

***The Distributive Politics of Environmental Protection in Latin America and the Caribbean*, by Isabella Alcañiz and Ricardo A. Gutiérrez.
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Who are the winners, and who are the losers, of environmental politics? Although Latin America is one of the world's lowest emitters of CO₂ and is extremely rich in terms of biodiversity, land area, and natural resources—Brazil alone accounts for 20 percent of both the planet's water supply and its biological diversity—it is especially vulnerable to the impact of global climate change. This tension is reproduced at the regional level, where the richest can protect themselves from the negative impacts of climate change, while impoverished racially or ethnically marginalized communities disproportionately overlap with industrial sites that pollute the environment. The central issue addressed by Isabella Alcañiz and Ricardo Gutiérrez in their book is that conflict in Latin American and Caribbean politics (LACEP) is ultimately distributive: behind each environmental conflict, there is a struggle between those who benefit from the appropriation of natural resources and those who suffer its socioenvironmental consequences. The absence of a comprehensive research agenda in LACEP studies makes this conundrum more challenging—but it is also surprising, the authors argue, considering that natural resources and the regulation of their exploitation have been drivers of vast social change in the region in recent decades. This is evident in how the region has changed because of the commodity boom, the deep transformation of its energy matrix, deforestation, and the expansion of agriculture, in addition to the profits and revenues brought by extractive industry.

To address the question of who the winners and losers of environmental politics are, the authors conduct an impressive review of the extant research and conclude that one reason for the fragmented (but quite prolific) LACEP research agenda is that scholars have tended to approach the locus of change in terms of two disconnected paradigms. Each paradigm is presented and discussed in the central sections of the book. In the first of these chapters, the literature on social mobilization in Latin America is reviewed. An important part of this conversation has to do with the actors who are forging such collective action. Grassroots organizations consist of Indigenous people and peasants, local populations, environmentalists, or community groups and tend to focus on territorially bounded issues. They defend a lifestyle connected to traditional subsistence practices. Others are highly professionalized, elite organizations that employ paid staff and can rely on international funding, which usually view sustainable development as compatible with economic development. Here the winners of inequitable distribution are the large companies and the state, which carry out or promote larger investments, while the losers are the populations affected by such projects. Discussion of the role of the state is not

completely absent from this chapter, but—unlike the following section, which focuses on the role of the state and its agencies in environmental protection—the contributions reviewed put the emphasis on social actors and consider the asymmetric power relationship that each type has with the state. Grassroots organizations have an adversarial relationship with the state and are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, whereas elite environmental organizations have easy access to bureaucrats and decision makers in governmental institutions.

In the following chapter, the authors critically assess the research focused on the roles of the state and the public sector in providing or withdrawing environmental protection. Public policy emerges not only from actions such as regulation and administrative, legislative, and judicial decisions but also from inaction, through which states institutionalize environmental harm. In addition, any state is crossed with contradictions, and these tend to be sharper in the capital-hungry countries of the Global South. The most concrete example of this inconsistency in Latin America relates to governments that enact legislation and create agencies to protect the environment while simultaneously encouraging economic activity in the areas of agriculture, energy, and mining. Ultimately, this contradiction reflects the paradox between the logic of capital accumulation and that of democratic legitimacy: whereas some state actors prioritize greater regulation and protection of the environment, others lower standards and avoid strict regulation to favor economic activity. Similar to the previous chapter (where the authors discuss how social mobilization and the state are connected), in this section, Alcañiz and Gutiérrez reflect on how the state develops networks with social and economic actors, such as businesses, activists, and experts. In a sense, a subject that is missing in this book is a critical reflection on how political corruption—an issue of central public concern in the region—allows corporate misbehavior to take place with the complicity, and to the benefit, of the public authorities.

In the last section, the authors attempt to outline a comprehensive research agenda for LACEP studies. Although the research literature on social mobilization and the role of the state offers partial (but potentially complementary) perspectives on the political demands of social and economic actors and the policy responses of governmental representatives and public officials, the gap between them may be reduced by suggesting that the distributive outcomes of LACEP are contingent on how state, economic, and social actors engage and interact with each other. The answers to the initial questions asked of the LACEP literature—Who profits from the appropriation of natural resources? Who pays the costs of climate change and the degradation of the environment? Who benefits from state protection?—are the powerful, the poor, and the powerful, respectively. The costs and benefits are not equally distributed.

The Distributive Politics of Environmental Protection in Latin America and the Caribbean is a detailed but concise review of the LACEP literature that should appeal to anyone—whether researcher or policy maker—concerned with gaining a general overview of the impact of climate change in the Global South (or Latin America, in particular), in grassroots and environmental social movements that are mobilizing for environmental protection, or in public policy and state responses vis-à-vis the sharpening threat of climate change. However, rather than simply

revising our understanding of the most important agenda-setting actors and the public policy responses to their demands, the most thought-provoking aspect of the book is that the authors shed an ethical light on the discussion of environmental justice by addressing who the winners and losers are, considering that Latin America is the region with the highest income inequality in the entire Global South. Business ethicists concerned about the tension between economic development and equality and, especially, the inequitable exposure of marginalized communities to environmental harm will find this book a valuable resource.

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