



NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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19. Reversing the Failures of Climate Governance: Radical Action for Climate Justice

Paul G. Harris

Addressing climate change effectively will require focused attention on the most vital sources of failure in climate governance. Much, if not most, of that failure can be attributed to a lack of climate justice—a lack of ecological and environmental justice, a lack of social and distributive justice, and a lack of international and global justice. Demands for justice began decades ago. Had they been listened to and acted upon then, radical action would not be required now. To avert climate catastrophe, climate governance must embrace and implement all forms of climate justice.

Introduction

The governance of climate change has failed (Harris 2021). Apart from a temporary decline due to the worldwide economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, greenhouse gas emissions are still *increasing* globally, with concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reaching 420 parts per million (ppm) in 2020—compared to the pre-industrial level of 280 ppm—the highest since measurements began (Monroe 2021). Global warming is continuing apace, already reaching 1.1°C above pre-industrial norms (World Meteorological Association 2020: 6) and likely to exceed 3°C, even if all of the promises arising from past climate negotiations, specifically pledges (i.e., Intended Nationally Determined

Contributions) toward the Paris Agreement, are implemented (United Nations Environment Programme 2019: 8). The impacts of climate change—wildfires, storms, droughts, pestilence and much more—are being felt with greater intensity, with the only prospect being that things will grow much worse in the years ahead (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2015). What is more, very little has been done to help the most vulnerable nation states, communities and individuals adapt to the inevitable, potentially existential, impacts of climate change. Recent events, notably widespread bushfires in Australia and forest fires in the United States, demonstrate that even the world's affluent societies and individuals will have trouble avoiding the impacts of climate change. Many millions, perhaps even billions, of people in poor societies have little to no hope of doing so.

Failed Climate Governance

After several decades of international negotiations, nation states still cannot agree to take concrete actions that will reverse climate change. Indeed, that lack of agreement helps explain the existence of the climate crisis, what many are now calling—justifiably—a climate emergency. The best that negotiations among governments have achieved—the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change—is a step in the right direction (on the Paris Agreement, also see Hannis, this volume). But it has followed many other steps resulting from international negotiations that have neither stemmed global greenhouse gas pollution nor mitigated climate change. Indeed, pledges by states to implement the Paris Agreement are a recipe for continued global warming. Certainly, international negotiations have failed to achieve the objectives of the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). That is, one cannot seriously argue that the negotiations have achieved anything akin to the “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (United Nations 1992: Article 2). All of the science and on-the-ground reporting about the impacts of climate change prove that ‘dangerous interference’ is manifestly upon us already.

Many of those involved in international climate negotiations will acknowledge their failures up to now (see Dyke et al., this volume). This

underlying realisation is probably one factor motivating those involved in upcoming negotiations to strengthen national pledges toward the Paris Agreement and to agree on the means by which those pledges will be fulfilled and verified. Indeed, many hold out hope for the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties (COP26), scheduled to convene in Glasgow in November 2021, to produce much more robust agreement among the world's governments to finally get to grips with the causes and consequences of the climate crisis—much as they held out hope for twenty-five previous conferences. It is likely that some progress will be made, but it is more likely that, as in all previous conferences, progress will still not be enough to prevent yet more dangerous interference with Earth's climate system.

Nationally, more governments are pledging to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, or at least limit increases in them, and a growing number have promised to achieve net carbon neutrality by mid-century, although few are on target to do so, and it is anyone's guess whether governments that succeed them will implement those promises. Most significantly, the greenhouse gas emissions of all of the countries that have made pledges of carbon neutrality add up to a minority of total global emissions. What is more, the materially consumptive and energy-hungry lifestyles and ways of doing business that have caused climate change remain largely unchanged; indeed, despite calls for 'green' growth, those lifestyles are being *advocated* by governments and businesses as a means by which to grow the world economy out of the COVID-19 slowdown that took hold in 2020. Even as most of the world was wallowing in a COVID-19-induced recession, China's millions of upper-class and hundreds of millions of middle-class consumers returned to shops in force, snapping up new cars and luxury products. At the time of writing in mid-2021, those Chinese are already being joined by consumers in other countries as their national economies start to turn back toward growth.

In short, the pollution causing the climate crisis, the behaviours causing that pollution and the impacts of climate change arising from it are all going in the wrong direction. All of these trends need to be acknowledged if there is to be much hope for climate negotiations to make substantial progress.

Holistic Climate Justice

What is to be done? More of the same just will not be enough. The momentum of climate change and the pollution that causes it mean that efforts to address the climate crisis must be stepped up by orders of magnitude. Radical action is needed to avert and cope with the most dangerous consequences of climate change. Doing that will require focused attention on identifying the most vital sources of failure in climate governance and overcoming them. Much of the failure of climate governance can be attributed to a lack of climate justice (a.k.a. climate equity)—a lack of ecological and environmental justice, a lack of social and distributive justice, and a lack of international and global justice.

Demands for climate justice began several decades ago and have been reaffirmed in climate negotiations ever since. That bears repeating: demands for climate justice have been ongoing for *several decades*. Poor states have repeatedly called for wealthy ones to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and to provide robust aid to assist the poor states to adapt. Poor individuals and their advocates have for decades called for action to prevent climate change and to help the poor avoid suffering that was expected to arise from greenhouse gas pollution. Advocates for nature have called over and over again for action to protect ecosystems, biospheres, landscapes, seas, species and animals that are already suffering from climate change. Had these calls for different aspects of climate justice been heeded and acted upon to any substantial extent, radical action would probably not be required now. However, apart from mostly lip service—such as invocation of the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ in international climate change agreements—the calls were, in effect, mostly ignored. This pattern will have to change dramatically (also see Bond, this volume, for some suggestions in this regard).

To avert climate catastrophe, climate governance must wholeheartedly embrace *and robustly implement* climate justice. Viewed holistically, climate justice would, by definition, entail all actors around the world doing what they can to prevent the climate crisis from becoming a climate catastrophe. This would include decarbonising the global economy very rapidly, thereby limiting global warming as much as possible, and helping everyone to adapt to unavoidable climate change. It would mean implementing environmental, ecological, social, distributive, international and global justice, as outlined below.

Ecological Justice

Addressing the climate crisis effectively will require coming to terms with the inextricable connection between healthy societies and a healthy environment. As long as the non-human world is treated as merely a source of resources and a depository for society's pollution, there is little hope of mitigating the worst effects of climate change. From this perspective, realising climate justice would entail putting the needs of the nonhuman world alongside—not beneath—the needs of humanity (Schlosberg 2019; Wienhues 2020). Such a view has gained traction among philosophers, and it has been advocated by Green parties in several countries (as well as being integral to indigenous cosmologies, as gestured towards in the chapters by Dieckmann and Sullivan this volume). Now and in the future, it needs to become a top priority of all actors—political, economic and social—and more explicitly a part of climate negotiations. Because the growth model of capitalism as practiced up to now is premised on perpetual extraction of resources from nature, doing this will inevitably require an alternative global economic paradigm. Climate negotiations intended to address the climate crisis effectively cannot avoid this challenging reality.

Environmental Justice

Addressing the climate crisis effectively must also involve concerted and successful efforts to eliminate environmental injustices experienced by people within states. This means that climate negotiations will have to work out agreement on how to facilitate this for real. Climate justice from this perspective would, at least, aim to prevent and alleviate the impacts of climate-changing pollution on disadvantaged communities (Bullard 2000; Nesmith et al. 2021). Much as poor and minority communities have always been the dumping grounds for society's waste and the places where the most-polluting industries have been located, climate change and the pollution that causes it are already harming poor communities, whether they be favelas that are washed away by landslides and storm surges, or rural regions and coastal villages that must endure the impacts of fossil fuel extraction.

Social and Distributive Justice

Addressing the climate crisis effectively will require that other injustices in societies be alleviated (Preston et al. 2014; Chancel 2020). Social injustice and economic inequity, with poor, minority and underrepresented members of society suffering the consequences when power and resources are concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and the well-connected, create the conditions for perpetuating climate injustice and inequity. Thus, climate negotiations must do more not just to pay lip service to, for example, the plight of the world's poor, racial and ethnic minorities, and indigenous peoples; the negotiations must also reach agreement to genuinely end their plight and to more fairly share the world's resources (including financial ones) so that they can have an active role in addressing the climate crisis. This sort of thing has been advocated by socialists and others for a very long time, but of course it has not been implemented widely because it challenges accepted notions of power and supposedly free-market economics. Achieving social and distributive justice, as part of realising holistic climate justice, would also require the world's affluent individuals to temper their passions for consuming large quantities of stuff they do not need. None of this will be easy, not least because the climate negotiations themselves lack the official remit to deal with many of these issues. Nevertheless, negotiators ought not to shy away from them if they are to make real progress.

International Justice

Addressing the climate crisis effectively will require a fair and equitable international distribution of the burdens and benefits associated with climate change (Shue 2014; Okereke 2018). For many states, climate change is as much a matter of international (in)justice as it is one of environmental change. From this perspective, affluent states need to act aggressively to implement the principle of common but differentiated responsibility that was codified in the seminal climate convention three decades ago and which has been invoked at each conference of the parties in word—and largely ignored in practice—ever since. International climate justice requires a fairer distribution of power and resources internationally so as to give the least well-off states the ability to negotiate on a relatively equal footing, and it requires that the injustices

associated with climate change suffered by states and their citizens, most obviously the costs and suffering that accompany the impacts of climate change, be ended (or, more realistically, greatly mitigated) and adequately compensated. This conception of climate justice is largely an extension of ideas about the need for international justice among states that have been argued by leaders, diplomats and scholars for most of the post-war period. International injustices that have existed for a century and more are multiplied by climate change.

Global Justice

There is another form of climate justice that is less commonly discussed in climate negotiations. It is a type that might be labelled as cosmopolitan in the sense that it is about the needs, rights, responsibilities and obligations of *all actors around the world*, encompassing state actors (as with the forms of climate justice within and among states mentioned above) but also involving non-state actors, including individuals. After all, the proximate cause of the climate crisis was, is and will be the behaviours of individuals, whether those behaviours result in greenhouse gas pollution directly, such as when driving a car, or indirectly, such as when consuming things whose production, transport and/or disposal result in such pollution. The notion here is that *all capable actors, regardless of where they are* (whether in rich countries or poor), ought to be acting to address climate change effectively. This means, for example, that people who consume more things than they need ought to refrain from doing so, and those who are capable of aiding others affected by climate change ought to do so. Put another way, in addition to requiring action on the common but differentiated responsibilities (bearing in mind respective capabilities) of states, holistic climate justice also requires action on the common but differentiated responsibilities (bearing in mind respective capabilities) of individuals (among other actors), regardless of where they live, too. Thus, while affluent people in the Global North have obligations to act on climate change, so do affluent people living in the Global South. For climate justice to be truly holistic and to aid in effectively addressing the climate crisis, it needs to include this *global* form of justice (Harris 2016; Dietzel 2019; Moss and Umbers 2020).

Prospects for Radical Action

None of the forms of climate justice outlined above, except, possibly, the last one, are unusual in any way. They have either been discussed since the earliest climate negotiations or at least promoted by activists and described by scholars for just as long. But all of these forms of climate justice have been practiced in the breach. Consequently, while propounding them is not at all revolutionary, to *implement* them, and perhaps even to approach negotiations in such a way as to assume that they should and must be implemented on the ground as soon as possible, would be. Just such a revolution is essential if coming climate negotiations are to achieve what must be, given the scale of the climate crisis, their supposed objectives: at minimum, to quickly reverse trends in greenhouse gas emissions, rapidly decarbonise the global economy, and, finally, take robust action without further delay to enable adaptation everywhere to the impacts of climate change that cannot be avoided. Negotiating holistic climate justice would help to create the conditions for making all of that possible.

Holistic climate justice amounts to making the world fairer and more equitable. That might seem to be idealistic, even fanciful, and certainly historical precedent would support such a sceptical view. But historically the world has not faced a threat as grave as climate change. The time has finally come when the fates of societies will depend on whether there are serious attempts to implement varieties of justice that remove incentives to live unsustainably and enhance the conditions that allow people easily to live in ways that mitigate climate change and its impacts. Action to achieve these forms of climate justice, and thereby to mitigate the climate crisis, must be, by definition, radical—that is, thorough and far-reaching. The need for radical action derives, very simply, from the failure to take modest action over the past several decades as governments and other actors have responded to climate change at a glacial pace while global warming and climate change, not to mention the pollution causing them, have sprinted toward catastrophe.

While rapid movement toward realising all forms of climate justice is essential (the fact that they can never be fully realised is no excuse for not doing all that is possible to make them so), a good place to focus is on ecological justice. That is because everything arguably arises from it.

If we treat the environment, including non-humans, justly, we thereby protect the environment upon which humans depend. But ecological justice cannot be achieved without treating humans justly, too. People trying to survive, and even people who just want their fair share of the economic pie, are not about to prioritise environmental stewardship if they do not perceive a very clear and present stake in doing so. Likewise, nation states are not about to protect the environment if they feel the same way vis-à-vis other states, so we need international justice, too. We need global justice as well because it captures the realities of climate change: ultimately, people cause it through their behaviours (to wit: if all humans dropped dead this week from a pandemic, new anthropogenic greenhouse gas pollution would immediately cease).

Conclusion

Climate change is an environmental problem, obviously. It is a political problem, locally, nationally and internationally. It is a social problem and, at its foundation, a human problem. But perhaps most of all it is a problem of justice, of treating others—other states, other communities, other races and genders, other individuals and other creatures (and their ecosystems) more fairly and equitably. The climate crisis is a crisis of injustice. Solving the climate crisis requires implementing climate justice (see Harris 2019). Whether climate negotiations can make that happen is an open question. Whether they try much harder to do so cannot be.

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