

Climate Justice is not a Commodity

Article by Jake Fremantle

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A dominant view of climate justice advocates for richer nations to pay developing ones to do the work of “solving” climate change. But this renders climate justice a mere commodity, and perpetuates the longstanding global division of labour, class disparity, and the north-south flow of value.

The question of who should pay for climate change is one of the most pressing debates of our time. For many moral philosophers, the answer seems to be easy: the rich, of course, should pay. Why? Rich nations, as well as individuals, overwhelmingly caused climate change; they benefit the most from the economic system that drives it; and they can afford to pay for it.

What form will this payment take? Options include payment through green investment opportunities, taxation on polluting activities, or even reparations (returning stolen colonial wealth). The first two are examples of an economisation of climate justice, which assumes that payment is ensured by creating the correct economic incentives to encourage capitalist buy-in. The “just transition” would thus be achieved through economic policies that direct money towards tackling climate change and ensuring green jobs.

However, the rich don't appear willing to pay. A pledge made in 2009 for developed countries to spend 100 billion dollars on financing emissions reductions and climate adaptation in developing countries has been missed. And although increased financial commitments were secured at COP28, the bulk of climate funding committed by global north countries, particularly in the EU, is spent internally on securing their citizens against the worst effects of the climate crisis.

Leaders in the global south and climate activists continue to push for funding, and for good reason. The continuous expropriation and exploitation constitutive of capitalism mean that communities lack the resources required to protect themselves. In such a context, financial investment becomes a lifeline. But this interpretation of “climate justice” needs greater scrutiny.

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Much has already been said about the creation of green jobs in the global north based on continued political domination of, and economic and geophysical extraction from, the global south. However, the matter of payments for climate solutions (whatever they may be) from the global north to the global south has been less discussed.

The emphasis on a monetary transfer implies that richer nations and individuals can simply pay others to do the actual labour of “solving” climate change. In other words, the rich play the role of patron, while recipient countries do the hard work to reverse the global north's destructive legacy.

Financialised justice

While the struggles of the climate justice movement to secure money are understandable in a context in which finance is king, work is needed to ensure that capitalist social relations do not dictate political horizons and continue to colonise the global south. Indeed, the climate justice movement must challenge the system that makes green finance appear essential.

The call for the rich to pay for climate change is neither wrong because of who it apportions blame to, nor because of its commitment to redistributing resources. Rather, the assumption that climate justice involves payment renders climate justice a mere commodity to be bought. In the process, its purchaser is given control and credit. The notion of payment may be interpreted in non-financial ways, but it is undeniable that finance and investment dominate the current discourse on climate justice. In light of this, climate justice groups must go further, centring on the ability of communities to live free from capitalism and colonialism.

In keeping finance central to justice (and to our future) such proposals assume that the social structures that underpin the global economy – and which are currently driving climate change – will persist. Climate justice becomes a transfer between those who pay and those who are paid. Even if this payment is framed as a form of reparation, we cannot escape the question of agency. Where is the justice when those who created and benefited from the climate crisis retain their socio-economic position, while those who have suffered most are the ones paid to do the work of fixing the crisis? It is not justice, but a perpetuation of the current global division of labour, the class system, and the flow of value.

Where is the justice when those who created and benefited from the climate crisis retain their socio-economic position, while those who have suffered most are the ones paid to do the work of fixing the crisis?

It is well known that the impacts of climate change are differentiated through race, gender and class – interlinked modalities of exploitation and oppression. Climate injustices do not affect poor, racialised communities just because of where they live but also because of histories of colonialism and capitalism. The theft of resources, and racialised and gendered divisions of labour, went hand-in-hand with ecological destruction, producing the poverty and hegemony of a capitalist order that prevents alternatives. As climate change worsens, illnesses spread, mobility decreases, and individuals and communities are less able to prepare for natural disasters, the increased burden of social reproduction will fall on poor, racialised women. Climate change makes “feminised” work in poorer communities, such as water collection or food cultivation, harder due to increasing scarcity.

Climate injustice is a distributive injustice: its impacts are unequally felt. Meanwhile, those who have benefited from causing this crisis have mostly been those who have enjoyed an imperial mode of living that developed in the global north through capitalist colonialism. This mode of life is defined by reshaping the lives of others in the global south through externalising the worst social and ecological harms of capitalism, at least temporarily. It is no coincidence that the worst impacts of climate change are gendered and racialised: the generation of climate change, through colonialism and capitalism, was gendered and racialised.

Climate justice and agency

Historicising climate change in this way allows us to take literally philosopher Walter Benjamin's conception of history not as a series of distinct events, but as "one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble". As activist and writer [Brian Tokar](#) has pointed out, climate justice struggles were birthed by interlinking struggles that came before: the civil rights movement in the United States, land-based anti-colonial movements in the global south, and European anti-capitalist global justice movements. It is important, therefore, to treat the linkage of climate, race and gender justice as responses to ongoing historical processes, as opposed to novel demands arising only in the context of the growing saliency of climate change in western discourses. These supposedly "other" concerns are, in fact, climate justice's foundational currents.

These historical systems are why climate injustice is not simply a distributive injustice but also a procedural one: the ability to both cause and prevent climate change was captured unjustly by the wealthy and powerful. By failing to tackle the system that produces the distribution of destructive kinds of agency and control of natural resources, the payment account of climate justice fails to tackle this procedure. It fails to break us free from the political ecology of colonialism and capitalism.

Thus, climate justice is not simply about monetary transfers (although it may involve them), but a restructuring of the distribution and forms of agency: the control over one's work and access to land and resources. It is not simply enough that money moves; the social system that reproduces climate change must be dismantled and the work shared.

This shared role is important. The current models, whereby the wealthy can give money (through wages or charity) to those who will clean, mean that control over the response to climate change is retained. Justice breaks this logic of payee and payer. Justice would share agency and work.

The history of both climate change and climate justice highlights that any solution must respond to procedural and distributive injustices.

A pragmatic response?

A counterargument to this pragmatic view of climate justice is that we simply don't have enough time to undertake large-scale structural changes. After all, climate change presents an immediate existential threat, and radical social transformation is a long-term project. This view does not seek to undermine the importance of racial and gender justice struggles; it simply gives greater saliency to the immediacy, universality, and existential nature of the climate crisis.

This seems, on the surface, to be a reasonable point. It is still an argument for climate justice, but one that advocates working within existing social frameworks to avert climate disaster. It is not in favour of sacrificing large sections of the global population or allowing climate change to progress unchecked. It does, however, relegate race and gender injustices to secondary priorities. What this would look like is the mobilisation of resources within capitalist frameworks, premised on a return on investment, in a way that keeps people alive without addressing the underlying dynamics that made them vulnerable: not necessarily saving all, but not intending to sacrifice any.

However, there are criticisms of this pragmatic argument. The invocation of existential risks is highly contentious in that it threatens to obscure the supposedly non-existential harms that occur in the meantime, particularly to those who fall outside standards of productivity. Speaking of existential risk (a

threat theoretically so large it could destroy human civilisation) also makes the tackling of systemic processes seem trivial in comparison to the battle for human survival. In the process, the social conditions that produce that risk are de-centred.

This pragmatic argument, which de-prioritises historic injustice, imagines a universal subject in need of saving. This notion, that it is the human race which must come together to survive the climate crisis, erases historically produced differences in control over resources. Thinking that finance can act on behalf of humanity pushes us towards solutions premised on a single technocratic and colonial way of living in the world. A response that does not challenge the historic processes that produce the climate crisis would not be climate justice.

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Moreover, the most impactful action on climate change has not come from pragmatic actions in the halls of power. Rather, it has come from (often indigenous) resistance to colonialism and capitalism, through physically disrupting construction, legally challenging projects, or effecting procedural delays. Research into the effects of direct action targeting fossil fuel production (for example, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation's resistance to the Teck Frontier Tar Sands Oil Mine in Canada) and infrastructure (for example, resistance at Standing Rock to the Dakota Access Pipeline) shows that billions of tons of greenhouse gas emissions have been prevented as a result of such tactics of resistance.

These resistances centred on the worst affected by climate change. By reclaiming agency from capital, they challenged the logic that underpins the crisis. Climate justice in this sense actively produces forms of agency to secure a future for the exploited and oppressed by disrupting the ecocidal tendencies of capitalism. In the meantime, advocates of “pragmatic” responses continue to wait for investment to materialise, while the global north continues to fortify itself against the crisis.

Who cleans?

Returning to Benjamin's image of the rubble of history allows us to re-pose Françoise Vergès's question: Who cleans? The pragmatic climate justice argument risks asking the victims of those injustices to clean it up. This “work” must be understood to include not just the building of wind turbines or the mobilisation of financial resources, but also the essential but unseen day-to-day labour of those at the bottom of capital's global value chains: for instance, men, women, and children from marginalised communities tasked with the work of “earthcare”: tending to the biophysical systems that keep us alive in key ecosystems across the planet. Or “urban mining”: recycling essential minerals from waste products to be used in green technologies, the bulk of which is done by the urban poor in South America. For this work, they are poorly paid, if paid at all. And once it becomes a “national priority”, they regularly lose out to commercial interests (as happened to Uruguayan “waste-pickers”). Without solidarity throughout the supply chain, there will be no solution to distributive injustice.

Climate justice grows through internationalist support for those bearing the brunt of the crisis, through solidarity with and at pipeline protests, through resistance to deforestation, and through global struggle against capitalism and colonialism. At Standing Rock, a coalition resisted the Dakota Access Pipeline in solidarity with the Sioux Tribe. This included those who supplied food, clothing, and other resources to

keep the camp operational. In Lützerath, Germany, protests against the expansion of a coal mine sought to simultaneously save homes and prevent increased emissions.

These may not be examples of quick success, and local fights are not the only solution to global climate issues anyway. Rather, through their attempts to save homes and protect ways of living they direct us towards social relations premised on solidarity in the face of life-destroying production. Importantly, these struggles do not suggest that climate justice requires no monetary support. However, the process of transferring resources must be done on the terms of the exploited and oppressed.

Climate justice attempts to share resources communally in the face of both the climate crisis and state repression. It emerges when we join those currents identified by Tokar, in sites and moments of resistance. It is about ensuring people have access to the means of life without being dependent upon payment – it necessarily undermines capitalist social relations.

“Pragmatic climate justice” does not address the catastrophe, and nor does it deal with what produced it. It simply asks some people to sweep away the rubbish. Without addressing the social questions of climate change, we simply replicate racialised and gender-based injustices. Without addressing historic and social injustices we cannot address either the procedural or the distributive injustice at the heart of the climate crisis. Climate justice must produce a new logic of agency. It must allow those currently oppressed to become liberated.



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