

History and Theory of Climate Justice

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What is in a person's environment that is worth protecting? A swamp someone grew up near under threat of being 'developed?' A conservation park outside their city being encroached on by migrating families? A new variety of seed replacing a variety their family bred for generations? A community garden overgrown from neglect? For the environmental justice movement, this was a crucial question to answer: what is it that they were fighting for that differed from earlier conservationists? The environment for them was a good place for all to "live, work and play" (Novotny, 2000, as cited in Schlosberg and Collins, 2014 p.360). This emphasis on everyday life highlighted the unjust distribution of environmental burdens on disadvantaged communities. Similarly, a focus on environmental justice shows that while it is true that all of humanity faces climate-based burdens, it does not imply that these burdens have arisen or will affect all of humanity equally. Schlosberg and Collins (2014) describe the rise of the climate justice movement from existing environmental justice principles. They also delineate the ways in which climate justice is conceptualised: ethical debates in academia, targeted policies by elite non-governmental actors, and the deeply layered discourse arising from grassroots social movements.

Farhana Sultana (2021) illustrates the first approach by discussing the role insights from feminist scholarship could play in shaping collective action. The debate around usage of terms like Anthropocene, Plantationocene, Capitalocene in academic practice and their implications on describing the current epoch is another example (Schubert, 2025). Academic debates can seem aloof, but can be source of legitimacy and discuss the normative principles that should guide policy formation as well as their merits and drawbacks (Krächi, 2025; Moellendorf, 2015)

With the climate crisis already underway, the need for policy requirements for specific adaptation measures. Cyclone Idai wreaked havoc on Beira, Mozambique. While the World Bank committed to finance adaptation measures, the housing budget was not enough to cover all those affected. In this case, assessment of who is most vulnerable and, thus, deserving of funding is a humongous undertaking. Confusion on this matter led reconstruction to first be owner-driven, then guided by selected NGOs to have 'proper' reconstruction. When funds were handed over to the city, reconstruction was carried out in areas which had not been flooded in the name of city redevelopment (Schubert, 2025). Criteria for such policies needs to be meticulously detailed to assess needs to affected communities. For example, in Beira, fishing community land next to the coast was developed with these funds by the local government. The village was used to water flowing in and out of the land with changing tides. The 'development' led to waterlogging in the newly made houses, whereas previous constructions allowed for the flow of water (Schubert, 2025). Governance need not take such a top-down approach to adaptation, which ultimately does not serve the community appropriately. Climate justice needs to be considered with other forms of social justice to be effective and this requires the de-centring of existing actors with power in decision making spaces (Newell et al, 2021).

Grassroot movements allow stakeholders to voice their own concerns and seek reparations or empowerment for a safe and enriching place to live, work and play. This could take various forms as discussed by Parekh (2025), Zamorska (2025) and Roberto (2025): community led resistance like the Narmada Bachao Andolan in India; legal recourse through private law cases like that against Shell in the Hague District Court; or demands for legislation through sit-

ins and occupations like those conducted in Switzerland against financing fossil fuels. The presence of diverse voices in movements is vital for an exchange of ideas to take place and to allow for affected communities to specify the exact change they wish to see (Roberto, 2025). Parekh (2025) emphasised that spaces of resistance in affluent and majority white countries like Switzerland should be open and inclusive to participation of individuals who are not white, upper-middle class, or college educated. It is also important for activists to not remain contained in the bubble of their movement and be open to dialogues with people who do face threat from climate change but might not term it exactly as climate change: for example, a farmer who sees their crops failing due to change in temperature, but does not want to stop using a tractor that consumes diesel. A dialogue is possible on the common ground of changing temperatures, which may have positive

spillovers. The tractor need not be the main problem (Parekh, 2025; Roberto, 2025).

To go back to the original question, what then is worth protecting? Spaces that are habited by marginalised communities are often seen as 'empty:' so they do not receive funds required for the community to prosper, but they can be taken over by the State or any other powerful actor to be used for their own benefit outside of the habiting community (McKittrick, 2011). In the face of such circumstances, marginalised communities are not powerless, as evidenced by a variety of grassroots movements. Moving forward, the climate justice movement needs more grassroots efforts that question existing structures of power along with seeking to stop climate change. These are not distinct in the search for a good space for all to live, work and play.

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