

IASS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

What transformative sustainability studies should learn from environmental justice movements

In April's session of the IASS focal topic "[Justice in Sustainability](#)" lecture series, Dr Leah Temper shed light on "just transformations towards sustainability" from the perspectives of those fighting on the ground to achieve them. Her discussion of environmental justice activism took us back to the roots of thinking justice and environmental politics together. Find out in this summary what transformative sustainability studies should learn from environmental justice movements a summary of her lecture. You can also rewatch the lecture and the following Q&A session on the [IASS YouTube channel](#).

Sustainability transformations are not just technical processes. They have a central social component, which makes it worthwhile to ask: Who are the actors in transformations and how do they shape environmental futures? The 3,661 ecological conflict cases registered in the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice ([EAtlas](#)) help to provide some answers. Its founder and co-director Dr Leah Temper is an ecological economist, scholar activist and filmmaker based at McGill University, Montreal and the Autonomous University of Barcelona. She is also Principal Investigator of the more recent [ACKnowl-EJ](#) project, which builds on the EAtlas, and was the main focus in the IASS focal topic lecture. Interestingly, that innovative project, in many ways, actually got off the ground at the IASS: Leah Temper brought it as a seed project to the first meeting of the Transformations to Sustainability programme of the International Science Council that took place at our institute in Potsdam. The project's acronym stands for "Activist-academic Co-production of Knowledge for Environmental Justice" and it examines how transformative alternatives are born from resistance against extractivism.

Leah Temper encourages us to take a radical approach to transformative research and proposes a resistance-centred environmental justice perspective on transformation that makes us rethink what transformation means. Her answer: transformations are bottom-up citizen-led processes that are shaped through processes of resistance and that require radical and systemic shifts. It is essential to find struggles that intersect and combine different forms of oppression to understand systemic justice challenges and the construction of alternatives that address them all together to resolve their root causes. So far, the scientific literature on transformation has not sufficiently engaged with social movements and the role of resistance.

In this context, conflict is not something to be avoided. Instead, it is a productive force, one through which different types of power can be transformed. Productive conflicts challenge institutional and

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cultural power, and contribute to producing new subjectivities, power relations, and institutions. Based on a reading of Nancy Fraser, Temper explained that three types of justice claims – distribution, recognition, and representation – can be responded to in two ways: either *affirmatively* or *transformatively*. The former tries to reduce inequalities without challenging the underlying social relations, whereas the latter corrects inequitable outcomes by restructuring the underlying generative framework. One example she gave for this relates to recognitional justice: Mainstreaming multiculturalism can be seen as affirmative, while deconstructing the cultural structures that hinder the full recognition of cultural identities and territorial autonomy would be transformative. Transferring this to environmental justice helps us to understand how granting rights to nature is a transformative approach because it makes us rethink our role as humans in the face of a new understanding of nature's agency.

The ACKnowl-EJ project, which was formed by three initiatives (EJAtlas, Vikalp Sangam in India and Grupo Confluencias in Latin America), has developed different conceptual frameworks for understanding transformation. One of them is the conflict transformation framework that aims to understand transformations through a power analysis. According to this model, there are three types of power in environmental conflicts that decide over the access to and control of natural resources and territories: The most visible is *structural power*, which lies in institutions and legal, political, and economic frameworks; *power of agency* lies less visibly in people's relations, alliances, and networks; and *decentred power* lies invisibly in discourses, environmental narratives and worldviews. The framework points out specific transformation aims and strategies for each power.

During the lecture, Leah Temper also shared how this transformative research project develops further frameworks and strategies. Based on insights from case studies from India, Venezuela, Belgium, Canada, and Lebanon, she discussed successes and challenges in the efforts of resistance movements from below to tackle regimes of extractivism and putting forward new proposals, economies and ways of being. This brought out the richness of the registered cases that are available for other researchers and activists in the EJAtlas.

Leah Temper's presentation was based on a forthcoming edited volume on the results of the Acknowl-EJ project, which she co-edited along with Mariana Walter and Iokiñe Rodríguez. Returning to the IASS at this stage felt for her like "closing a circle" as she said in the lecture. It was indeed a great time to bring these important conceptual and empirical insights in the field of transformative research to the institute.