

History and Theory of Climate Justice

Block 2. Preparatory Session 25.03.2025 | Public Panel Discussion 01.04.2025

A SUMMARY BY LINA DIMACKIE

This second block focuses on the theoretical framework and evolution of the climate justice movement, exploring how various fields and diverse perspectives shape its development. By engaging with different texts and guest speakers, the broad and interconnected nature of climate justice becomes clear. The panel discussion on climate justice brought together individuals with diverse backgrounds, highlighting various facets of the movement and the intersections between activism, legal frameworks, and different social movements in the ongoing fight for a just and sustainable future.

Dr. Payal Parekh, a climate strategist, shared valuable insights into the evolution of climate justice, emphasizing the work of sociologist Robert Bullard. In the 1980s, Bullard's research on toxic landfill sites in Texas revealed a clear racial disparity in their placement. This research became a foundation stone for the environmental justice movement, which is often traced back to the 1982 Warren County protests in North Carolina. These protests marked a turning point in linking environmental harm to systemic inequalities, revealing the intersection of race, class, and environmental degradation (Colins et al., 2014). Dr. Parekh pointed out that this was not a new concept, as indigenous communities had long recognized such links, but it was during the 1980s that these ideas gained wider mainstream attention.

Climate justice emerged as an extension of environmental justice, which was initially created to address the disproportionate environmental risks faced by marginalized communities. Rooted in the intersection of civil rights and environmentalism, environmental justice redefined the concept of 'environment' to include everyday spaces where people live, work, and play. It advocates for social equity alongside environmental sustainability, pushing

beyond the narrow concept of a 'distant nature' that must be protected (Colins et al., 2014). Parekh emphasizes that the shift from environmental justice to climate justice became more apparent in global events like the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, where the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" emerged. This concept highlighted the need for both rich and poor countries to take responsibility for addressing climate change. She stresses that climate justice requires more than just policy changes, but it necessitates a radical transformation in humanity's relationship with the planet. Movements like the Green New Deal and the idea of Buen Vivir advocate for alternative sustainable and inclusive ways of life, emphasizing the need for systemic change.

Marta Zamorska, an expert in climate justice and private law, focused on the accountability of corporations in the face of climate change, another aspect of climate justice. According to her insights it is the pervasive and delayed nature of climate change, where the long-term effects of emissions are felt far into the future, as well as its public nature, where individual action seems ineffective due to the scale of the problem, that creates a challenge when tackling climate justice through the legal route.

The burdens of climate change are felt unequally, particularly in the Global South and among racialized communities in the Global North. Climate justice calls for systemic transformation, dismantling the colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal structures that perpetuate climate injustices (Sultana, 2021). Zamorska mentions the Kivalina case in Alaska, where residents sued ExxonMobil for damages related to climate-induced erosion. Despite the apparent connection between fossil fuel emissions and the community's displacement, the

court ruled that there was insufficient causal evidence to hold the company accountable. This case illustrates the challenges in private law when it comes to establishing liability for climate harm. On the other hand, she also points to more promising developments, such as the *Milieudefensie* case against Shell, where the court ruled that the company must not only reduce its emissions but also address the emissions of its customers. This case represents a significant step forward in holding corporations accountable, which is the emphasis of transformative climate justice. By addressing the root causes of climate injustice, such as fossil fuel extraction and colonial exploitation, this approach advocates for inclusive governance, strengthened legal frameworks, and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems and marginalized voices (Sultana, 2021).

Roberto, an activist involved in collective climate justice movements with Greenpeace, shared his experiences with occupations, blockades, and civil disobedience. His work in Switzerland focuses on holding institutions accountable for their role in climate change, including major banks and corporations. He emphasized the role of grassroots movements in resisting the status quo, pointing to the Zapatista's influence and the need for solidarity with the global South. Roberto's activism is rooted in the belief that the existing political and economic systems are fundamentally flawed. He criticized the current environmental movement as predominantly led by white, upper-middle-class individuals, noting that these movements often fail to include marginalized voices, particularly from rural and

low-income communities. Similarly, the authors of "From Urban Resilience to Abolitionist Climate Justice in Washington, DC" proposing an abolitionist climate justice framework argue that climate justice should center historical racisms, intersectional drivers of trauma, and an ethics of care practiced by those most at risk (Bratman et al., 2019). He also discussed the importance of reaching a broader audience beyond the traditional "climate justice bubble," recognizing that many people outside of these circles are still not fully engaged with the climate crisis. He also stressed the need for new tactics and narratives to break through political and social barriers.

The discussion concluded with a call for systemic change. Panelists agreed that the fight for climate justice must be linked to other movements, such as social justice, economic justice, and migration justice. Roberto proposed creating a grassroots political party that would be more inclusive and better represent the needs of marginalized groups. The panelists also emphasized the importance of creative, intersectional approaches to activism that could build solidarity across diverse communities. Ultimately, the speakers shared a vision of a world where climate justice is not only about reducing CO2 emissions but about radically transforming the systems that perpetuate inequality and environmental destruction. Finally, achieving climate justice will require collective effort, bold actions, and a willingness to challenge entrenched power structures, underlining the common conclusion of all the given texts.