

Climate crisis as a matter of justice

Anna Dańkowska

Magdalena Klarenbach

Why should the climate crisis be understood and tackled in terms of justice?

What are the connections between climate crisis, racism, colonialism and historic as well as contemporary violence? What kind of perspective is needed to approach the climate crisis as a matter of justice and propose appropriate answers to it?

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These are big and complex questions that deserve a lot of attention. However, in the dominant climate crisis narrative they don't get sufficient space. If one wants to face the climate crisis in its whole complexity, with both ecological and social dimensions, one needs to explore these phenomena widely, not only in geographical but also in historical terms

Climate change - the past, present, and future

The climate crisis is usually tackled in the context of the future. The consequences of climate change have begun to be noticed in the Global North, and there is an urge to act in order not to deprive future generations of the right to a decent life on our planet. It is worth acknowledging though that in the Global South climate change started as long ago as with the beginning of colonialism and was deepened throughout the centuries of oppression.

The ruthless plundering of the colonized territories led not only to robbing them of natural resources and enormous land use changes, transforming whole ecosystems and influencing the climate, but also to the subjugation of many people or even their extinction.

The belief in the superiority of the white man over nature as well as other people paved the way to racism, slavery and genocide.

Colonial continuities - an unfinished history

Throughout the centuries these power relations continued, increasing global inequalities. But thinking about colonialism as a process that has already ended is a misunderstanding. The system that was built on the exploitation of land and people, extraction, oppression and slavery still profits from the colonial continuities. And climate change should be seen as a result of its legacy.

Coloniality and racism are deeply rooted in the present global, national, regional and local systems as well as in individuals, because of the way we have been socialized. But this issue is usually not linked with the climate crisis. As the Framing Climate Justice initiative points out:

And the elephant in the room is colonialism. People do not see how colonialism relates to climate change, and we have our work cut out to make this connection [1].

Only when one understands such long-term historical processes and interconnections with power relations, one can grasp and address the overlap between racial and climate injustice [2].

HISTORICAL RESPONSIBILITY* FOR CLIMATE BREAKDOWN

redfish



*RESPONSIBILITY = $\frac{\text{CUMULATIVE EMISSIONS} - \text{FAIR SHARE}}{\text{TOTAL NATIONAL OVERSHOOTS}}$

Source: The Lancet Planetary Health/Jason Hickel

Different narratives

to tackle the climate crisis from a human rights perspective & allow the completely marginalized voices to be heard

Future

leaving "the kids" with an unlivable world

Climate justice associations

Inequality

those who have contributed the least to the problem are the ones who suffer the most from it

Economy

the wellbeing and comfort that we so preciously guard is based on the unjust global economic system that has been disadvantageous and harmful to others

Source: Voices of the participants of the seminar "Understanding and tackling climate crisis as a matter of justice"

What is climate justice?

Climate justice is about acknowledging that historical responsibility for the climate crisis rests with industrialized countries (the Global North), which have been freely burning large amounts of fossil fuels for almost two centuries, and yet it is poorer areas (the Global South) that are especially affected [4].

Before "climate justice", the concept of "environmental justice" was established. The starting point were the protests of black people who opposed the dumping of toxic chemicals in their communities in the early 1980s in the U.S.

The term "climate justice" was popularized in the 1990s to reflect the unequal impact of climate change on different groups, such as indigenous peoples, people of color, women, and people with disabilities. Additionally, it covers the phenomenon of intergenerational injustice in which older generations in the Global North benefit from a lifestyle built on burning fossil fuels, while leaving young people with an uncertain future in the midst of the climate crisis [4].

According to Vanessa Andreotti from the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective [5], global (climate) justice requires the following:

- Developing capacity to face and hold generative space for complexities, uncertainty, paradoxes without being overwhelmed or immobilized
- Connecting dots in the bigger picture: the roots and effects of unsustainability and material and rational poverty leading to different forms of violence; understanding how are the conflict in harm
- Imagining alternatives beyond the limits of a single rationality and of a single story of progress, development and evolution
- Moving towards sobriety, maturity, discernment and accountability

Differences between mainstream and intersectional climate movement

Mainstream climate movement	Intersectional climate movement
Future-focused & Euro-centric Western-led	Reflective/historical & Decolonial
"Conservation", "protection", "management of nature"	Social dimension of climate change
Technical rationality, market-based economic tools	Criticism of expertise/technical solutions in favour of ecology
State as addressee	Community-based decision making

Source: Black Earth Kollektiv, 2021, [8].

Towards intersectional climate justice movement

According to Asad Rehman from organisation [War on Want](#),

Fixing the climate is only possible if we also fix all of the other inequalities that exist because not only does climate reinforce all those things, but it also amplifies them – and it's an expression of those things [4].

The existing inequalities in society are often shaped by racism, and climate change reinforces them further. People in the Global South, indigenous people, people of color and racialized communities are often faced with the most severe impacts of climate change. Isn't it a paradox that the most vulnerable to the effects of the climate crisis are at the same time the least responsible for it? And they are also the least heard in the ongoing climate debate.

Moreover, both colonialism and racism are strongly embedded in the organisations, institutions and structures that deal with the climate crisis. This can be observed in the history of international climate policy and its double standards. Additionally, it is evident in the design of measures that do not align with the objectives of developing countries within the Global South [2]. That's why the history and legacy of colonialism must be acknowledged in climate policy and action.

An **intersectional** approach should be applied to put attention and give voice to the most vulnerable, the most marginalized and the most affected by the climate crisis.

BIPOC

an acronym for Black, Indigenous, People of Color

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black American law professor who in 1989 coined the term "intersectionality", puts an intersectional lens to inequality and points out how compounding experiences of discrimination based on race, gender, class, sexuality and/or immigrant status overlap and deepen even more the inequality in society [6].

To act in line with climate justice one has to acknowledge intersectionality by putting special attention to those social groups who are underprivileged and/or discriminated against already in some dimensions and therefore are more affected by the consequences of the climate crisis.

Climate action must be intersectional

The Global North can spur climate action by, for example, waiving the debt of the Global South countries. It can also help to advance racial justice by prioritizing adaptation measures for BIPOC communities. Additionally, environmental organizations have to face their own histories of racism by hearing and elevating BIPOC voices, as well as investing in the hardest-hit communities [7].

Books recommended by the participants of the seminar:

- Reni Eddo-Lodge, "Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race"
- Elsa Fernandez, "Fragmente über das Überleben"
- Paulo Freire, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed"
- David Graeber, David Wengrow, "The Dawn of Everything"
- Kübra Gümüşay, "Sprache und Sein"
- Robin Wall Kimmerer, "Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants"
- Valentin Luntumbue, Philippe Lefevre, Stephan Raab, Ruxandra Seniuc, Adrian Waters, Nadya Kamenkovich, "Places in the Sun: Post-Colonial Dialogues in Europe and Beyond"
- Nawal El Saadawi, "Woman at Point Zero"
- Anna Tsing, "The Mushroom at the End of the World"
- Leah Penniman, "Farming While Black"

References:

- [1] Framing Climate Justice, "[Research briefing: How People in the UK Think About Climate Justice](#)", 2020
- [2] Olumide Abimbola, Joshua Kwesi Aikins, Tselane Makhesi-Wilkinson, Erin Roberts, "[Racism and Climate \(In\)Justice. How Racism and Colonialism Shape the Climate Crisis and Climate Action](#)", Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2021
- [3] Jason Hickel, "[Quantifying national responsibility for climate breakdown: an equality-based attribution approach for carbon dioxide emissions in excess of the planetary boundary](#)", The Lancet Planetary Health, 2020
- [4] CarbonBrief, "[In-depth Q&A: What is 'climate justice'?](#)", 2021
- [5] [Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective](#)
- [6] "[What is intersectionality, and what does it have to do with me?](#)", YW Boston, 2017
- [7] Joe McCarthy, "[Why Is Climate Change a Racial Justice Issue?](#)", 2021
- [8] [Black Earth Kollektiv](#)

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Fundacja im. Heinricha Bölla
ul. Żurawia 45, 00-680 Warszawa T +48 22 44 01 333
E pl-info@pl.boell.org FB @Boell_PL W pl.boell.org



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