

Chapter 4

Race and Climate Change

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Climate change must be approached as an issue of race as well. The negative effects of climate change are primarily felt in countries that are majority people of color, especially black and brown people, despite the fact that most of the planet's CO₂ emissions come from China, the United States, and Russia. Further, people of color are more likely to be exposed to industrial pollution. Although people of color have historically organized for change regarding environmental racism, there has been little progress made, and little has been done to include them more directly in discussions regarding climate change legislation.

Faces with the Names

Throughout college, I always saw climate change as an abstract issue. I cared about the environment. I cared about conserving water, fighting deforestation, and decreasing pollution. I knew I was supposed to recycle and turn the water off while brushing my teeth, and I tried to support renewable energy. But for me, the actual issue of climate change was always about saving trees and protecting the earth. It wasn't until my visit to COP21*, when I finally got to attach faces to the climate change statistics I had read so much about. After this realization, my time at COP21 became quickly focused on the people affected, rather than the actual effect itself. This time allowed me to see climate change as the humanitarian issue it really is.

In everything I study, I always remain cognizant of the racial issues involved. My background and experiences in race relations have taught me to evaluate how people of color are treated and represented in every situation. It didn't take me long at COP21 before I realized how much race has to do with climate change.

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One-Point-Five To Stay Alive

During my first day at the COP, I walked outside of one of the large exhibition halls and came across a small protest forming. “One-point-five to stay alive!” was the resounding chant from the group. This slogan refers to the controversy over whether or not the goal of climate solutions should be to limit global temperature increase to 1.5 or 2°C (1). While 2° is the benchmark most commonly suggested across members of the United Nations, a temperature increase of more than 1.5° would actually leave many small island nations submerged by sea level rise. 1.5 is the mark needed to keep these island nations above water, and thus, alive (2).

COP21 turned out a great product for our Earth’s future that we now know as the Paris Agreement (3). However, lack of inclusion of the 1.5° benchmark created skepticism of how helpful the Paris Agreement will be for minorities. The text of the Paris Agreement includes a mention of the benchmark, but merely in the sense of a whimsical goal with no real intention of being reached. In other words, a pat-on-the-back for the 1.5 advocates. The issue with this is not that the United Nations accepted lower standards for carbon emissions, but that, once again, communities of people of color have been talked down to lesser treatment than they deserve.

Yes, climate change is an issue of race. Of course, as an amateur race relations enthusiast, I can connect most issues to race. But climate change is more blatantly related to race than expected. The 1.5 issue presents race very clearly, as most of the countries threatened by a global temperature increase of more than 1.5° are majority people of color.

Take, for example, the island of Grenada: it is in danger of sea level rise, 99.6% people of color, and still at the mercy of white leaders (4). Grenada has already been hit hard by climate change (5). Global temperature rise to date has altered weather patterns, specifically the water cycle. I had a chance to talk with Trevor Thompson of Grenada’s Ministry of the Environment, who told me that more frequent droughts and floods have ravaged the nation’s crops and infrastructure (6). This has caused major setbacks to their economy, in addition to putting lives at risk every day.

Still, changes to the water cycles are the least of the worries on the mind of Grenada’s citizens. Mr. Thompson told me that with a global temperature increase of 1.5° or greater, sea level rise would be so great that the entire island of Grenada would be submerged beneath the water (7). This would leave its 100,000 citizens homeless and forced into evacuation. This is a common theme across island nations. I attended a panel discussing climate resilience in Pacific Island nations and found the discussion did not revolve around if they would need to evacuate, but rather what their plans were for evacuation and how soon they would be implemented (8).

Climate Racism

Times like these cause me to check my privilege. Here in the United States, we are fortunate enough to not have to know what a climate refugee is. However, island nations across the globe are putting together plans for when their citizens

become displaced due to that feared 1.5° global temperature increase—the same 1.5° that protestors pleaded against at COP21, the same 1.5° that was included on only a minimal level in the Paris Agreement (9).

This is a solid example of climate racism, the needs of people of color being minimized or neglected in our search for climate solutions. So many lives are contingent upon keeping the global temperature increase under 1.5°C, and nearly all of those lives are people of color. Granted, according to NOAA administrator Kathryn Sullivan, that this is a nearly impossible task, our shortcomings to fully recognize 1.5° as the official “red line” of temperature increase highlights our minimization of the lives of people of color (10).

The twist on climate racism is that it harms people of color most but is caused *almost* exclusively by white people. The reason I use “almost” as a modifier is because China is the global leader in carbon emissions and is not majority white. According to the World Bank, just short of 50% of the planet’s carbon emissions come from China, the United States, and Russia (11). However, the effects of climate change, as we all know, are not contained within the boundaries of the country where carbon is emitted. In fact, almost the opposite is true. Carbon emissions contribute to sea level rise and, as established earlier, this disproportionately affects island nations and people of color.

Further, many developing countries across Africa and Central and South America are hit hard by changes in their water cycle due to climate change. Droughts and floods alike become more frequent, more severe, and less predictable (12). This contributes to food scarcity as it becomes harder to grow and sustain crops (13). Tropical storms and cyclones caused by climate change leave wreckage in these countries as they often do not have the infrastructure to withstand the increased intensity and frequency (14).

I spoke with a group of representatives from Ethiopia who explained to me how serious climate disasters are to Ethiopian citizens. “Homes are destroyed. People die,” one delegate told me plainly (15). The effects of climate change are greater than just economic ones—they are issues of life and death for entire villages. In Ghana, similar effects are taking place with an additional twist; warmer, wetter climates have created a more favorable environment for mosquitoes, which puts citizens in greater danger of Malaria (16).

When it comes down to looking at who emits versus who gets hit, the numbers are very lopsided in terms of race, and this trend continues in terms of who is concerned about climate change. It was obvious to me, through my observations at COP21, that people of color are very visible in climate protests. The 1.5° protest (the protest responsible for sparking my interest in race and climate change) was racially diverse and majority people of color.

Black Lives Matter and Climate Change

During my final day at the COP, I was surprised when I found myself in the middle of a Black Lives Matter protest. I quickly noticed that the protesters’ chants of “We can’t breathe!” were being used in a different sense: one that suggests a more subtle grip society has on black lives. I talked with some of the protesters

and found out that the majority of them were college and graduate students from the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) climate consortium, a program that specifically focuses on the racial aspects of climate change and is led by the biggest name in the field, Dr. Robert Bullard, Dean of the Mickey Leland Center for Environmental Justice and Sustainability at Texas Southern University.

The program's focus is to educate young people on the racial inequalities of climate change and to help be a voice for the cause (17). "[Black Lives Matter] is larger than police shootings," Payton Wilkins, a student at Dillard University and a participant in the consortium, explained to me after the protest. The HBCU climate consortium broadcasts their message that black lives are treated with less respect with regard to climate change, and that Black Lives Matter should not be limited to police brutality.

Representation of people of color is more than just anecdotal. A 2014 poll found that more than 70% of Latino-Americans and nearly 60% of African-Americans are concerned about climate change. Meanwhile, less than 50% of white Americans are concerned. Latino and African-Americans alike are about twice as likely to fear that they will be affected by climate change (18). Even within political parties, we see that since 2009, a greater percentage of non-white democrats think of climate change as a top political priority than white democrats.

Considering politics only makes the racial disparity in climate apathy greater. The United States has countless politicians who, along with their supporters, deny that climate change even exists. Some delegates from Cameroon had a good laugh when I told them this, but I assured them that climate deniers not only exist, they are plentiful. Whether climate denial is due to ignorance or choice, apathy toward climate change is apathy toward the people affected.

A Prince's Effort To Promote Climate Literacy

One of the people I was most fortunate to meet at COP21 was Prince Obi Goodluck, a prime example of someone who works every day to improve climate literacy. Prince Obi, a delegate of Nigeria, is the founder and CEO of Global Alert for Defense of Youth and the Less Privileged, an NGO that starts tree planting clubs for children in Nigeria's hard-to-reach, riverine communities (19). Each time Prince Obi ventures into these communities he puts himself in danger. The communities he serves are high in crime and poverty, and his visits, as a politically interested member of a higher class, are not always welcomed by everyone. However, Prince Obi's intentions are pure: the tree-planting clubs his organization starts teach young people about climate change and the importance of taking care of the earth. Not only do the trees bring shade and clean air to the community, but the work inspires a feeling of responsibility for the environment in each of these children and teaches them how environmental decisions we make affect our planet and all of its people.

Environmental Racism

A big part of the reason people are apathetic regarding climate change is that it is easier to deny what we have not yet experienced firsthand. Though the effects of climate change are difficult to notice throughout most of the United States, environmental racism is very prevalent. Regarding environmental inequalities, Dr. Bullard says “Racism trumps class. Even middle-class African Americans are more likely to live in more polluted neighborhoods” (20).

Environmental hazards have become a major avenue of racism in the United States. As pointed out by an AJ+ video titled “Environmental Racism Explained,” the Flint, Michigan water crisis is the most prominent example of this. More than 100,000 residents in Flint—a city with a 57% black population—were poisoned by lead in their drinking water. Residents protested the dangerous water for more than a year, but their voices were ignored and their health suffered.

The Flint water crisis made headlines, but it was not an isolated incident. Black neighborhoods are a common target for industrial pollution, and this trend appears to be based on race rather than class. Black Americans making US\$50K-\$60K per year are more likely to live in polluted neighborhoods than white Americans making \$10k per year. This pollution has great public health implications on the affected communities. A section of the Mississippi River in Louisiana has even earned the nickname “Cancer Alley” (20). This 85-mile stretch between Baton Rouge and New Orleans is home to over 200 petrochemical plants. Consequently, high rates of cancer have been reported in the region’s majority black population. Cancer Alley residents have been organizing to demand industrial regulations to make their communities safer from pollution, but with little media attention and no legislative progress (21).

This is a trend I have noticed in many similar situations—community organizing by the affected communities with little to no success. Not only do communities of color suffer the most from climate change effects caused by majority white communities, but when they protest for change, they are ignored.

Dr. Spencer Thomas, Ambassador and Special Envoy for Multilateral Environmental Agreements in Grenada, shared some important words during a panel on coastal reliance that stuck with me: “There is no room for tokenism in climate change decisions” (22). Essentially, we know who is affected by climate change. Why minimize the representation of the identities affected most? History has demonstrated that people of color are willing to protest current environmental legislation and be advocates for progress on climate solutions. The next step is to create avenues for them to get appropriate representation at the table.

A common mantra when dealing with decision-making regarding minorities is “nothing about us without us.” This is something that needs to be taken seriously regarding climate solutions. We know that people of color are disproportionately affected by the climate change. Thus, people of color cannot only be included in climate discussions on a tokenistic basis. We know that there is no shortage of voices willing to represent these communities. It is time to hear these voices and make sure that climate decisions going forward are representative of the people they impact most.

Conclusion

Perhaps part of the reason climate change becomes an abstraction for so many white Americans is because the victims are people that don't look like them. It is typically harder to be passionate about things to which we cannot relate. Since the worst effects of climate change occur far away in communities we don't identify with, it makes it easier to ignore the issue. This is a notion that needs to be recognized and fought, and it can only be done by including people of color in climate change discussions.

The best way to do this is to make it happen the same way it happened to me: stop making climate change an abstraction, a hypothetical. For so many of us here in the United States, climate change feels so distant because it is merely a future threat and not something that we have felt yet. The key is to put a "face to the name." Climate change is already affecting a lot of the planet, and for me to properly understand this, I had to meet some of the people affected and hear their stories. I realize not everyone will have this opportunity, but for those who do, we need to share the stories that we hear, along with the facts that we know, to make climate change an issue that can seem real to everyone.

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