



A Moment of Intersecting Crises: Climate Justice in the Era of Coronavirus

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Abstract

The author explores the nexus of ‘climate chaos’ and how this intersects with and exacerbates the top issues of our time—from immigration to public health to mass incarceration. She challenges us to think about the implications of these intersections for social justice and why policy makers need to stop considering the climate emergency as a siloed issue. Climate policy needs to be framed and rethought in an intersectional manner that centers equity, justice, and the creation of jobs.

Keywords Climate justice · Carbon tax · Pandemic · Jobs · Social justice · Communities · Coronavirus

For far too long, climate change has been incorrectly framed as a single issue, one separate from the numerous other crises we face. In 2019, as the presidential primary kicked off, Democratic National Committee Chair Tom Perez said that the Democratic Party would not host a debate centered on climate change, reasoning that it would be unfair to host a debate on a ‘single issue’. Similarly, climate solutions that go beyond the scope of simple decarbonization face stark criticism from both the left and right. In 2019, the *New York Times* editorial board questioned¹ whether addressing the climate crisis was ‘merely a cover for a wish-list of progressive policies and a not-so-subtle effort to move the Democratic Party to the left?’ Soon after, the *Washington Post* editorial board asserted² that policymakers should not ‘muddle’ decarbonization with social programmes that ‘divert money and attention from the primary mission’.

This attempt to divorce climate policy from social justice has become so widespread partly because of misguided and racist leadership within the environmental movement itself. Historically, prominent leaders of environmentalism in the United States—including John Muir, cofounder of the Sierra Club—were known to espouse racist views alongside their environmental advocacy. Muir wrote about the supposed laziness of Black ‘Sambos’ and described the Miwok, the

Indigenous people of Northern California and Yosemite, as ‘dirty’ and ‘altogether hideous’ (Johnson 2014).

In 1916, Madison Grant, another well-known conservationist (Purdy 2015), published *The Passing of the Great Race*, which Adolf Hitler went on to laud as his ‘bible’; the book has also influenced the hate speech of contemporary white supremacists (Serwer 2019). While the Sierra Club has since denounced the racist views of Muir,³ the racist origins of the environmental movement have had lasting legislative and political ramifications.

To this day, we see frontline communities repeatedly deprioritized in climate policy. For instance, environmental-justice communities were largely excluded (Komanoff 2008) from the drafting of the 2009 Waxman–Markey Bill—the closest we’ve ever gotten to passing federal climate legislation.

Furthermore, with the help of environmental-justice groups, New York State passed a historic climate bill in 2019,⁴ but when the final bill was signed into law, Governor Andrew Cuomo removed (Roberts 2019) key environmental-justice provisions that would have prioritized investments

¹ The Green New Deal Is Better Than Our Climate Nightmare, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/23/opinion/green-new-deal-climate-democrats.html>. Accessed 15 October 2020.

² Want a Green New Deal? Here’s a better one. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/want-a-green-new-deal-heres-a-better-one/2019/02/24/2d7e491c-36d2-11e9-af5b-b51b7ff322e9_story.html. Accessed 15 October 2020.

³ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/22/894343467/sierra-club-denounces-founder-john-muir-for-racism?t=1602767818471>. Accessed 15 October 2020.

⁴ <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2019/s6599>. Accessed 15 October 2020.

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in communities of color and protections for union workers. Even electeds who publicly claim to support climate action buy into the misconception that climate is a separate issue.

Regardless of regressive efforts by legislators, journalists, and some environmentalists to separate environmental issues from social justice, the reality is that climate change impacts every sector of the economy as well as every facet of our lives. With global emissions still increasing and on track to surpass 1.5 degrees of warming (Wilke 2019), we've already reached a point where climate-fueled planetary emergency is the context in which all other public-policy issues exist.

Climate chaos intersects with the top issues of our time—from immigration to public health to mass incarceration. And, of course, all of these intersections come with significant implications for racial justice.

It is not a coincidence that climate change disproportionately affects communities of color. Social science research has repeatedly shown that points of extraction (Needham 2014) and processing⁵ of fossil fuels almost always follow lines of socioeconomic and racial divides (Bullard 2008). Furthermore, climate-change-fueled wildfires and hurricanes do not impact all communities equally. This past summer, California deployed thousands of inmates (Fuller 2020)—disproportionately people of color who are denied access to basic necessities like housing and work—to fight wildfires that literally turned the sky orange.⁶ In Louisiana, Black and brown communities, many still grappling with the long-term impacts of Hurricane Katrina, bore the brunt of Hurricane Laura this past fall.⁷

These intersections are exacerbated and clarified by the uniquely turbulent moment we're living in, with a global pandemic wreaking havoc on communities across the globe. The pandemic has made more apparent the deeply interconnected nature of our well-being and the issues we face. To start with, research has shown that increasing temperatures can lead to increased transmission of infectious disease and animal-borne illnesses (Lustgarten 2020). Climate change impacts disease in numerous ways. For one, biodiversity loss increases disease transmission (Keesing et al. 2010), and the warming climate is reducing biodiversity at an alarming rate (Harvey 2018). Furthermore, increased global temperatures expand the geographic regions vulnerable to contagion (Lustgarten 2020), and can bring back old viruses that were previously frozen away. This happened in 2016, when a heat wave thawed permafrost leading to an anthrax

outbreak in nearby communities (Doucleff 2016). As climate change exacerbates the spread and frequency of infectious diseases, we can expect environmental-justice communities to be impacted more than others.

Many of the communities most affected by coronavirus are what some in the climate movement call 'frontline communities', i.e., communities living on the frontlines of poverty and pollution. Wealth and power cannot fully protect one from disease (as the recent White House coronavirus outbreak makes clear) (Margolin and Bruggeman 2020). However, who is affected by pandemics (and climate change) and to what extent they're affected is influenced by the power dynamics in society. To put matters into perspective: Reporting from the National Urban League found that Black Americans have been infected with coronavirus at three times the rate of white Americans,⁸ and are twice as likely to die from the virus. The communities hardest hit by coronavirus have been struggling with public health (Mulholland et al. 2020; Cha et al. 2020a, b), economic, and environmental-justice issues since long before coronavirus brought society to a halt. The pandemic has only exacerbated these conditions. Indeed, emerging research from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health has found a link between air pollution and the lethality of coronavirus.⁹ These findings are consistent with the lived reality on the ground in places like the Navajo Nation, prisons and ICE detention centers, and farmworker communities in California.

In June, the worst outbreak of coronavirus was in the Navajo Nation (Cheetham 2020). When coronavirus was first reported in the nation in mid-March, infection rates per capita quickly became the highest in the country compared with any individual state. Numerous factors led to the rapid spread: disproportionate rates of comorbidities like diabetes, heart conditions, and lung disease, as well as exposure to radiation from abandoned uranium mines. Limited access to healthcare resources also stymied relief efforts. Notably, the nation has been able to curb infection rates through a series of containment measures that led Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, to assert that the Navajo Nation's coronavirus response should serve as a model for the rest of the country.¹⁰

Another clear example of marginalized groups facing disparate harm during the pandemic is the country's

⁵ <https://www.naacp.org/climate-justice-resources/fumes-across-fence-line/>. Accessed 15 October 2020.

⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/09/10/san-francisco-orang-e-sky-california-wildfires-lon-orig-bks.cnn>.

⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/30/opinions/hurricane-laura-hurricane-katrina-15-anniversary-climate-justice-russell/index.html>.

⁸ <https://www.cidrap.umn.edu/news-perspective/2020/08/us-black-s-3-times-more-likely-whites-get-covid-19>.

⁹ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/air-pollution-linked-with-higher-covid-19-death-rates/>.

¹⁰ Fauci says Navajo Nation's COVID-19 response could be model for US. <https://www.koat.com/article/fauci-praises-navajo-nation-for-covid-19-response-says-nation-can-be-model-for-us/34102495>.



incarcerated population of more than two million people.¹¹ During the early months of the pandemic, coronavirus cases in federal and state prisons were almost six times higher than in the general population. Death rates were three times higher (Saloner et al. 2020). It's also likely that these numbers underestimate the prevalence of coronavirus in prisons, since some aren't testing or reporting cases at all (Van Beusekom 2020). Similarly, immigrants detained in ICE detention facilities have faced disproportionate exposure to coronavirus and systemic lack of access to basic measures of protection.¹² The disregard that the US government has shown toward the humanity and health of people in prisons, jails, and ICE custody is a human rights atrocity that will stain the country's history for generations to come.

The pandemic has also affected millions of farmworkers across the country, many of whom are already dealing climate-change-fueled wildfires (Mahoney 2020). For instance, at its peak of cases, Imperial County, California, an agricultural community on the border of Mexico and Arizona, had the highest per capita rate of cases in the entire state (Bottemiller et al. 2020). The farmworkers there faced a dystopian reality in which smoke from climate-change-fueled wildfires and a respiratory pandemic inhibited their ability to breathe. This isn't even mentioning the constant fear these farmworkers, many undocumented, live with due to our militarized and brutal immigration system. Such intersections—between the climate, coronavirus, Indigenous, criminal and immigrant justice—show why climate change cannot be separated from the other injustices affecting our world.

This empirical reality should shape the decisions of policymakers and lead them to craft climate policies that directly address the intersectionality of people's lives. Treating climate as a siloed issue is not only inaccurate analysis but also it leads to politically dangerous solutions, such as the 'carbon fundamentalist approach', which emphasizes market-based solutions for reducing carbon emissions at the expense of working-class people. Such an approach can have disastrous political and socioeconomic implications, as we've seen in Australia and France, where each government has pushed carbon taxes and faced significant public backlash.

In 2012, Australia introduced a carbon price of AU\$23 (€14.77) per metric ton as well as plans to transition to a full cap-and-trade programme to reduce emissions.¹³ Those plans never came to fruition, and their failure has since been cited as a textbook example of how *not* to introduce a carbon tax (Collins 2019). Although the carbon tax was

accompanied by some minor increases in welfare payments intended to offset its impact, the public largely rejected the tax perceiving it as an effort to kill jobs and further disempower the working class (Mercer 2011). Within 2 years of the carbon price being enacted, the Liberal–National Coalition opposed the incumbent party responsible for the tax and ran on a platform to 'axe the tax'. The anti-tax coalition decisively won. The whole debacle—rooted in a flawed and siloed approach to climate policy—ultimately proved politically costly and setback the climate movement in Australia for decades.

Similarly, in France, President Emmanuel Macron ran on a climate agenda and, in 2018, attempted to implement a carbon tax to reduce emissions and address climate change (Darby 2017). However, as in Australia, France's tax was met with fierce public opposition. Thousands of people, including many sharing concerns about climate change (Rubin and Sengupta 2018), took to the streets in what is now known as the 'yellow vests movement' (Cigainero 2018), protesting Macron's fuel tax, which disproportionately burdened the already marginalized working and middle classes, especially those in rural areas. Macron was forced to repeal the tax, and his party went on to lose their majority in parliament, no doubt in part due to the social unrest that the tax incited.¹⁴

The experiences of Australia and France make clear the shortcomings of climate policy that seeks to divorce climate change from the socioeconomic context in which we live. Although their circumstances somewhat differed, the constituencies of France and Australia both, in essence, rejected climate solutions that neglected the intersectionality of their lived experiences.

People in Australia, France, and all across the globe don't lead single-issue lives. Communities are affected by heat waves and wildfires at the same time as they are impacted by coronavirus, police brutality, ICE raids, and economic inequality. Our public policy must reflect this.

If we want to help people, our policies need to address the issues they confront in their daily lives. At a very basic level, the carbon taxes of Australia and France failed to do this, showing not only the economic limitations of siloed climate policy but also the political cost of such an approach. If we want to stop climate change, we have to find a way to do so that is both politically popular and resilient to pendulum swings of power.

Analysis of polling and public opinion shows that the most popular way to frame climate policy is in an intersectional manner that centers equity, justice, and the creation of jobs. Polling conducted in the US by Data for Progress, where I work, shows that a majority of voters support

¹¹ <https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>.

¹² <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/covid-19-escalating-ice-detention-centers-states-hit-highest-daily-records-and-ice>.

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-emissions/australia-plans-carbon-tax-from-2012-report-idUSTRE71B0DZ20110212>.

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52721153>.



climate policy that incorporates clean infrastructures, creates millions of jobs, and jobs and disproportionately invests in frontline communities. Furthermore, 56% of voters say they are more likely to support a presidential candidate that commits to transitioning America to 100% renewable energy by 2035.

Building on this, an article published in IOPscience asserts that combining climate policy with economic and social policy builds support for climate action in the US (Bergquist et al. 2020). Specifically, the findings show that public support for climate mitigation increases when climate policy includes socioeconomic reforms like affordable housing, a job guarantee, and increasing the minimum wage. The research also shows that connecting climate policy to economic and social issues is particularly useful for expanding support for climate action among people of color.

These kinds of intersectional approaches to climate policy have the potential to empower communities, workers, and consumers in a just transition. To start with, empowering communities on the frontlines of coronavirus and climate change with data-driven equity mapping, screening, and targeted investment is critical to equipping advocates and activists with the information they need to fight for better conditions. Such efforts have already begun at the state level in California¹⁵ and Washington,¹⁶ but to address environmental justice at scale, we need to revamp and expand federal infrastructure for this kind of data collection.

Our approach to climate policy must also center worker power, job creation, and strengthening unions. Research has shown that decarbonizing the United States has the potential to create over 25 million jobs in the following 5 years alone (Klein 2020). Ensuring that these jobs go to communities historically burdened by racism, economic inequality, and environmental injustice will be key to cementing the popularity and longevity of climate policy. Similarly, focusing on consumers and how cleaner energy can benefit their bottom line and health will help build a winning electoral coalition.

Moments of crises can bring about a sense of clarity that might otherwise escape us. Coronavirus is making crystal clear that our well-being is inextricable from the well-being of our neighbors and our planet. The planet's warming is not merely another issue to add to a laundry list of concerns; rather, it is a reality that interacts with and exacerbates all the other challenges we face. Public policy is the best tool we have to take on the challenges of our era—it's time policy started reflecting how we live.

¹⁵ <https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen>.

¹⁶ <https://www.doh.wa.gov/DataandStatisticalReports/WashingtonTrackingNetworkWTN/InformationbyLocation/WashingtonEnvironmentalHealthDisparitiesMap>.

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