequalities. Borrowing the words of Larrère, French political ecology can thus be said to have taken the form of a ‘phenomenology of the lived world, richer in subjective descriptions than in data allowing for calculations and comparisons’ (Larrère 2017, p. 14; our translation). Recent environmental justice work in France has inherited this emphasis on the subjective, on the lived experience, but combines this with a deeper engagement with social justice theory than was originally the case in French political ecology (see e.g. Lejeune 2019, Faburel *et al.* 2021).

Convergence and divergence in the environmental justice field

The French environmental justice literature has focused primarily on issues such as health (e.g. Charles *et al.* 2007), poverty alleviation (e.g. Gagnon *et al.* 2008), urban planning (e.g. Laigle and Tual 2007, Faburel 2010), or territorial development (e.g. Emelianoff 2006, Gobert 2010) and territorial justice (Laurent 2013). Recently, the most visible documentation and (mostly quantitative) analysis of environmental inequality in France is conducted by economists (e.g. Chancel 2017) and public health scholars (Caudeville *et al.* 2021). However, partly in response to some of the methodological controversies also plaguing Anglo-American environmental justice scholarship (Pulido 2000, Holifield 2001), more qualitative work has emerged, analysing the socio-historical making of environmental inequalities as well as the potential feelings of injustice they generate (Deldrève 2022). The increasing scholarly interests in political claim-making for both social and environmental justice – voiced by the popular class (Belmallen 2022) or by the wider

civil society (Senac 2021) – is a testimony of the growing influence of the English-language scholarship on environmental justice.

The most notable difference between the field in France and the US-inspired field, however, is the fact that environmental justice in France first developed in a top-down fashion, drawing in large parts on the notion of environmental/ecological inequality in policy and academia, as discussed. For example, it is only (much) later that activist groups and emerging environmental movements started articulating combined social and environmental concerns through justice-based discourses, using concepts such as ‘climate justice’ (*justice climatique*) or, more recently, ‘just transition’ (*transition juste*). This relative disconnect perhaps fuelled the seemingly endless terminological discussions – especially between environmental *vs.* ecological inequalities – as well as typological explorations (on typologies of environmental inequality, see Laurent 2015, 2013) which may have been less important in the English-language literature.

While sometimes dividing the French field into different opposing groups – *e.g.* some consider that all environmental inequalities are necessarily ‘ecological’ (Laigle and Oehler 2004, Emelianoff 2006), while others see the language of ‘ecology’ as having a depoliticizing effect (Blanchon *et al.* 2009) or as failing to capture the emotional and subjective experience (Charles 2008) – these definitional struggles have sometimes been found to generate more nuanced empirical and conceptual frameworks. Opposing the binary choice between environmental and ecological inequalities, Durand (2012) for example, argued that making methodological distinctions between these terms is useful to get at a more fine-grained documentation of how environmental injustices play out at the local level – where some are on the receiving end of environmental degradation while others are on the supply end – and hence at the underlying issue of responsibility. Others have used these discussions to stress the cumulative or coproduced nature of environmental inequalities, arguing that they are often inscribed in variable, multi-dimensional, intersectional experiences of social subordination (Deldrève 2022).

These differences invite us to interrogate two things: the consubstantial link between (in)equality and (in)justice in environmental justice scholarship, and the evolving landscape of social-environmental activism and renewed modes of collective action, in France and elsewhere.

Massard-Guilbaud and Rodger noted in 2011 that ‘there is a consensus of sorts on the use of the word *inequalities* in preference to *injustice*’ (2011, 14; original emphasis) in the French literature, and this consensus seems to have prevailed. Different authors have provided potential reasons explaining the differences in terminology. Blanchon *et al.* (2009) note that ‘inequalities’ perhaps appear as less threatening and less value laden than ‘justice’. With justice (particularly social justice) potentially seen as carrying a normative

discourse of disruption and political struggle, it would be easy to understand why researchers in France have been reluctant to use the term. In a context where the French egalitarian ideal is increasingly being questioned and where new conceptions of justice and injustice are being voiced within society (Rosanvallon 2011), others see the principles of universalism and republicanism as responsible for making French scholars difference-blind when it comes to the environment (Emelianoff 2006, Kalaora and Vlassopoulos 2013). Comparing the terminology in different European countries, Laigle and Tual (2007) argue that differences arise from the different legal systems. While in France the legal system is based on the idea of 'equality in law', commons-based legal systems rather rely on rights-based approaches. More broadly, the terminology could also reflect the reluctance of bringing political dimensions into the field of the environment, as if power relations and domination were to be confined to the social. The environmental justice framework hence could be a misfit with current academic and policy circles, a point also made by Gauna (1998) with regard to public participation in decision-making in the US.

For all that, justice cannot be seen exclusively as a language of political struggle. For philosophers and certain economists, it may even be easier to speak of justice rather than of inequalities, as it refers to widely accepted theories of justice (from, e.g. Rawls and Sen) used in their fields. While we agree that there are broader principles of justice that can help justify inequalities (such as merit or desert), the latter cannot be reduced only to neutral disparities. In France, social inequality refers to a treatment induced by social differentiation, referring to value judgments and a deliberate hierarchization of society. The demand for equality enshrined in the 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen* (and later in the different French Constitutions) was born out of a feeling of social, economic, and political injustice linked to the privileges of the nobility. In other words, in the country of the French Revolution, inequality can hardly be considered to be depoliticized or difference-blind.

In *The Society of Equals*, Rosanvallon (2011) traces the historical evolution of the concept of equality in both France and the US, and the crises that permeate it. Rosanvallon argues that political struggle against these inequalities has been framed in two opposing ways. Either the inequalities are acceptable, because they are deserved and necessary, or they are unacceptable, because they are inherent to a social order that ensures the maintenance of privileges, i.e. to injustices. This multivalence of the concept of inequality has also been stressed by sociological scholarship on inequalities in health, schooling, or culture, for example. In these works, inequalities are explicitly linked to structural disparities that are attributed to 'the state of *social justice* in a country or territory' (Aïach and Fassin 2004; our translation and emphasis).

Since the 1970s, feminist movements and scholarship have made similar points, namely that inequalities are rooted in deeper structural mechanisms, which allowed for a partial deconstruction of the notion of republican equality. These influences brought to light the existence of gender-based and racial inequalities in France and showed how policies promoting equal opportunities for all can generate inequalities too, be they related to income, political participation, and socio-cultural recognition for example (Fassin 2015). Later, in opposing Bourdieusian sociology, pragmatic sociology tended to decouple inequality from injustice. The focus was on the subjective experiences in the face of experienced injustice, rather than on its structural conditions of inequality (Boltanski 1990). However, the objects of inequality and justice are increasingly being connected again by highlighting the critical competence of dominated actors (Boltanski 2009), the exacerbation of inequality by the meritocratic fiction (Dubet 2010), and, more recently, the centrality of the struggle against experienced inequalities in contemporary radical movements for justice (Senac 2021).

In the French activist field, this diffusion of environmental justice language characterises two complementary trends. The first is the one, previously described, of the development of movements combining social and environmental concerns; of a greater hybridisation between the movements. The second trend is related to an exclusive use of environmental vulnerabilities in political claim-making but without necessarily taking into account social vulnerabilities (e.g. Thiann-Bo 2019). To be sure, in the past, struggles against social inequalities in France have sometimes extended to cover environmental issues – such as in the case of workers' rights (Bertrand 2016) or with regard to low-income suburbs (Kokoreff 2021) – but without referring specifically to environmental inequality or to environmental justice.

A keyword search in the French press and on francophone Twitter shows that 'environmental inequality' remains circumscribed to academia (Assemat 2022), with increasing cross-references to the English-language environmental justice literature, while the term 'environmental justice' is gradually spreading among activists,⁸ introduced in particular by a growing climate justice movement (Comby 2015). By pointing to the common root causes of social injustices and environmental degradations, these new social movements, without completely merging their causes, help to de-silo the issues. The alliances of local grassroots movements, of labour unions, and of environmental NGOs – sometimes described as blue-green or red-green alliances (Felli *et al.* 2014) – thus seem to form 'new communities of struggle' (Groux 1998). These extremely diverse communities produce 'new political intelligence' (Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018) by resorting

to a renewed and enlarged repertoire of collective action, from the occupation of symbolic places, the proactive use of legal action in court, of road blockage and of civil disobedience, to the development of alternative practices that reveal the profoundly political meaning of everyday life (Pruvost 2021).

Conclusion

We have explored the particularities of French approaches to environmental justice and traced their roots back to French sociology and political ecology. We have discussed the convergences and divergences with the environmental justice framework as initially developed in the US, which is older, more bottom-up, and grounded in the lived experiences of racial and low-income communities.

Considering the French field, we have stressed the risks of dissociating justice and inequality. While justice cannot be reduced to the sole principle of equality, there is a risk that the environmental justice framework, as it spreads and goes global, hybridises without taking into account existing social and environmental inequalities and, in so doing, contributes to increasing them. Exclusively resorting to ‘justice’ as the main guiding principle(s) in the context of environmental inequalities is problematic. As Hache (2013; our translation) notes ‘instead of focusing on how [the environmental justice movement] transforms the possibilities for social and environmental change through processes of redefining and constructing new political discourses and practices, [environmental justice scholarship] often analyses it against existing theories of justice, as if [the movement] has nothing to teach us on its own [...]’

On the other hand, focusing exclusively on existing inequalities without drawing on a sufficiently theorised idea of environmental justice can also be counterproductive. As Rosanvallon (2011) notes in the context of post-war public healthcare debates in France, if justice is reduced to a wrestle about what, when, and where inequalities emerged, while lacking deeper engagement with justice principles able to justify necessary transformation, it risks getting stuck into exclusively reformist solutions aiming to maintain existing political and economic arrangements – a problem also highlighted elsewhere in the context of environmental justice (Martin *et al.* 2020). Environmental injustices and environmental inequalities hence need to be considered as being analytically and politically inseparable, like the two ends of a same thread that cannot be disentangled without risking loss of meaning and political strength.

Notes

1. The 1978 law on ‘computing, files and liberties’ explicitly prohibited the collection of data related to the origin or the ethno-racial belonging of people. In 2016, exceptions were introduced for the purpose of scientific research. This has allowed for the creation of the first survey on population diversity in France by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) available at <https://teo-english.site.ined.fr>
2. Seveso plants are EU-based hazardous industries regulated under Council Directives 96/82/EC and 2003/105/EC on the control of major-accident hazards involving dangerous substances, commonly known as the Seveso Directive.
3. <https://www.ineris.fr/fr/dossiers-thematiques/tous-dossiers-thematiques/inegalites-environnementales/plateforme-analyse>
4. <http://cancerspreventions.fr/projet/agrican/>
5. It is only in 1978 that French writer Marcel Schneider depicted Rousseau as the father of modern environmentalism (Schneider 1978).
6. The professions and socio-professional categories are the main French statistical nomenclature, used to classify French people according to their occupations. This classification was created by the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies in 1982 to replace the nomenclature of socio-professional categories established in 1954, introducing some changes to improve the first classification (such as moving agricultural employees from the farmers category to the workers category).
7. Feminist political ecology/ecofeminism is a fourth field to mention here. However, while the term ‘ecofeminism’ was originally coined by French philosopher Françoise d’Eaubonne (1974/2020, its influence in French environmental and political thought, as well as within public debate, has been extremely marginal until very recently (for a discussion, see Burgart Goutal 2018, Bahaffou and Gorecki 2020, Pruvost 2021).
8. It should be noted that even though contemporary social justice movements in France grow increasingly wary of the notion of equality, which they see as being instrumentalized by French public authorities (Senac 2021), the calls for *equal* opportunities, *equal* consideration, and for *equal* treatment remain strong in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and disqualified rural territories (Hérat and Deldrève 2021, Levain *et al.* 2022).

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