

World Movements for Environmental Justice

Joan Martínez Alier

**2020 Balzan Prize for Environmental Challenges:
Responses from the Social Sciences and the Humanities**

Balzan GPC Adviser: Donatella della Porta

Project Director: Joan Martínez Alier

Deputy Supervisor: Mariana Walter

Affiliated institution: Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (ICTA UAB)

Joan Martínez Alier is Professor Emeritus at the Institut de Ciència i Tecnologia Ambientals (ICTA) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and Senior Researcher at ICTA.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main objective of Joan Martínez Alier's Balzan research project is to carry out research on the world environmental justice movement (or movements) through a mixture of methods of political ecology, including some fieldwork. One main tool will be the EJAtlas, a large and growing database of over 3,350 "ecological distribution conflicts" built up at ICTA UAB since 2012 (ejatlas.org). Our main hypothesis is that these conflicts arise from the growth and changes in the social metabolism at the frontiers of commodity extraction and of waste disposal. In the past 120 years, human population has nearly multiplied by five, while the yearly inputs processed in the global economy (biomass, fossil fuels, building materials, metals) grew almost thirteen times from 7.5 to 95 Gt (Haas et al 2020). The economy is not circular; it is increasingly entropic (Giampietro and Funtowicz, 2020). The recycled materials are only about 8 per cent of the total material input. Energy from fossil fuels – the photosynthesis of the distant past – is burned and dissipated. Another reason for this lack of circularity is the expansion of stocks of buildings and infrastructures; once in place, a large input of materials and energy is needed for their maintenance and

operation. Even without further economic growth, the industrial economy would need new supplies of energy and materials extracted from commodity frontiers, which would in turn produce more waste (including excessive amounts of greenhouse gases). Therefore, new “ecological distribution conflicts” arise all the time. They imply “valuation contests”, where plural values are displayed by the social protagonists whose collective identities, forms of mobilization, or repertoires of contention are studied here. In this way, this research helps to place political ecology at the centre of politics (Charbonnier, 2019).

Martínez Alier’s Balzan research project will improve the geographical and thematic coverage of the EJAtlas as a tested tool for the study of comparative, statistical political ecology. The number of cases recorded in the EJAtlas will increase to at least 4,000 by 2023, thus improving geographical and thematic coverage. Further work in the atlas is required now that the team’s publications have established it internationally as a reliable database of environmental conflicts (Scheidel et al 2020, Temper et al 2020). A recent assessment (LeBillon and Lujala, 2020) states:

While providing the best worldwide record of cases, with 2,957 cases reported at the time of analysis, EJAtlas is not comprehensive, and statistics must thus be understood as reflecting the database’s limits, including uneven geographical coverage (e.g. link with transnational activist networks), variable quality of information and updating, and possible biases in interpretation of contexts, processes and outcomes.

When faced with this and other such assessments, the team will concentrate on carrying out further work to improve the coverage of the EJAtlas, which will ensure that its contents be used not only for peer-reviewed publications (as per current practice) but also as support for environmental justice movements. The Balzan prize will contribute to this.

Underlying Martínez Alier’s Balzan project is a research programme that actually started some time ago (Guha and Martínez-Alier, 1999). It was summarized by Professor Catherine Larrère, who contrasted it with fashionable *collapsologie* on the one hand and with a powerful international school of “eco-modernism”, “eco-efficiency”, and “green economic growth” on the other.

WORLD MOVEMENTS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: THE SUB-PROJECTS

“World Movements for Environmental Justice” will be divided into sub-projects which will reach beyond the academic world, and support movements for environmental justice. The main institution for the project will be ICTA UAB. Collaboration with other institutions is foreseen, mainly with China Agricultural University, the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Beijing; UNAM (Morelia campus), Mexico; the Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence, Italy; and the Escola Paulista de Política, Economia e Negócios da Universidade Federal de São Paulo (Unifesp), Brazil. The sub-projects will result in the publication of several articles in top academic journals, and possibly in one book. All publications will acknowledge support from Martínez Alier’s Balzan Research project. The deputy supervisor will be Dr Mariana Walter of ICTA UAB, who will work on the project part-time for three years. To list the sub-projects:

- Prof. Dr. Juan Liu, China Agricultural University, Beijing: part-time support for advancing and exploring the EJAtlas with Bowen Gu (ICTA UAB) and writing two articles for international and Chinese journals of political ecology.
- Dr Brototi Roy (Indian Society for Ecological Economics) and one graduate student at ICTA UAB: part-time support to enter and analyse different types of conflicts in the EJAtlas in India from a comparative political ecology perspective. Two articles will be published.
- Dr Daniela Del Bene (ICTA UAB / Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence): one-year part-time postdoc support for publications on her eight-year experience on the EJAtlas, in particular, conflicts on hydropower worldwide.
- Dr Grettel Navas, ICTA UAB: a part-time contract on support for the EJAtlas and a visit to the Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence for research on health and the environment, in particular mobilization against environmental pollution. Two articles will be published.
- Dr Arnim Scheidel (ICTA UAB / Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence): support to lead the publication of collective articles in statistical political ecology based on the EJAtlas focus on disproportionate impacts on indigenous peoples, and the contributions to sustainability achieved through resistance by environmental defenders.

- Dr Ksenija Hanacek: two-year postdoctoral part-time contract for four publications, work at the ICTA UAB, and a visit to the Scuola Normale Superiore, Florence.
- Teresa Saenz, ICTA UAB: Pre-doctoral support for analysis of the iconography and other cultural expressions of environmental conflicts, research based on the EJAtlas, with field work in Chile and possibly Philippines.
- Research team led by Dr Beatriz Saes (Univ. Sao Paulo), Tatiana Roa (Censat/FoE Colombia), and Bobby Peek (GroundWork, FoE South Africa) for a one-year project on specific issues involving Brazil, Colombia and South Africa: the relevance of the EJAtlas for Business Economics and Management; research on environmental liabilities and corporate social irresponsibility, with publication of results in the *Journal of Business Ethics* or similar publications.
- Dr Sofia Avila: completion and launching of the Mexican EJAtlas, with Prof. Victor Toledo, UNAM, Morelia (cooperation with Dr Aida Luz López, Conycet).
- The Philippines: a sub-project to expand research on the Philippines by critically evaluating the research on determinants of killings of environmental defenders, in cooperation with local NGOs.