
In Defense of both Climate and Justice: The Climate Justice Movement

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Today, we are living in a world that is on average about 1 degree warmer than the pre-industrial period. If we do not limit this human-caused temperature rise to around 1.5 degrees until the end of the century, various disasters we are already experiencing such as the rise in sea levels, melting of ice sheets and glaciers, extreme weather events, floods and inundations, drought and water scarcity will increase in intensity and scope and furthermore assume an irreversible condition.¹ Meanwhile, facing such a crisis, international climate policy managed under the United Nations umbrella, which has a history of about 30 years, has reached an impasse. While countries that carry the historical onus for the emergence of the climate crisis shirk from responsibility and from assuming the burden of fighting the climate crisis, countries of the Global South that are the most and worst affected by the climate crisis are unable to sufficiently participate in decision making processes and have their voices heard. The most concrete mechanism that has emerged out of the negotiations in the international arena is the 2015 Paris Agreement which sets forth the goal of keeping temperature rise below a total of 2 degrees – preferably 1.5 degrees. Even if countries meet their non-binding commitments within the framework of this agreement as they stand however, it is projected that temperature rise will reach between 2.7-3.7 degrees until the end of the century.² In sum, there is a long way to go and there is no time.

Foremost among alternatives that could provide a solution is a transition away from the multiparty climate management model where decisions are left to nation state administrations to a multi-center, multi-actor and multi-scale governance system. First among the potential bearers of the transformation in question is the Climate Justice Movement (CJM), which by assuming the advocacy of disadvantaged groups says that the climate crisis is at the same time a justice issue, presents different alternatives to replace the fossil fuel based growth economy, acts on various local-national-regional-global scales simultaneously and which defends participatory, deliberative practices and principles of democracy. While looking at the relatively “pluralist”, “colorful” and “promising” face of climate politics, this article presents an alternative to one of the greatest crises the planet is experiencing and analyzes the emergence and development phases of the Climate Justice Movement which has called for deep transformations in social, economic and political spheres.

NGO-centric struggle against climate change

The emergence of the climate movement dates back to 1989, when a number of environmental organizations that had been taking action on their own in an unconcerted manner regarding the climate crisis came together to form the global movement network called Climate Action Network (CAN). Founded to enable regular information exchange and coordination between NGOs on a global level and to develop common climate strategies, CAN predominantly consists of (semi-) professional, institutionalized environmental organizations which have their own resources. CAN has grown rapidly since its inception and continues to be the widest and most expansive climate movement network.³

CAN, which has for a long time represented the “reformist” or “moderate” wing of the climate struggle, had been describing climate change as an environmental issue caused by various human activities, primarily fossil fuel use. Bringing the technical and scientific aspect of the crisis to the fore, the majority of the solutions recommended by CAN in this period consisted of reforms and legal regulations that would restrict or abolish by stages fossil fuel use. In other words, CAN projected an image that was faithful to the framework of ecological modernization, arguing that climate change could be prevented through certain changes and improvements within the existing system.

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The climate justice movement network has grown by bringing together different ecological groups and organizations, in addition to local movement groups mobilized around the many issues of farmers and peasants, indigenous peoples and climate justice, Global Justice Movement groups that oppose capitalist globalization and labor union federations like the International Trade union Confederation (ITUC) that says the transition to the carbon-free economy must be made while defending workers' rights under a "Just Transition" program.

In this vein, it left the door open to a series of market-based policies like carbon markets, carbon offsetting and REDD+ and solutions based on opportunities provided by developing technology. The fundamental strategy it adopted meanwhile, has been to try to get an internationally "binding" and "ambitious" deal signed by influencing the yearly *UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP)* through activities like lobbying, informing the public, symbolic actions and publishing scientific reports.⁴

The transformation created by the Climate Justice framework

On the other hand, the number of movement organizations and activists who found CAN's attitude and actions to be "moderate" and "ineffective" and claimed it did not sufficiently tend to the issues of the Global South were on the increase.⁵ Different groups and organizations from both the Global North and the Global South who voiced these criticisms began to come together from the early 2000s on and set out upon an effort to develop an approach that connects the climate crisis with various issues like poverty, indigenous rights, food and gender.⁶ About 30 groups and organizations that united around the climate justice framework made their relations permanent in 2007 and established the alternative climate movement network called Climate Justice Now! (CJN!). CJN! has had a heterogeneous structure since its inception; there are various actors within CJN! from both the Global North and the Global South. The climate justice movement network has grown by bringing together different ecological groups and organizations, in addition to local movement groups mobilized around the many issues of farmers and peasants, indigenous peoples and climate justice, Global Justice Movement groups that oppose capitalist globalization and labor union federations like the International Trade union Confederation (ITUC) that says the transition to the carbon-free economy must be made while defending workers' rights under a "Just Transition" program.⁷

As per the climate justice framework, CJN! has been treating the climate crisis as beyond a technical issue; as a multifaceted problem with social, economic and political causes and consequences. The

“climate justice” frame communicates that the climate crisis has emerged historically through a combination of economic growth, industrialization, capitalism and colonialism and relatedly that there are many inequalities and injustices at the root of the crisis. In turn, the effects of the climate crisis are not distributed equally either; disadvantaged and vulnerable societies/communities are exposed to the destructive effects of the disasters being experienced in more intense and violent forms. Attention is drawn to the “historical responsibilities” of Northern countries, which have released the highest rate of carbon into the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrialization process. While it is reminded that Southern societies –leaving aside upper classes and elites– have made almost no contribution to the emergence of the climate crisis, these societies are experiencing the effects of the climate crisis in the worst and gravest manner. Economic growth and the culture of overconsumption are criticized, along with the existing climate governance model, for being anti-democratic and exclusionary. Meanwhile, market and technology-based climate actions and policies most emphasized by political decisionmakers as the remedy are characterized as “false solutions”.

According to CJN! and other climate justice advocates, the solution lies in numerous deep changes to be made in the dominant economic, political and social system. Some of the proposals advocated for are as listed as follows: Payment of the climate debt through transfer of financial resources from the North to the South; preventing excessive and unnecessary consumption especially in the Northern countries in general and by elites in the South; implementing rights-based natural reserve protection policies that accommodate the rights of indigenous peoples; realizing the transition to renewable energy in a decentralized, just form that will ensure energy democracy; ensuring food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture with small producers at the center, etc. Additionally, in order to ensure poverty and other injustices are overcome during the struggle against the climate crisis, a series of alternative social and economic models such as collective management of the commons and degrowth are also being advocated for.⁸

The first time that groups and organizations advocating for the climate justice framework made a show of force was in 2009 at the Copenhagen COP 15 Summit. During this summit which was deemed to be of critical importance, while CJN! and Climate Justice Action (CJA), which is another climate justice movement network formed by European ecological organizations, presented themselves on the streets of Copenhagen through various protest actions,

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CAN was making efforts to influence official negotiations “inside”. Despite all the undertakings of the climate movement that consisted of two wings with almost no connection and relation with each other, however, a new climate treaty that was hoped for did not get signed at COP 15.⁹

Right after the disappointment that took place in Copenhagen, the climate movement began to undergo a transformation. The climate justice wing of the movement continued to expand and deepen its networks through various actions and meetings. The World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth organized in 2010 in the city of Cochabamba in Bolivia that was attended by about 30 thousand people negotiated around many issues ranging from anti-colonialism to indigenous peoples, discussing different dimensions of the climate justice framework.¹⁰ Meanwhile, CAN started to mention the injustices suffered by the Global South more frequently through initiatives such as the Southern Capacity Development Program and increasingly espoused the climate justice framework.¹¹ At the COP 21 where the Paris Agreement was signed in 2015, the two wings that made up the climate movement had by then formed stronger ties. Climate justice was now becoming the main framework that encompasses the entire movement.

After COP 21 however, the climate justice movement began to follow a different strategy. Believing that focusing solely on COP Summits was no longer sufficient, activists concentrated on organizing campaigns and actions, sustaining them on local and national scales. Many climate justice actions and campaigns were organized, such as the struggle carried out in the USA against Keystone XL and the North Dakota Pipeline (NDP), the Break Free From Fossil Fuels campaign that involved simultaneous actions in various places of the world in 2016 and the Ende Gelände coal mine occupation in Germany. While these examples may at first appear to be actions that took place at the local level, they were carried out with the support of the transnational climate justice solidarity network, which among others, included organizations that were members of CAN.

New generation climate movement groups

At the end of the 2010s, the world met a new generation of climate movement groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), Sunrise Movement and #FridaysForFuture (FFF) which spread and gained visibility in a rapid manner. These groups, which provided new momentum to the climate movement contain different characteristics than the previous climate movement groups and organizations in terms of the profiles of their participants, forms of action and frameworks of meaning they established.

First of all, predominantly high school and university student youths who have not previously taken part in a social movement make up the vast majority of activists in these groups.¹² Children and youths who do not yet officially have the right to political participation are mobilizing in order to speak about the climate crisis and influence policies. Young climate activists are expressing that their future is being jeopardized by the previous generation, emphasizing the notion of “intergenerational justice”. In other words, future generations which are said will be harmed by the climate crisis are moving beyond the position of undefined objects and are taking the stage as subjects pursuing their right to life.¹³

While new generation climate groups make reference to climate justice in their discourse and demands, as distinct from CJN! and other groups advocating for climate justice, they do not dwell on the social, economic and political causes and consequences of the climate crisis in a detailed fashion. While calling for climate justice in general, they do not speak much of alternative solution proposals. The climate crisis is described by FFF and XR as a “moral” issue. According to this perspective, all differences of political movement, identity and ideologies must be set aside in the climate crisis struggle. In other words, by moving beyond existing political positions and distinctions, these movements are seeking the possibilities of a mobilization that goes beyond (conventional) politics.

Another discerning feature of new generation climate movement groups, is that they predominantly act at the national scale. These groups address their demands to decisionmakers at the national/local levels and demand of governments that they implement policies concerning the climate crisis as soon as possible. For example, XR explains its demands addressed to the governments as a plain list consisting of the articles “declaring a climate emergency”, “taking immediate action” and “creating a Citizens’ Assembly beyond (conventional) politics”.¹⁴

Additionally, new generation groups possess a repertoire of action consisting of acts of civil disobedience supported by innovative elements. For example, among the primary purposes for which Gail Bradbrook and Roger Hallam of Britain founded XR is to mobilize at least 3.5% of the population in societies around the issue of climate change using Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King’s civil disobedience teachings in order to reach a “critical mass” and carry the movement to a point where it has enough mass support to have an impact. In order to achieve this, they are improving many forms of civil disobedience actions with new elements and putting them into practice. For example, XR activists frequently use the method of occupying public space that they borrowed from the Occupy movements that took place in the first half of the 2010s.¹⁵ Through the dead-ins with theatrical elements that they perform at these occupations, they are alluding to the “6th Mass Extinction” risk.¹⁶

The Sunrise Movement which also predominantly consists of youth, meanwhile, has certain differences compared to the others in terms of the frames of meaning and forms of action. First, they pursue the goal of directly influencing institutional politics through methods such as supporting candidates who do not receive any financial support from fossil fuel companies, promise to fight the climate crisis and defend renewable energy in elections and running their electoral campaigns.¹⁷ Additionally, they perform actions such as sit-downs for mechanisms related to the climate crisis to be formed in the Senate and they carry out negotiations with relevant authorities. Another difference of the Sunrise Movement is that they produce and present concrete solutions concerning the resolution of the climate crisis. The group is also among the most important advocates of the Green New Deal program which has entered the political agenda of the USA and later Europe, aiming to open new fields of employment, increase public spending on education, health and other basic human needs and to defend the rights of various disadvantaged groups such as indigenous peoples, black people and immigrants.¹⁸

These new generation climate groups which made quite a splash are not without their critics. Some of the criticisms they face are that their participants predominantly consist of white, middle class, Northern youths, that they do not adequately present the alternatives when demanding urgent resolution of the climate crisis, and that the “scientific” framework they employ weakens the political side of the issue.¹⁹ It must also be added that while in the beginning they positioned themselves differently than the “old” climate movement groups, shortly after their emergence, they started to act together with organizations and groups within the wider climate movement network.

In lieu of a conclusion

The climate movement is growing every day, increasing its scope and impact with the joining of new actors and frames of meaning which influence and transform each other. It is possible to see the increasing impact of the movement in the declaration of a “climate emergency” by 1768 national and local governments/parliaments from 30 countries including Scotland, Ireland, France, the UK and Canada, upon calls led by XR. Meanwhile, the climate crisis has claimed its place on the agenda of official negotiations, if only on a limited, discursive level. The pressure that the climate movement has exerted on institutional politics mostly by confronting policy makers, is largely responsible for all these gains up to now.

On the other hand, as the social movements literature shows, local and national governments can turn into allies of the movement as much as its opponents. With its new approaches and alternative solution proposals, the climate justice movement is candidate to becoming one of the most

important actors of an alternative system of governance that can allow climate politics to extricate itself from the predicament it has found itself in. This in turn, renders inevitable the inclusion of the climate justice movement into decision-making mechanisms in order to stop the climate crisis in all its aspects. For heeding the social movements that instantly and continuously voice the needs and demands of society in general will prevent institutional politics from functioning in a manner that is disconnected from the base. Regular and frequent relations to be established with the climate justice movement which advocates the rights of disadvantaged groups will allow policymakers to identify the issues, needs and expectations in society with accuracy and certainty. The path will thereby be cleared for climate policies created according to real needs to be further embraced and rendered effective. Additionally, the opportunity to create policies that can remove many sources of injustice, from poverty to marginalization, simultaneously with the climate crisis, will be seized.

In cities as well, which are becoming increasingly important in the climate struggle, it is possible and necessary for local administrations to make the climate justice movement and communities that they defend into partners to their local climate policies by using mechanisms like city councils and neighborhood assemblies and implementing applications such as participatory budgets. By preparing the climate action plans which are the climate policy roadmaps of cities on the basis of a climate justice framework, an important threshold will have been passed towards organizing a climate struggle that develops from the bottom-up. This will also mean that the participatory and deliberative democracy model which functions from the bottom-up by uniting localities will have been experienced. This in turn provides us the possibility to overcome the crisis of representative democracy today.

Notes

- 1 IPCC, 2018: Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report. [<https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>]
 - 2 <https://www.wri.org/blog/2017/11/4-reasons-countries-enhance-their-ndcs-2020#:~:text=The%20current%20NDCs%2C%20by%20contrast,compatible%20with%20the%20Paris%20goals.>
 - 3 As of today, there are about 1,100 NGOs from more than 120 countries that are members under the CAN umbrella. For more information: <http://www.climatenetwork.org/about/members>
 - 4 Garrelts, H. 2014. "Organization Profile - Climate Action Network International" in M. Dietz and H. Garrelts (eds.) Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement, Routledge, 237-239.
 - 5 Hadden, J. 2015. Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - 6 Hadden, J. 2015. Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - 7 Dietz, M. 2014. "Organization profile - Climate Justice Now!", in M. Dietz and H. Garrelts (eds.) Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement, Routledge, 240-242.
 - 8 Climate Justice Now!, 2007. What's Missing From the Climate Talks? Justice! Press Release. https://www.foei.org/press_releases/archive-by-subject/climate-justice-energy-press/whats-missing-from-the-climate-talks-justice; Climate Justice Now!, 2008. Climate Justice Now! Principles. <https://climatejusticenow.org/principles/>; Della Porta, D. and L. Parks, 2014. "Framing processes in the climate movement: from climate change to climate justice", in M. Dietz and H. Garrelts (eds.) Routledge Handbook of the Climate Change Movement, Routledge, 237-239.
 - 9 Hadden, J. 2015. Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - 10 Tokar, B. 2018. "On Social Ecology and the Movement for Climate Justice", in S. G. Jacobsen (eds.) Climate Justice and the Economy: Social Mobilization, Knowledge and the Political, Publisher: Routledge, 168-187.
 - 11 Cassegard, C. and H. Thörn, "Climate Justice, Equity and Movement Mobilization" in C. Cassegard, L. Soneryd, H. Thörn and A. Wettergren (eds.) Climate Action in a Globalizing World: Comparative Perspectives on the Environmental Movements in the Global North, Routledge, 33-56.
 - 12 According to the results of a study on the simultaneous student strike actions that took place on March 15, 2019 in 13 European cities, 45% of the FFF demonstrators on average consisted of youths aged 14 to 19. Wahlström, Mattias, Piotr Kocyba, Michiel De Vydt and Joost de Moor (Eds.) (2019). Protest for a future: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European cities. https://protestinstitut.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/20190709_Protest-for-a-future_GCS-Descriptive-Report.pdf
 - 13 The founder of FFF, Greta Thunberg who has in the recent period become one of the most known faces of the climate movement had warned world leaders whom she accused of stealing her "childhood" and "dreams" at a speech she made at the United Nations in 2019 with the words "as the future generations, we will have our eyes on you". (<https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/activist-speeches/>).
 - 14 Extinction Rebellion, 2019. This Is Not A Drill: An Extinction Rebellion Handbook. Penguin Books.
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15 For example, XR activists blocking the passages on the Thames River in London in November 2018 and the occupation of 5 city squares in April 2009, again in London, may be cited.

16 Kinniburgh, C., 2020. "Can Extinction Rebellion Survive?", *Dissent*, Winter, [<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/can-extinction-rebellion-survive>]

17 8 candidates whose electoral campaigns were run by the Sunrise Movement were elected to the US House of Representatives in 2018, with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez among them, who is on the left wing of the Democratic Party.

18 <https://www.sunrisemovement.org/gnd-strategy>

19 Evensen, D., 2019. "The rhetorical limitations of #FridaysForFuture movement", *Nature and Climate Change*, 9:428-429. Walker, C., 2020. "Uneven Solidarity: The School Strikes For Climate Global and Intergenerational Perspective", *Sustainable Earth*, 3(5).

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