

Current Debates in Climate Justice

Block 1. Preparatory Session 04.03.2025 | Public Panel Discussion 18.03.2025

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Overview

Climate justice as a concept is debated in different contexts and from diverse perspectives. The first block of the colloquium “Climate Justice: Basel in the World” explored ongoing debates in the field of climate justice around issues like responsibility, legality, policy, ethics and activism. One central debate concerns how climate injustices can be addressed through mitigation, adaptation and compensation. Some scholars and practitioners emphasize legal action, such as climate litigation, as a crucial tool for achieving climate justice. Others argue that while litigation can create critical groundwork, true climate justice requires activism for systemic changes. Another key debate focuses on the ethical implications of climate change, particularly for the nonhuman world.

Prep Session

Basil Bornemann from the University of Basel’s Sustainability Research Group explained in the prep session that the debate about climate justice historically emerged from different sources, such as the concept of environmental justice. Used by both scholars and social actors, climate justice serves as an umbrella term for diverse perspectives and practices. While somewhat ambiguous, the concept spans discussions on the causes and drivers of climate change, its impacts and effects, governance and policy, communities and actors, principles and rules as well as strategies and practices. Climate justice is applied in philosophical reasoning, empirically backed arguments as well as concrete actions on the streets.

Readings

The readings reflect important ongoing debates in the field of climate justice. The article by Moellendorf (2015) discusses different concerns of justice that arise due to climate change. The author explores how mitigation policies can reduce the exposure to climate change, adaptation policies can provide resources for protection against climate change and compensation policies can financially compensate people that have suffered due to climate change. The second reading by Palmer (2011) discusses climate justice regarding the nonhuman world, arguing that the ethical implications of climate change for nonhumans are very unclear and not entirely negative, as climate change will also produce entirely new organisms and benefit some species, ecosystems and individual organisms. Palmer contends that much more research is needed to assess the effects of climate change on the nonhuman world. Foerster (2019) examines two different avenues of private climate change litigation targeting corporations as tools to remedy climate injustices. The first avenue, Corporate Climate Liability Litigation, aims to hold companies legally accountable for their climate impacts and to oblige them to compensate the victims. The second avenue, Corporations Law Litigation, uses corporate law to push businesses towards climate action by requiring them to address financial risks linked to climate change. Finally, the essay by Gordon (2024) deals with climate justice in light of the recent criminalization of protest. The author contrasts what the state defines as “critical infrastructure” with the importance of strengthening “infrastructures of care” – forms of mutual aid, solidarity and collective care that sustain movements defending land, water and the environment.

Panel Discussion

The panel discussion brought together different perspectives on ongoing debates regarding climate justice. Simon Kräuchi from the University of Fribourg explored climate justice in terms of historical justice and distributive justice, linking these to three important policy areas where climate justice might apply: mitigation, adaptation as well as loss and damages. Philosopher Angela Martin spoke about the role of animals in climate justice, arguing that reducing or eliminating animal products is a key leverage point to addressing climate change. She also highlighted that animals are often overlooked victims of climate change, as not all animals will be able to adapt easily. Next, Joie Chowdhury from the Center for International Environmental Law discussed climate litigation as an instrument to put pressure on states and corporations. She argued that while litigation can lay critical groundwork and provide an important foundation

for accountability, it must be combined with climate movements to drive change. Johannes Wendland from the Hilfswerk der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche Schweiz talked about a specific case where four fishermen and women from Indonesia decided to take legal action against Holcim which is the world's largest cement manufacturer. He highlighted that litigation cases can not only spark legal debates about compensation, but also influence public and political debates. Lastly, a politically engaged person from WaldStattRepression, a Swiss Climate Activist Group, spoke about the occupation of a forest near Zurich and about the repression activists faced by the police and the state. During the following panel discussion between the participants, some emphasized the need for legal action as a tool of resistance, while others warned against relying on a system that upholds the status quo. While law can create evidence and hold corporations accountable, climate justice requires broader system change and intersectional activism.

Moellendorf, D. (2015). Climate Change Justice. *Philosophy Compass*, 10(3), 173-186. doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12201

Palmer, C. (2011). Does nature matter? The place of the nonhuman in the ethics of climate change. In D. G. Arnold (Ed.), *The Ethics of Global Climate Change* (pp. 272-291). Cambridge University Press. doi.org/10.1017/CB09780511732294.014

Foerster, A. (2019). Climate Justice and Corporations. *King's Law Journal*, 30(2), 305-322. doi.org/10.1080/09615768.2019.1645447

Gordon, C. (2024). Criminalizing Care: Environmental Justice Under Political and Police Repression. *Environmental Communication*, 18(1-2), 138-145. doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2023.2296835