

Joan Martínez-Alier. 2023. *Land, Water, Air and Freedom: The Making of World Movements for Environmental Justice*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Book review by

**Slobodan Stankovic**

slobodan.stankovic@outlook.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8750-6321>

*Slobodan Stankovic* holds a BA in Social Work from Singidunum University, Belgrade, and an MA from the department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University, Vienna. He has extensive research experience with Romani communities in Serbia as well as participating in the Romani movement for over a decade. His research interests include Critical Romani studies; substandard Romani settlements, precarity, and urban marginality; exclusion, exploitation, dispossession; displacement, migration, and ghettoisation; labour, waste collection, and the informal economy; state, governance, and necropolitics; and environmental justice.



## Introduction

*Land, Water, Air and Freedom* by Joan Martínez-Alier covers global, comparative political ecology and delves into the intricate web of environmental justice movements unfolding across the globe. As a distinguished Professor of Economics and Economic History and author of a plethora of texts on topics such as social metabolism, environmentalism, environmental justice, environmental conflicts, and movements, Martínez-Alier brings a wealth of expertise to the table. In this book, he challenges the notion that the environmental struggle is the reserve of the white, middle-class of core countries and shows a growing number of environmental movements initiated by poor and indigenous peoples. These movements came into existence via struggles for access to clean air, land, and water amid the ever-expanding, extractive nature of capitalism, which relies on constant growth to sustain itself.

## Environmental Activism and the EJAtlas

Martínez-Alier lays the groundwork for a profound exploration of environmental activism, sustainability, and the urgent need for a paradigm shift from the circular economy to a degrowth economy. As we live on a planet with finite resources, the pursuit of constant and consistent growth becomes more and more challenging, as it is increasingly harder (and more expensive) to find new sources of raw materials and energy. This is where the circular economy comes into play, as it proposes reusing materials to counter the finite nature of resources and energy on our planet. Martínez-Alier argues, relying on the *Circularity Gap Report* (Haas et al. 2015, 2020), that this is not enough in itself: in 2017, 92 Gigatons (Gt) of raw materials, not including water, were pumped into the global economy and only 8.6 per cent of all used materials were recycled. By extrapolating the trajectory of the circular economy over the next 70 years, Martínez-Alier concludes that even if it grows from 8.6 per cent to 50 per cent, it will not be enough to sustain projected growth.

Extractive industries rely on new processes of social metabolism to sustain the constant need for growth. Martínez-Alier points to two concepts that are key here: commodity widening and commodity deepening. Commodity widening refers to spatial expansion, where extractive industries are looking for new areas to exploit, so attempting to dispossess and displace people. Commodity deepening refers to the use of new technologies (fracking, for example) to squeeze out even more from existing mines, plantations, or oil fields. These two processes frequently cause ecological conflicts, as they are, more often than not, even more damaging to the environment than previous methods. In this way, they force the creation of new environmental justice movements. The Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) maps and documents these cases in an interactive, free access, online database. As Martínez-Alier is one of the founders of this platform, the book draws upon 500 documented cases of environmental conflicts around the world, grouping them either geographically or thematically in different chapters.

Martínez-Alier uses the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) as a tool for documenting and analysing environmental conflicts worldwide and sheds light on the interconnected nature of environmental issues and the importance of global solidarity in addressing these challenges. Through case studies

and empirical data, Martínez-Alier demonstrates how grassroots movements and community activism play a crucial role in advocating for environmental justice and holding accountable those responsible for environmental degradation. This analysis shows that vulnerable groups disproportionately bear the burden of environmental degradation and underscores the critical importance of inclusive, grassroots movements in advocating for sustainable practices and policies.

Returning to the concept of sustainable development, Martínez-Alier joins the company of Marxist and postcolonial authors (Jason Moore, Andreas Malm, Malcom Ferdinand, to name a few) in critiquing this concept. He uses the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (specifically goal eight on decent work and economic growth) to demonstrate his critique. This goal proposes seven percent economic growth in developing countries, aiming to do all that without accelerating environmental collapse through more efficient use of resources. Instead Martínez-Alier proposes stopping economic growth in developed countries, supporting environmental movements, and resolving the ecological debt of the Global North to the Global South.

As stated, the book analyses 500 (of around 3,800 in the EJAtlas as of December 2022) environmental conflicts around the globe and is organised geographically and thematically into 30 chapters. Some of the themes are as follows: extractivism and violence; women environmentalists murdered around the world; the Arctic as a commodity extraction frontier; biodiversity conservation; Mesoamerican and Caribbean environmental movements; agrarian justice and human ecology; corporate social responsibility and similar. Unfortunately, as it would be impossible to review all 30 chapters here, I will convey some thoughts on chapter 10: "The World Anti-nuclear Movement since 1970."

## Nuclear Energy Conflicts

At the time when *Land, Water, Air and Freedom* was written, there were 150 documented nuclear energy conflicts on EJAtlas, 25 of which are mentioned in chapter ten. In this chapter, Martínez-Alier delves into the intricate web of nuclear energy conflicts, shedding light on the global landscape of the disposal of nuclear waste, military testing of nuclear weapons, and uranium mining. Faced with these challenges, local environmental justice organisations around the world grapple with issues pertaining to nuclear technologies. Observing from the point of view of environmental justice and activism, this chapter portrays the anti-nuclear movement as a significant force in advocating for transparency, accountability, and the protection of communities affected by nuclear energy projects all around the world. While the author recognises historical opposition to nuclear power, and the closure of certain nuclear plants, as successes in environmental justice, he does not explicitly advocate for a complete abandonment or endorsement of nuclear power. Overall, the chapter presents a balanced perspective that promotes critical reflection on the complexities and intricacies of nuclear energy, leaving room for readers to draw their own conclusions on the benefits and drawbacks of the use of nuclear power based on the information provided.

## Relevance for Romani Studies

As of March 2024, in the EJAtlas there are more than 30 recorded cases of environmental justice movements involving Romani communities. For example, a Sinti settlement was established near the Henkel company in Heidelberg, Germany, and situated on heavily polluted land resulting from the industry's chemical production, leading to contamination of both soil and water sources. In response to concerns about race-based segregation faced by Sinti and Roma in Germany, the government's main stance, as highlighted in a 2000s UN report, was that these communities live in self-contained areas by choice. Despite the long history of Sinti and Roma in Germany, the European Roma Rights Centre notes that they are often perceived as foreigners. This perspective suggests that the government views the responsibility for the well-being of these communities as resting with the individuals rather than necessitating systemic change (<https://ejatlas.org> 2022a).

In a famous case from Kosovo, between 1999 and 2013, around 600 Romani families displaced during the Kosovo conflict were housed by the United Nations in camps located on lead-contaminated land near the Trepca industrial complex in Mitrovica, Kosovo. Trepca, known for its lead smelter and toxic waste ponds, has been a significant source of pollution since the 1970s. Despite early reports of lead poisoning among Romani residents, preventative action was delayed until 2006 and deemed insufficient by the World Health Organization. Meanwhile, protective measures for peacekeeping soldiers were implemented in the year 2000. Lead exposure is believed to have caused deaths and severe health issues, particularly among children. In addition to lead-contaminated land, the camps lacked basic amenities, exacerbating health risks. Recent testimonies reveal ongoing health problems in affected individuals, highlighting the long-term impacts of lead poisoning (<https://ejatlas.org>, 2022b).

Authorities in various countries build walls around Romani settlements, create dump sites near or around them, or implement forced evictions to utilise the space for capital investment projects, so Roma are forced to live near toxic sites or similar (Rorke 2023). As the topic of environmental justice becomes more popular and relevant in Romani studies, EJAtlas offers an excellent starting point for researchers. Martínez-Alier's recommendations are exceptionally relevant to Romani environmental justice movements. Environmental degradation affects everyone, and this is especially true for racialised and disenfranchised communities. Instead of suppressing resistance by Romani communities to environmental injustice, EU, national, and local governments should support environmental justice movements and provide reparations for affected communities.

In the non-profit sector, organisations that work with Romani waste collectors frequently point out the impact that individual Roma have on a country's efforts towards circular economy and waste management. Romani waste collectors are constructed as vital to the preservation of the environment, praised for their skill in dealing with solid waste, and the circular economy is seen as a chance to improve their overall position in society (Simpson-Hebert et al. 2005; Balic 2008). From my own experience working in the non-profit sector in Serbia, this narrative was even more apt with the announcement of the EU's Green Deal policies. A circular economy is praised as the solution to our environmental issues and a guarantee of sustainable development in the future. The analysis of these concepts in *Land, Water, Air and Freedom*

allows us to think critically about them. As presented above, the book deconstructs both the circular economy and sustainable development myths, proposing a form of degrowth as a more viable solution.

## Conclusion

*Land, Water, Air and Freedom* by Joan Martínez-Alier represents a comprehensive guide on environmental justice and environmental movements around the world. While it can be argued that the book does not necessarily express a new theory or significantly expand on the key concepts it relies on, it excels in providing empirical data and deeply insightful analyses on the state of contemporary environmental justice movements and environmental conflicts. The one aspect of the book I cannot emphasise enough is how all-encompassing, in terms of geography and themes, the book really is. It is indeed a comprehensive global review of environmental activism. If we add the fact that both the book and the EJAtlas are completely free, I see no reason not to recommend both wholeheartedly.

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