

84. The politics of climate change and grassroots demands

by
Antônio A. R. Ioris

There is a pressing need to counter the dominant mode of commodity production and economic growth, which is responsible for the negative and unfair impacts of climate change. The political ecology critique emphasises the role of grassroots organisations and affected communities in the production of more inclusive public policies and mitigation strategies. The climate justice approach is a good example of the political ecology approach.

Climate change issues are at the centre of the current debate on socio-economic development and the future of humankind. However, despite a growing volume of environmental legislation, constant technological improvement and intense multilateral diplomacy, questions related to the allocation of natural resources and the conservation of ecosystems remain only partially resolved.

Anthropogenic climate change offers a unique entry point to assessing public and private responses to global environmental problems. One of the main paradoxes of science and policy-making today is that although government and society increasingly recognise the magnitude of environmental impacts, reactions to these problems are usually fragmented and inadequate. Environmental degradation and social conflicts continue to disregard most responses, especially because these are normally based on techno-bureaucratic approaches and market-driven solutions (Leff, 2004).

In this context, the work of political ecologists inquires into the causes of environmental degradation, the asymmetric distribution of opportunities, and the unfair sharing of negative impacts. Political ecologists have emphasised the historical and geographical currency of environmental problems, the double exploitation of nature and society, and the expansionist nature of the dominant relations of production. "Political ecology is the politics of the social reappropriation of nature" (Leff, 2004: 267). Special attention has been paid to the limits of mainstream environmental management, and the politicised nature of technical assessments and policy implementation.

The political ecology critique is even more important if the slow progress of the negotiations on implementing the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is taken into account. Many policymakers and neoclassical economists have recommended

stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations by allocating nations or administrative units appropriate emission reduction responsibilities. They then need to achieve the relevant reduction through market-based mechanisms. The basic assumption is that this should be pursued to the level where the marginal benefit of reducing emissions by one additional unit is equal to the marginal cost of curbing such emissions.

However, from a political ecology perspective, this calculation of the costs of emissions and effects is inadequate, because it presumes that the greenhouse gas reductions will have a global welfare function. This reasoning ignores the differences between poor and rich countries (Anthoff and Tol, 2010). On the whole, these mainstream responses have largely maintained the interests of landowners, industrialists, construction companies and real estate investors at the expense of the majority of the population and of the recovery of ecological systems.

Despite the current rate of technological and logistical innovation, there are still a billion hungry and undernourished people worldwide. This is partially because of the failures of agricultural production, and partially because of market speculation, trade barriers and rising prices. Food supplies will be further reduced as agricultural production fails as a result of cyclical droughts and floods associated with climate change. In particular, smallholder and subsistence farmers are expected to suffer progressively worse localised effects of climate change (IPCC, 2007). In addition, the increased demand for biofuels such as sugar-cane ethanol is another threat to the food supply, because producing biofuels increases the competition for land and resources (Ioris, 2011). At the same time, the global food economy as it exists today is a significant contributor to humanity's carbon footprint (Weis, 2007).

An important step towards understanding this complexity is to develop a clear appreciation of the socio-ecological interactions involved, the uncertainty and contested knowledge of the causes and consequences of climate change, and the interdependency between the diverse and unequal interests which are involved (Fish, Ioris and Watson, 2010).

The heart of the matter is the ongoing inability of governments and the representatives of the hegemonic agroindustrial sectors to formulate more inclusive and sound climate change policies. Their highly inconsistent ways of thinking, and the lack of effective responses to the risks that climate change poses, are a direct reflection of global and local political inequalities (Parks and Roberts, 2010). Those least responsible for climate change are usually the ones who experience its greatest effects. For instance, deprived communities are more likely to live in unsafe areas along river courses, to have more difficulty adapting to a changing environment, and to have fewer opportunities to influence government decisions. Yet the difficulty of incorporating the demands of grassroots groups meaningfully is not trivial. Existing decision-making systems are reluctant to recognise that those social groups with less political influence are likely to feel the effects of anthropogenic climate change most intensely.

The political ecology critique stresses that without fundamental shifts in the structure of production, and more inclusive public policies, there is a serious risk that climate change will affect different social groups unevenly. This will aggravate the hardship that low-income sectors already experience, and siphon off the results of the adaptation and mitigation measures to those who benefit more from the current economic model. Responses to climate change need to go beyond the techno-bureaucratic reductionism of most contemporary interventions, and deal with the connections between the practices

(such as subsistence agriculture) of marginalised groups (such as urban poor people), social institutions, and the discursive, symbolic and material aspects of climate change. At the same time, marginalised groups and grassroots activists need to address their failure to counterbalance the dominant tendencies, and to link their campaign strategies to a more broad-based political movement.

Fortunately, the past decade saw a broadening of environmental and social concerns from a political ecology perspective (Schroeder, 2000). Successful cases of mobilisation demonstrate that climate change policies should be related transformatively to the problems of poverty and marginalisation in the Southern part of the world, and overconsumption and fuel dependency in the Northern part. Partly through the conceptualisation of “just sustainability”, this led to sustainability and environmental justice discourses coming together (Agyeman and Evans, 2004). Similarly, wider developments in justice theory have moved beyond the distributional to emphasise the role of process, procedure and recognition in the production of unequal outcomes. Claims with regard to justice have routinely extended beyond the distributional to include matters of fairness in processes and regulations, inclusion in decision-making, and access to environmental information related to climate change (Schlosberg, 2004). On the ground, organisations such as La Via Campesina (the international peasant movement) have tried to connect access to land, and food insecurity, with climate change and environmental injustice.

The campaign for “climate justice” is a positive example of the political ecology approach. This mobilisation includes a network of local and global organisations which emphasise that the causes and effects of climate change are related to concepts of social and environmental justice. Many grassroots organisations have repeatedly pointed out the politicised interactions between climate change threats and the erosion of social and economic rights. An example is Climate Justice Action (CJA), a global network of groups and individuals formed as part of the mobilisation around the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. CJA aims to promote the rights and voice of indigenous and other affected peoples.

These critical social movements want to disentangle the complexities of international law and governance, to find ways to turn economic, legal and cultural norms toward climate justice. The lesson is that the climate change controversy is not only an environmental and economic issue, but primarily a human rights problem (Haines and Reichman, 2008). Creating and funding international institutions for adaptation to, or mitigation of, climate change undeniably involves questions of justice. Because it believes that current responses to climate change maintain or aggravate discrimination and injustice, the global movement for climate justice has fiercely criticised the ineffectiveness of top-down responses, as well as the opportunities for capital accumulation that the environmental crisis has created in the form of “green capitalism”.

Overall, the main task ahead is to counter politically the effects of the dominant mode of production, which are responsible for climate change and for the unequal distribution of its impacts. Reactions to anthropogenic global warming should prioritise human welfare and environmental sustainability before compensating states and economic sectors as the prevailing approach does. A new paradigm built on the principles of ecological productivity and cultural creativity should embody grassroots, local communities and campaign groups which demand environmental and climate justice (Leff, 2004). Effective and fair responses to anthropogenic climate change require the organised reaction of marginalised communities and social groups. They should take

any opportunity to take part in policy-making, establish alliances with other movements around the world, and carry out creative social learning and substantive political and economic transformation.

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Antônio A. R. Ioris is a lecturer in environment and society at the School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. His main research interests are the political ecology of environmental regulation, the organisation and evolution of environmental management and the political geography of economic development.



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