

The Sacrificed "Nearby": Environmental Risks and Distributive Justice in NIMBY Conflicts

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Abstract. Studies on NIMBY conflicts have revealed the unfair concentration of environmental risks in specific "nearby" areas, but they can hardly respond to the trend that the spatial transfer of ecological costs keeps shifting to farther geographical spaces in a concealed manner. Taking "the sacrificed nearby" as the clue, this paper builds an analytical framework from the community scale to the transnational scale with the help of Marxist ecological theory. The study holds that both utilitarian and proceduralist schemes face ethical failure at this scale, and the crux lies in that they do not touch the root of risk distribution. The paper then discusses possible paths to transcend the "beggar-thy-neighbor" type of transfer by combining China's ecological civilization practices.

Keywords: Marxist ecological theory, environmental NIMBY conflicts, spatial expansion, distributive justice

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem formulation

When it comes to NIMBY conflicts, most people have roughly similar images in mind: a city plans to build a waste incineration plant, and surrounding residents hold banners and submit petitions, saying "not in my backyard". Around this narrative, the academic circle has accumulated a lot of research. No matter whether the entry point is interest compensation, public participation or right struggle, most studies share the same spatial setting: the conflict occurs between the facility site and surrounding communities, and the core issue is whether risks are fairly distributed between beneficiaries and victims.

But this judgment holds true at the community scale, which does not mean the problem ends here. Garbage from developed cities is transported across cities to less developed counties and cities for landfill; highly polluting industries move in gradients from areas with stricter regulations to areas with looser regulations; electronic waste from developed countries is shipped in batches to Southeast Asia and Africa for dismantling in the name of "second-hand goods". The "backyard" in "not in my backyard" has just been moved to places that are less capable of resisting.

This observation elevates NIMBY conflicts from a technical problem of community governance to an issue of environmental justice between regions and even between countries. This paper

attempts to give a structural interpretation of "the spatial expansion of the sacrificed scope" with the help of Marxist ecological theory, and explores possible solutions at the normative level.

1.2. Research status

Domestic research on NIMBY conflicts gradually formed a scale after the Panyu waste incineration plant incident in 2009. He Yanling summarized it as an event-centered political process [1]; Sun Xuyou analyzed the legitimacy dilemma of residents' rights claims from the perspective of environmental citizenship [2]; Wang Yunxia positioned distributive justice as one of the core dimensions of environmental justice, and questioned the fair allocation of environmental interests and burdens [3]. The above studies provide a basis for understanding the logic of risk distribution in NIMBY conflicts.

Existing research presents two directions that can be further promoted. First, the spatial perspective is relatively limited. Most analyses take a single facility and surrounding communities as units, and lack systematic tracking of the spatial chain of risk transfer. Second, the depth of criticism needs to be expanded. Most existing studies seek solutions from technical levels such as system design and compensation mechanisms, and pay insufficient attention to the root of the mode of production behind NIMBY conflicts. Marxist ecological theory — Foster's excavation of the metabolic rift theory [4], Harvey's elaboration of the spatial fix mechanism [5], and discussions on ecological imperialism — provides analytical resources to make up for the above blind spots, but it is still rare to introduce it into NIMBY research [4]. Harvey's elaboration of the spatial fix mechanism [5], and discussions on ecological imperialism — provide powerful analytical resources to make up for the above blind spots, but systematic attempts to introduce it into the study of NIMBY conflicts are still rare. This paper is carried out at this intersection.

2. The root of the sacrifice of the "nearby": an analysis of Marxist ecology

2.1. Metabolic rift: how capital creates ecological costs

Marx noted in *Capital* [6] that in the pursuit of surplus value, capitalist agricultural production breaks the material cycle between humans and nature: soil nutrients are transported to cities in the form of grain, and instead of returning to the land in the form of fertilizer, they are discharged into rivers and the atmosphere as pollutants. Foster conceptualized this process as "metabolic rift", pointing out that this is not an accidental technical failure, but an inevitable concomitant of the logic of capital accumulation — there is an irreconcilable tension between the infinite expansion impulse of capital and the limited carrying capacity of the ecosystem [4].

Putting this concept into the analysis of NIMBY conflicts will lead to a different problem consciousness. NIMBY facilities become the focus of conflicts not only because of "wrong site selection", but more fundamentally, the production and consumption patterns of modern cities endogenously generate a huge amount of metabolic waste. The logic of capital naturally tends to locate the end of metabolism in areas with the lowest land prices, the least resistance, and the weakest social capital. There is always a "nearby" that will be selected to bear the ecological cost, and this selection follows the law of cost minimization rather than the principle of fairness.

2.2. Gradient transfer: how ecological costs spill over

Harvey uses "spatial fix" to describe the mechanism by which capital transfers internal contradictions outward through geographical expansion [5]. This framework is also effective for understanding the geographical transfer of ecological costs: when environmental regulations in a region become stricter and land costs rise, capital will actively seek alternative spaces with looser regulations, cheaper labor, and more abundant environmental capacity, thus forming a gradient transfer chain from urban core areas to edge areas, from developed regions to less developed regions, and from developed countries to developing countries. NIMBY conflicts break out periodically at the nodes of this chain: each conflict reflects that the previous "nearby" has become saturated, and the next "nearby" is being locked in.

2.3. A Marxist inquiry into environmental justice

The early Western environmental justice movement focused on revealing the unequal distribution of environmental risks across races and classes. Marxist ecological theory pushes this observation to a deeper structural level: the root of environmental injustice lies not in the technical errors of distribution rules, but in the operating logic of the mode of production that regards nature as a "free gift" and externalizes ecological costs. This externalization is manifested as gradient transfer in space and debt transfer in intergenerational terms. Examining NIMBY conflicts from this perspective, the focus should not only be on "whether the compensation is enough" or "whether the hearing is standardized", but also on the following questions: What kind of production logic is constantly creating risks that need to be "avoided by neighbors"? What kind of power structure determines time and time again — which "nearby" will be sacrificed this time?

3. The expansion of the sacrificed scope: from the "nearby" to the "faraway"

3.1. Spatial presuppositions and boundaries of traditional analysis

Classic NIMBY research contains a "point-to-point" model: the facility is built in place A, residents in place A bear the risks, and all citizens share the services. The comparison between Panyu and Likeng falls within this framework: residents in the former were excluded from decision-making and became a typical "sacrificed nearby"; the latter relied on the "village resident on-site supervision mechanism" to turn residents from passive bearers into active supervisors. However, this model presupposes that risk makers and bearers are in the same governance unit and share the same set of decision-making procedures. Once risk transfer breaks through city or even national boundaries — garbage from one province is landfilled across cities, and electronic waste from one country is dismantled across continents — hearing and compensation schemes at the community level can hardly cope.

3.2. The emergence of inter-regional environmental NIMBY

The waste treatment capacity of some megacities tends to be saturated, and neighboring small and medium-sized cities undertake the disposal needs of the former under the incentive of fiscal revenue growth. On the surface, it is market reciprocity, but examining the asymmetry between the two sides in terms of information, technology, capital and discourse power, it is not difficult to find that this "voluntariness" has a structural bias: the undertaking parties mostly make choices in the absence of industrial alternatives, and their negotiation status and risk management capabilities are far weaker

than those of the exporting parties. When residents in the undertaking areas launch protests, they are faced with a compound governance dilemma across administrative jurisdictions. Its essence is to amplify the "benefit-damage" separation within the city into a structural gap between regions.

3.3. When the "nearby" extends beyond national borders

At the global scale, developed countries continuously transfer highly polluting industries and toxic waste to developing countries through trade, investment transfer and waste export, which is underpinned by an arbitrage mechanism formed by the national gradient difference in environmental regulation standards and disposal costs [5]. The global flow of electronic waste is the most intuitive example: consumers in developed countries update electronic products rapidly, and heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants in waste parts cause serious and often irreversible health threats to residents around dismantling sites. When these wastes are transported to developing countries, consumption takes place in Europe and the United States, while the end of ecological costs is at dismantling sites in Africa or Southeast Asia. In this chain, the "nearby" has been pulled to the other end of the earth.

4. Ethical examination of the spatial transfer of environmental risks

4.1. Why utilitarian calculation fails

In community-level NIMBY conflicts, the utilitarian defense logic is that the benefits of the whole city are greater than the losses of the surrounding areas, the site selection is moral, and the net loss can be offset by a sum of money. This calculation is already unstable in terms of "commensurability" — whether health damage and home loss can be converted into currency has long been debated within moral philosophy. At the inter-regional and transnational scales, the problem is more intractable: beneficiaries and victims belong to different political communities, and there is no unified comparison framework; systematic differences in development stages and risk perceptions among regions make any "unified measurement standard" a fiction; in the context of unequal power, "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" is likely to degenerate into "residents of powerful countries gain happiness, while residents of weak countries bear the costs".

4.2. The boundary of procedural justice

Procedural justice schemes — information disclosure, expert argumentation, public hearings, and EIA publicity — operate effectively on the premise that all stakeholders have roughly equal access channels and discourse power. This premise is still eroded within a single city (the fact that Panyu residents only learned the news from the media three years after the plan was approved is an example), and it is even more nominal across administrative jurisdictions: residents in the undertaking areas have no legal participation status in the decision-making procedures of the exporting areas, and communities in importing countries have no voice in the approval of exporting countries. Procedural justice presupposes a closed set of "stakeholders", while spatial transfer is precisely promoted by excluding some affected people — procedures here do not correct injustice, but provide a legitimate appearance for the transfer.

4.3. The difference principle at multiple scales

Rawls' difference principle requires that unequal arrangements are only just when they benefit the least advantaged [7]. Extended to the distribution of environmental risks, a normative proposition can be obtained: if a spatial allocation scheme further worsens the situation of the most vulnerable groups or regions in the environmental dimension, the scheme is morally indefensible. At the community scale, this points to the weak position of Panyu villagers facing all Guangzhou citizens; at the regional scale, it points to the structural asymmetry between waste undertaking areas and exporting areas in terms of financial and institutional resources; at the global scale, it points to the systematic disadvantages of developing countries in terms of regulatory formulation power and transnational litigation resources. The difference principle uses the same ruler at three scales, and each elevation of the scale will reveal the injustice that has not been faced squarely in the existing analytical framework.

5. Normative resources and practical references

5.1. After criticism: solutions and possibilities

Marxist ecological theory not only reveals environmental injustice, but also contains the normative direction to transcend it. Marx pointed out in Volume 3 of *Capital* that when associated producers rationally regulate their material transformation with nature and bring it under common control, the harmony between humans and nature will gain a real social foundation [8]. The fundamental way to transcend NIMBY conflicts lies in changing the production and consumption patterns that indiscriminately transfer ecological costs outward at the institutional level. In the transnational context, this points to two directions: at the international level, promote the coordination of regulatory standards and cross-border relief to narrow the space for "ecological arbitrage"; at the domestic level, upgrade the governance paradigm from facility site compensation to the linkage of production and consumption, waste management and spatial planning.

5.2. Reference from China's ecological civilization construction

China's ecological civilization construction provides a practical reference for this. At the institutional level, the inclusion of "ecological civilization" in the Constitution, the "dual carbon" goal and the normalization of central environmental protection inspectors are changing the institutional environment for the transfer of ecological costs. At the practical level, the Shenzhen Longgang Energy Ecological Park was built after 18 years, with real-time disclosure of emission data and community supervisors working with certificates. The key to the change lies in the reconfiguration of power relations — residents have changed from the objects to be persuaded to active supervisors, and the "nearby" is no longer a victim but a co-manager. The success of individual cases does not mean the completion of systematic reform, but the concept of "community of life" provides a direction worthy of serious consideration for transcending the "beggar-thy-neighbor" type of transfer.

6. Conclusion

Reviewing the full text, three judgments may be worth retaining. First, the scope of the "sacrificed nearby" is expanding from the periphery of facilities to farther geographical spaces, and inter-regional and even transnational transfer of environmental risks has become an unavoidable empirical

trend. Second, both utilitarian interest calculation and proceduralist participation schemes appear inadequate at this scale, and the common crux is that they avoid the inquiry into the productive root of risk distribution. Third, concepts such as metabolic rift, spatial fix and ecological imperialism in Marxist ecological theory provide penetrating analytical tools for diagnosing "why the nearby is sacrificed and why they are always the ones sacrificed", while extending the difference principle from the community to the regional and global scales provides a normative reference for judging the moral acceptability of the current spatial arrangements.

The exploration of this paper is still at a preliminary stage in multiple dimensions. The systematic connection between Marxist ecological theory and NIMBY conflict research needs to be further promoted in terms of method refinement, case accumulation and institutional transformation evaluation. If this research has a more macro direction, it is to try to show that NIMBY conflicts should not only be regarded as a governance problem, but also a window to observe "whose nearby is being sacrificed and whether this sacrifice is just". Through this window, what we see is far more than protests against a certain factory, but a mode of material transformation between humans and nature that urgently needs to be recalibrated at the structural level.

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