

Toward Climate Justice and Community Renewal

– Brian Tokar

In the aftermath of massive Western wildfires and a punishing Gulf Coast hurricane season in North America last summer, combined with record-breaking spring and summer heat waves in Europe, people in the world's wealthiest regions are beginning to acknowledge the near-universal nature of current climate impacts. However the core insight of climate justice – that highly vulnerable communities around the world have long been and still remain disproportionately affected by climate disruptions – remains as true as ever. Data from the UN's Human Development Report document the highly unequal impacts of climate-related weather events going back to the 1980s (UNDP 2007, 75-76), and people in South Asia, East Africa, Central America and many other regions have experienced tragic extremes of drought, flooding and increasingly devastating storms over the past several years. A steadily improving science of climate attribution has clarified links between specific weather events and long-range climate trends that were virtually incalculable just over a decade ago.¹

A rapidly growing understanding of the social justice dimensions of the climate crisis has spawned the evolution of both a global movement and a wealth of new scholarship. Climate justice activists have become increasingly visible on the global stage over the past two decades, from events surrounding the annual UN climate conferences (a.k.a. "COPs," Conferences of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) to increasingly youth-led mobilizations and climate strikes in many countries. The outlook of climate justice has brought together representatives of Indigenous and other land-based peoples around the world with environmental justice activists who are focused on the impacts of environmental racism, and global justice activists striving for a systemic approach to the common roots of climate disparities and other social and economic inequities (Tokar 2014, 2018). This emerging movement-of-movements is challenging extreme forms of resource extraction, exposing false solutions to the climate crisis, and articulating a broadly intersectional outlook on the climate crisis, illuminating the common threads that link environmental abuses to oppression by race, class, gender and other social factors.

¹ Climate attribution science has advanced steadily since a pioneering paper published nearly a decade ago (Pall, et al. 2011), and has become increasingly accepted in recent years (NAS 2016, Schiermeier 2018).

In the realm of scholarship, there has been a worldwide flowering of research efforts, papers and books informed by a climate justice perspective. Glasgow Caledonian University in Scotland hosts a Centre for Climate Justice that has archived well over a thousand peer-reviewed academic papers (Cameron 2018, 188) and hosted a World Forum on Climate Justice that received submissions of abstracts from some 350 researchers and activists from every corner of the world (Mikulewicz 2019). Climate justice has come to shape research agendas in a wide variety of disciplines – from activist journalism to in-depth policy analyses, and scholarly case studies – and also sparked efforts to reassess aspects of human rights law and jurisprudence (Atapattu 2016).

Despite all this advocacy and research, there has been a dearth of literature that directly speaks from the perspectives and lived experiences of people engaged in front-line struggles for climate justice around the world and associated efforts to rebuild their communities. That is precisely what the new Routledge collection, *Climate Justice and Community Renewal: Resistance and Grassroots Solutions*, aims to offer. The book, co-edited by myself and Tamra Gilbertson, was published last April, just as the global coronavirus pandemic was compelling quarantines and lockdowns throughout much of the world.

Our book brings together the voices of people from five continents who live, work, and research on the front lines of climate resistance and the creation of community-centered alternatives. The contributors share stories of people impacted by extreme weather events in Africa, the Caribbean, and on Pacific islands; of life-long defenders of the land and forests in Brazil, India, Indonesia, and eastern Canada; and of people working to halt the expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure from North America to South Africa. They offer a variety of perspectives on what a just transition toward a fossil-free economy might look like, as they organize to protect water resources, advance new ways to feed their communities, resist exploitation of Indigenous lands, and usher in new models of urban policy and energy democracy. We feature the voices of on-the-ground land defenders, community organizers, leaders of international campaigns, agroecologists, and activist-scholars, among others. Together, they convey a realistic, nuanced, and forward-looking view of how a more comprehensively justice-centered response to the unfolding climate crisis is beginning to unfold.

Climate justice advocates generally agree that the most promising responses to global climate disruptions emerge from the evolution of grassroots, popular resistance to continued fossil fuel development and other forms of accelerated resource extraction, as well as efforts to build local alternatives that can inspire

like-minded efforts around the world. Hence, our book is organized into two parts. The first focuses on efforts to confront local climate impacts, defend land and forests, and curtail fossil fuel extraction. These land and water protectors in various corners of the world are also frequently in the forefront of challenging politically popular false solutions to the global climate crisis. The second part of the book focuses upon a wide array of grassroots efforts for community renewal in response to accelerating climate disruptions. We believe that these parallel stories of resistance and renewal represent our best hope for fending off the most severe consequences of continuing climate disruptions and realizing the potential to create a more livable, fossil-free future.

Some of our contributors have already published widely and gained considerable international recognition for their efforts, while others have been working tirelessly in the forests, fields and urban streets and up until now have written mainly for the benefit of their own organizations and activist colleagues around the world. We begin with the words of the renowned Nigerian climate justice campaigner Nnimmo Bassey, who once led Friends of the Earth International, reflecting upon the contrast between official climate responses and on-the-ground efforts in Europe as well as across Africa. Other contributors whose work may be better known to readers here include journalist and scholar Christina Gerhardt, who writes on the response to climate impacts in the Marshall Islands, the prolific South African scholar/activist Patrick Bond, and Tom Goldtooth, the founder and director of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), who first began to engage North American Indigenous leaders and environmental justice advocates to address the consequences of climate injustice nearly two decades ago.

The wealth of experience, insight and on-the-ground knowledge offered by our contributors is quite vast, including leading advocates for forest-dwelling peoples such as Marcelo Calazans in southeastern Brazil, Soumitra Ghosh in West Bengal in India, and Winnie Overbeek of the World Rainforest Movement. The poet and activist Alexis Lathem has been supporting Indigenous people in eastern Canada for more than two decades in their efforts to halt the proliferation of massive hydroelectric projects in their territory, and Scott Parkin of the Rainforest Action Network is a leading strategist with the global climate direct action network, Rising Tide. Contributors to the second half of the book include Puerto Rican agroecologists Nelson Álvarez and Georges Félix, the renowned Bolivian water protector Marcela Olivera, European green cities advocate Karl-Ludwig Schibel, and North American activist-scholars Shea Howell, Thomas Stephens, Terran Giacomini and Kelly Roache. Finally, co-editor Tamra Gilbertson, who has worked for many years with IEN and other important international organizations, concludes the book by challenging the prevailing discourse around climate “solutions,” proposing alternative, community-centered

approaches to energy policy, education, food sovereignty, law and governance. Following the lead of our contributors throughout, her conclusion reinforces the call for global solidarity and the need for genuinely systemic alternatives.

We view our book as appealing to the growing ranks of scholars, researchers and students of climate justice and diverse approaches to climate action, as well as to a wide array of policymakers, analysts, and on-the-ground activists. We believe the book has much to offer to climate campaigners around the world who want to learn about creative, leading-edge responses to climate disruptions in various countries and regions, as well as researchers on various aspects of international policy and international development. The book is very timely, and we are also confident that its relevance and lessons will persist for many years to come.

As the editors of this book, we acknowledge the profound uncertainties the unfolding climate crisis poses for all of life on earth. But we also remain hopeful that humanity can unite to reject the false choices imposed by current political and economic institutions and embrace the potential for an enhanced quality of life beyond fossil-fueled capitalism. It is that sense of hope amidst uncertainty that drives many of our contributors to keep working on the front-lines of the climate crisis, and to seek a greener and truly liberated future.

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