

The Long Fight for Environmental Justice in the Caribbean

Article by Malcom Ferdinand

December 3, 2021

Environmental disasters are not always dramatic one-off events, sometimes devastating effects arise over decades of neglect and damage. The fight for environmental justice in Martinique and Guadeloupe, which remain French “overseas territories”, is inscribed in a long struggle against colonial power and domination. For the people of these islands, decolonisation is far from an abstract notion – it is bound up with the most basic of human needs and can be a matter of life or death.

Green European Journal: The Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe are facing a long-term public health crisis connected to the chemical chlordecone. Can you explain where this substance comes from and what its effects are?

Malcom Ferdinand: Chlordecone is a chemical compound that was produced in the United States by the Allied Chemical Corporation since the 1960s. It was then exported, mainly from the States, to Europe and other parts of the world, including Martinique and Guadeloupe. In the form of a white powder, it was used as a pesticide against insects that would damage the crops in banana plantations. Officially, it was used from 1972 to 1990, but the use went on illegally for a few years longer.

Why is it still causing problems today? For a number of reasons. The first is that this chemical persists in the environment. Like all organochlorides – the insecticide DDT is another example – chlordecone stays in the ecosystem for a long time. It can stay in the soil for centuries, particularly in soils that are very rich in carbon like the volcanic soil of Martinique. The result is generalised contamination. Even if chlordecone was last used in the soil in the 1990s, it is still found today in different types of foods, in the waterways, in the coastal waters, and, of course, in the human body.

To this day, it is estimated that more than 90 per cent of all the people in Martinique and Guadeloupe are contaminated by this chemical. This harmful compound has a number of damaging effects on the body. It’s what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence” (violence over a long period of time). This type of violence is felt through reduced pregnancy terms, increasing the chance of premature birth, and slowing the cognitive, visual and motor development of infants. It also increases the chance of prostate cancer, of which Martinique has one of the highest rates in the world.

While there have been court cases since the 2000s around these impacts, to this day, there has been no indictment.

You may go to Martinique and Guadeloupe and think that is a paradise island where nothing could possibly be wrong. But this is very far from the truth.

Have resistance movements taken shape in Martinique and Guadeloupe as a result of this? What has been the response from the French government?

The state response came late. Chlordecone was used from 1972 to 1994-5, but the state only started to take measures to protect the people in 2000. So, the state only decided to start protecting people 28 years after the chemical was first used and, for all that time, people were fully exposed to it.

Even though the first court cases took place between 2006 and 2007, we couldn't really call what existed at the time social movements. But there was enough publicity to push the state to take stronger measures in terms of funding some clean-up methods, trying to limit exposure, and inter-ministerial plans. But, because the compound cannot be removed from the soil, the government's response was to limit chlordecone concentration to a level that was deemed safe.

Throughout this time, a few books were written and criticisms were made, but there weren't any massive demonstrations until three years ago. Many in Martinique and Guadeloupe knew it was not safe, but that's another thing. In 2018, the state raised the limits, increasing people's exposure to chlordecone, and that led to demonstrations, criticisms, artistic expressions, and the founding of a few collectives.

The social movement really started to grow from 2019 onwards. There were massive demonstrations in Fort-de-France, the capital of Martinique, and in Paris on 27 February 2021. It reached a peak earlier this year after the Penal Court indicated that inconclusive verdicts might be reached on court cases filed 14 years ago because of the time that has elapsed.

Since 2008 the government has been releasing multi-year plans. We are currently in the fourth plan, which will run until 2027. But, for the population, this is not enough.

Our latest edition - Moving Targets: Geopolitics in a Warming World - is out now.

It is available to read online & order straight to your door.

[READ & Order](#)

In your research, you distinguish between this kind of more persistent and insidious form of pollution, as opposed to something like an oil spill. Can you talk about that?

One of the particularities of this contamination is the fact that you cannot see it or feel it with your primary senses. Agricultural workers often had an intimate knowledge of this

chemical and they were acutely aware of the dangers because they were exposed to it. But if you don't know, you may believe that it's not there. You may go to Martinique and Guadeloupe and think that is a paradise island where nothing could possibly be wrong. But this is very far from the truth, and chlordecone is just one chemical that we know of.

I'm currently writing a book in which I use the term "environmental domination" to conceptualise this kind of colonial violence and domination attached to contamination. This concept refers to a few people imposing a violent way of living on the inhabitants of the island as well as what they find in their bodies, by force. We didn't choose, we didn't have a say, we just now have to bear these compounds in our bodies because plantation owners, with the help of state officials, decided so. This is domination.

Is there something about the experience of the colony that throws the social-political side of ecology into sharp relief?

On the contrary. It is precisely in former colonies where it may not seem as evident. This is the starting point for my book, which will soon be published in English under the title of *Decolonial Ecology*. I spent 18 years of my life in Martinique where we were raised to see ecological issues on one side, and the social-political-historical on the other. It is in just such a place, heavily marked by the legacy of colonialism and enslavement, that these issues are siloed. So you will have companies destroying the environment, but also environmental NGOs that reduce ecological activism to cleaning up the beach and the streets, without addressing the polluting and extractive activities of companies.

Colonial habitation is not just a material economic practice but also an intellectual one. [Note: Colonial habitation and related concepts are further discussed in [this interview](#) with Ferdinand.] In this context, ideas like "environmental justice" are seen as disruptive and are not really welcomed by those who want to maintain the system. When I interview people in the Caribbean, they don't use these terms even though their struggles are classical cases of environmental injustice.

The term environmental justice has been used in the US since the late 1970s. If you look at the [declaration from the 1991 environmental justice summit](#) in Washington, it stated that we have been colonised for 500 years and we want a different model. But, later, when the concept of environmental justice emerged in France, it was emptied of its anti-racist and anti-colonial roots. When it emerged between 2005 and 2009, the term was not environmental justice but environmental and ecological "inequalities", reducing it to an almost arithmetic matter. It is only since 2015 that French universities have taught environmental justice. And even then, it is being taught by law schools, giving it an almost technocratic meaning.

You have companies destroying the environment, but also environmental NGOs that reduce ecological activism to cleaning up the beach and the streets, without addressing the polluting and extractive activities of companies.

Could progressive movements draw on this kind of reflection to speak to racialised communities and the broader working class in Europe in a language of justice and emancipation?

Definitely – I think there’s a long way to go. I do not think that, especially in France, the ecological parties take seriously what justice means for the people who originate from these sites of colonialism and slavery. I don’t think anti-racism has been understood as something beyond a moral imperative, when really it is a political question. When you look at who is exposed to air pollution, who is denied access to good housing, and who gets to talk about contaminants, it clearly becomes a political question.

When I published my book in France and started giving interviews, almost consistently, I was one of the first Black people journalists had interviewed about ecological issues. That is telling. In arenas where you want to talk about the world, part of the world is missing. Why is that? I don’t think the answer is only that “Black people have other concerns”.

Let me ask you. Have you interviewed either a Black or racialised person about ecology in your journal?

We have quite good connections around the world but I take the point. The representation of racialised people from Europe is a weak point.

When I was studying in France, I was the only Black person there from France at most of the conferences I went to. What this absence does is further an imaginary representation of what France is that is classed and gendered.

The French green movement recently selected their presidential candidate for next year’s general election. The campaign of the eventual runner-up, Sandrine Rousseau, introduced ecofeminism and racial justice to the wider public debate. How do you evaluate the campaign’s impact? Do you think it will have a legacy?

I hope so. I respect and appreciate what the Green party does. But I don’t know where it stands politically. I think there is a tendency to be extremely technocratic and reduce political discussion to a management of funds rather than offering a real a vision of the society we want to live in.

Rousseau’s candidacy was great in the sense that she highlighted a number of questions that are usually side-lined by the party because they think that they won’t win many votes. They can be seen as divisive.

But what I don’t understand is: why is my demand to be treated with dignity seen as a divisive issue? A divisive issue for whom? It creates a fracture where you can only worry about the environment or racial justice – not both.

There’s also a *naïveté* in thinking that when you invoke ecology, you can absolve yourself of any kind of criticism and go as far as to accuse anyone who raises questions around justice of being divisive. I have talked with many people in Green parties, and I respect and support what they do, but I think they have a long way to go.

The far right is at the centre of the debate in France. While across Europe, closed

borders and refugee pushbacks are increasingly normalised. Reflecting on these developments, writers such as Hans Kundnani have pointed to a civilisational turn in European thinking since the refugee crisis to argue that whiteness is becoming more central to the European project. What do you make of this argument?

I haven't read the article, but if I were to respond to that thesis I would say, "Where have you been?" A supposed turn? There is no turn. Whiteness is at the centre of the colonialism, enslavement, and imperialism carried out by European nations. So it's not a novelty. The refugee crisis certainly brings it to the fore, but it has been there all along. Perhaps it's being talked about more because there is a wider demand to change the narrative of what it means to be French and what it means to be European. Grassroots movements, scholars, and their supporters in ecological movements are asking these questions.

People who resist that change become increasingly extreme in their ideas of a European entity that is civilisational and centred around whiteness. But I wouldn't call it a turn. What it is, though, is an opportunity to challenge it and effect structural change.

There is continued scarring from colonialism not only in Guadeloupe and Martinique but across the Caribbean. Those injustices are still built into how this region relates to the world. What would an emancipated model of development look like for nations in the Caribbean?

The scars of colonialism are not only located in the Caribbean, but also located right here in Brussels, Paris, and Bordeaux. The civilisational turn, the whiteness, is part of this scar.

But about the Caribbean, a starting point is recognising that the effects of climate change that we are enduring aren't really our fault. The Caribbean is a region of island states, it is exposed to the most extreme climate events, such as hurricanes. So I believe we need to change how we inhabit these lands, to end our heavy dependence on fossil fuels and begin to relate to the non-human world differently.

Changing how we inhabit these lands also comes back to the issue of pesticides, which we should look at through a justice lens. Who were the first people exposed? Agricultural workers producing food for export. What role and space do they hold in our societies? Very marginalised positions. By considering this issue through a justice lens, you realise both that the people giving us food face real injustice and that, what's more, we as a people lack sovereignty over our own food. You begin to understand the inequality that exists and the change that needs to happen.

At the regional level, we can thrive by making stronger alliances with other small island states. It would be naïve to wait for some sort of global justice before starting to act.

So the Caribbean needs to be more autonomous and sovereign.

Yes! Start there. Because you can be independent and still be so dependent on oil extraction, and foreign aid over and over again. So start there.



Malcom Ferdinand is a political scientist at the Université Paris Diderot and a researcher at CNRS (IRISSO). He is the author of *Une écologie décoloniale. Penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen* (Édition du Seuil, 2019), winner of the Fondation de l'écologie politique literature prize in 2019.

Published December 3, 2021

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-long-fight-for-environmental-justice-in-the-caribbean/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.