Interview with Julian Agyeman

conducted with **Gerald Taylor Aiken**

Interview realised via Zoom on 25 January 2021.

Julian Agyeman is a professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University. His works has regularly engaged with key issues of our journal Justice Spatiale | Spatial Justice*, for example, in his 2013 book* Introducing Just Sustainabilities*. Julian is the cofounder and editor in chief of the journal* Local Environment*, which has been a platform for many of the ideas discussed in this special edition—on the role community plays in pursuing a just transition, and how environmental issues are entangled with issues of spatial justice and injustice. In this interview with* JSSJ*, Professor Agyeman reflects on his own work, discusses emerging issues such as how researchers can become more "just", including techniques such as participative research, and elaborates on the dual role community can play in both meeting expectations of justice and entrenching injustice.*

Gerald Taylor Aiken (GTA): Hi Julian, in the special edition here, we have a number of papers based on the ways community is ostensibly pursuing justice, but one of the emerging themes is the ways this can cover up and perpetuate injustices. Every candle we light casts a shadow. One of the themes from your work has been the ways in which the perceived whiteness of community initiatives, in how they're represented in practice, in police, but also in journals, in academia, can perpetuate this white privilege. To start: what are your reflections on the role of community in pursuing justice, while at the same moment being an enabler of injustice?

Julian Agyeman (JA): I'm thinking now of Minneapolis. Minneapolis is the focus of our current introspection in the US, on issues of race and injustice. I wrote a piece for *The Conversation*[1] where I noted that urban planning is the spatial toolkit of white

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1.   https://theconversation.com/urban-planning-as-a-tool-of-white-supremacy-the-other-lesson-from-minneapolis-142249

supremacy, and I do believe that to be the case. Take a look at Minneapolis. If we look at Minneapolis according to sustainable city metrics, or green city metrics, it's off the charts—like Portland, Oregon. It's got the best park system—ten years on the trot, according to the Trust for Public Lands. It's the third-best city for biking. It's got all of these running tracks. It's a very green city. But scratch the surface and you find a very different picture. It's a green city if you're white, and can use those amenities, but if you look below that surface picture, it's one of the most unequal cities in terms of income, home ownership/wealth gap, or the achievement or opportunity gap, in terms of education. On all of these and other factors, Minneapolis is a very unequal city. So, yes. In the US, issues of race and white supremacy and opportunity to access green space, or access to a first-class education are delimited by racial and socioeconomic means.

I'm thinking, in relation to your question, that there are many local and sustainability projects, that while looking to achieve greater sustainability or "greenness", can actually deepen inequality. One example of this is what we call in the US "Complete Streets". Streets where the automobile is decentred and we recentre the public, with broader sidewalks. They bring in bike lanes, and medians, and benches and trees. So, there are lots of groups pushing for these Complete Streets. And we would agree with all this. But, the thing is, the way it pans out in the US is that these places come with a price premium. The rents go up once these Complete Streets programmes are installed. Rents go up, house prices go up. They end up gentrifying neighbourhoods, so displacement happens alongside these Complete Streets. The people speaking out for these programmes are usually white, upper or middle-class gentrifiers. To be clear, they are not racist, but what they do in terms of pushing for these ecological and sustainability improvements, is to continue a settler-colonial mindset around the city, resulting in gentrification and displacement. And those neighbourhoods get very much whiter because of these sustainability initiatives. Not, as I say, because of racism, but because socioeconomically, these neighbourhoods are much more expensive and therefore more exclusive. And expense and exclusion in the US equals racial exclusion.

GTA: I'd like to delve a bit deeper into that, specifically the relationship between tackling one form of injustice—in this case environmental or ecological injustice—and how that can result in increasing social injustice. Is there always a spill over, so that any attempt at justice has a negative consequence elsewhere? Or is it that in this case the conception of justice just wasn't wide enough before?

JA: Let's think of it like this. If you're a mayor in any US city, you want to increase your tax base. And gentrification is very good for that. So while many mayors will speak out about gentrification, they look at their tax base and they will see it's increasing, the more these gentrified neighbourhoods occur in their district.

GTA: So the underlying structure is the blame really. And what about examples from beyond the US? Is it still the case that we see these rebound effects beyond this one particular country?

JA: Yes, I think so. But the issues play out very differently. In race for example, the UK's issues of race play out quite differently to the US. But I think the "settler-colonial-gentrification" path, once embarked upon does very similar things, in different nations. It makes for more exclusive neighbourhoods. Whether that's to do with issues of whiteness, or just a higher socioeconomic group. But I think that's a general process. I really think along the same lines as the geographer David Harvey here, who says we're building cities for people to invest in, not to live in. And this is absolutely the case, in many different places. And that is a much more universal thing. So, I think the Complete Streets example, or Liveable Streets, is a good example where community-based organisations push for neighbourhood change knowingly or unknowingly they're also pushing for gentrification and displacement.

GTA: So you are an urban planner as much as anything else, is there anything specific about "the urban" that brings these issues of justice to the fore?

JA: I think in urban areas these issues are just much more visible. Due to urban densities, due to the greater population of lower income and minority populations. So there is an intensity within the urban scale that perhaps as you move towards the peripheries of the urban and into the suburbs it is just not as visible.

GTA: One of the interesting aspects of this special edition has been bringing together the French and English language fields of literature and examples on community, and helping to provincialize some of that Anglophone scholarship. You've worked all over the world—what role do you think the Anglo hegemony plays when researchers are focused on justice? Both in their own work, and in how they go about doing that research?

JA: Yes, I do think about language a lot. When I give talks, I often use a definition of urban planning from Patsy Healey, emeritus professor at Newcastle University. And she talks about it as: "managing our coexistence in shared space". Coexistence. Shared space. That's what we do as urban planners. But also in urban planning we have an additional set

of challenges. We do use words in urban planning that are very pejorative. "Blight": your neighbourhood is "blighted". We need to "redevelop" the neighbourhood. We're going to do placemaking. Placemaking means we don't think your place is good enough as it is, we're going to do something about it. Placemaking as a concept ignores the fact that there was a place there already. So are we "placetaking"? There's a whole vocabulary of urban planning, in other languages—the French, the Germans, the Spanish—we might not get the nuance that different nations are talking about.

GTA: And so when you are given talks to audiences where many don't have English as a first language—how do you chart a course through this?

JA: Depending on the audience, I will spell these differences out. Given that, as I argue, urban planning is the spatial toolkit of white supremacy, to then overlay that power of urban planning with the power of urban planners to choose "words" —some of which are incredibly prejudiced, pejorative against certain communities. And with words comes the ability to construct the "narrative". So, yes, I'm very aware of the multiple justice issues at stake here.

Recently I was in a planning meeting with all these august people, and someone starts talking about the master copy. And I said "let's decolonise our minds right away!" This is language that we use without thinking—the "master bedroom", the "master copy" that directly refers to the master-slave relationship. Our language is soaked, it's dripping in privilege, prejudice, and power—and we need to call it out. We need first to understand it, and then choose alternatives: "main bedroom", "main copy"?

This isn't just spatial justice. This is vocabulary justice. Even before we do spatial actions, or engage in spatial practices, we are engaging in forms of injustice in the selection of words and language that we use to describe the world we see around us.

GTA: I'd like to ask a question about your role as founder and editor of the journal *Local Environment* just now. *Local Environment* is one of the key places where a lot of research on community and environment is placed, and a lot of this has a focus on issues of food—community gardening, but also some of your work on food trucks. So I wanted to ask is there something about food as an issue that fits more easily in community examples—rather than say community housing or community energy?

A lot of these examples tend towards some of the usual suspects too—so I wonder if there is something about over-research—the way research tends to bunch up in focusing on certain key locations/honeypot sites. The reason why I think this is important is that I

wonder if research and researchers practising or participating in this bottling-up is another way in which research in and on community can be affected by issues of justice.

JA: There's a really good point here. I've often had a problem with this idea of "best practice". Because what it usually means is rounding up the usual suspects. Not simply in terms of the city or project or programme or process that we're talking about, but it usually entails an exclusive group of people who do that best practice. I prefer the concept of emerging practice. Take, for example, Portland. It's usually held up as an example of one of the most sustainable cities in North America. But we know there are a lot of problems there. A lot of the greening initiatives that are held up as an example of why Portland is a beacon of greenness are white driven. Not so many of them are black driven. I think the concept of emerging practice might help us be able to look at a variety of programmes and projects, rather than always look at the best, which as you said—is usually done by hyper-resourced white middle and upper-middle-class people.

GTA: So what do we do with this awareness as researchers then? If there is a tendency to be drawn to "best practice" as you say, or "over-researched places"—practically what should we be doing here? By saying pay attention to emergent practices, are we putting the responsibility back onto the individual researcher?

JA: Well, a lot of researchers are drawn to research and research projects they can identify with. What we need is to go beneath the surface. For me that's beneath examples that are super green and super white, but go beneath the surface we can find examples where we can find a lot of difference. A lot of different issues will be going on in terms of race, inequalities, spatial injustice.

We have a tendency for boosterism I think as researchers. Certainly in terms of transition, sustainability, smart cities, sharing cities. We want—and we all fall into this trap—we want to push an idea that is good, so we look around for the best examples of that. All I'm saying is let's not stop doing that, but let's also be very clear that those best practices are hyper-resourced and conceived and maintained and managed by people who have the time and have the resources. But I think in the field of emerging practices, we find more struggle, we find more raw community power, if you like.

Best practices-based research certainly doesn't fall into what we want to be which is ultimately as critical researchers. I think this is where practices such as community-based participatory research can really help us start to identify other examples and emerging practice.

GTA: What is it about participative research that makes it better? In a lot of these issues you're saying on the surface these issues are all about justice and sustainability, but scratch the surface, when we're critical we find they can perpetuate injustice such as white privilege. The same could go for participatory research—it's great to involve affected people in your research and give them a say in research design and research output. But for a lot of hard-pressed groups that can just drain time and resources from these affected communities. What is it specifically about participative research that's more just?

JA: Yeah, it's a tough one. One way I've found round it is from a book I'm currently working on, on *Sacred Civics: the spiritual side of the city*. We've got some chapters from Indigenous people. They were very clear at the start, they said "we'd love to collaborate, but we need to get paid". So, I've started paying people. We need to pay community practitioners. If we want them in our processes, we need to pay them. They're not getting paid—this is just writing for me, but for them it's labour that they're giving for free. So I always put in the budget now some money—some serious money—for paying them. So that's only one aspect of the power balance that we need to be thinking of and getting right.

GTA: But it also produces better research? Right? You get access to the emerging practices, and also avoid extracting your research, but also the time and energies from those participants?

JA: Yes. Of course, I am the person with the vision about my research, but we need to partner on this. One thing I've been thinking of a lot is the concept of coproduction. I'm very interested in this idea of coproduction. How do we coproduce the urban commons? How do we do that? We can do it on many levels—participatory budgeting, for example. Coproduction can be as basic as throwing a bucket of water over a street tree in your local area, because you know it's a dry summer—that's an act of coproduction. How about a park—which is "designed", "managed", "maintained", and then "programmed"—what about "codesigned"? "Comanaged"? "Comaintained"? And "coprogrammed" parks? And wouldn't that space be much more spatially just, be much more culturally inclusive as a result of that coproduction process? I also see that coproduction extending to something I'm very passionate about—planners should not just rely on simple demographic data; 7% of this neighbourhood is Latinx for example. I want "deep ethnographies", I want neighbourhoods to have deep ethnographies coproduced by the urban planners and members of the local communities. Imagine the richness of understanding of neighbourhoods and communities if we didn't simply rely

on demographic data which is just census data, but we relied on rich and thickly produced deep ethnographic data.

GTA: OK, great. What are the key lessons/points to be aware of then when addressing just how a community initiative is, and can be?

JA: Number one: does your organisation—non-profit, non-governmental—does it look like the community in which it is operating? If it doesn't, is it legitimate? Is it effective? Is it even trusted? So many non-profits these days, so many governments just don't look like their communities, and that's a problem. One very good example of an organisation that does look like their community is the Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative[2] here in Boston where they established themselves in the early eighties in a great wave of displacement and gentrification. But before they established themselves, they did a demographic analysis of the neighbourhood, and they constituted the board of directors and the staff to look like the neighbourhood, and 40 years later, they're still going strong. They're loved by funders, the city council, the local community trust them. There is something really, really deep in seeing yourself, seeing your community and your culture in an organisation. So that's point No.1.

Point No. 2, really simple: social justice never simply happens. Spatial justice never simply happens. We don't simply walk along and suddenly say: "Oh wow! This is so much more socially just, or spatially just! How did all this justice suddenly happen?!" It has to be fought for. Nobody gives away social justice—it has to be fought for.

You know, one of the things that worries me is when planners start talking like "we need to start working towards social justice". "NO!" I say, "We have to start with social justice". In the midst of developing policies and plans, we need to move away from a plan being economically efficient, "equitable", and environmentally benign. We need to centre social justice. We need to be explicit: how can this plan or policy increase social justice and environmental justice.

There are a whole host of other dimensions here around food justice. If you look at a lot of food justice organisations—they're white. Or mostly white, and often in largely black neighbourhoods. That is one of these issues that is problematic. Now, there are a large and increasing number of black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC) organisations, but there are still too many where there is one board member, and one worker who is of colour and the rest are white. It's a problem. I don't doubt the motivation of the workers

2. https://www.dsni.org/

who make up these organisations. I teach these students in my classes, and they come to my food justice class with the greatest of desire to make change. They are good, good people. But it is problematic, when white folks dominate a justice organisation ministering to low-income minority community, and giving them nutrition advice. Which is often rather pejorative, and based on some notion of the ideal body form, etc.

GTA: One the whole do you see progress?

JA: The good thing about the US is that these conversations around race, urban planning, white supremacy, social and spatial justice are happening, now more so than ever. This is in large part due to the horrific killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and progressive politicians, local, state and federal. And of course, the new Biden-Harris administration will help too!

GTA: Julian, thank you.

To quote this article

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