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Climate justice and the Caribbean: An introduction

April Karen Baptiste [a,*], Kevon Rhiney [b]

[a] Colgate University, Environmental Studies Program, United States
[b] Department of Geography and Geology, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

Climate change is affecting Caribbean nations in a significant manner. Yet there is limited research on the varied effects on these island states and the ways in which adaptation has occurred. This paper introduces the idea of climate justice for the Caribbean region, highlighting a series of papers focused on climate justice concerns.

1. Introduction

Climate justice is a political approach to understanding climate change and its differential effects on vulnerable populations (Bond, 2011) and ecosystems. It seeks to bring to the forefront the argument that climate change, while a global phenomenon, does not have a boomerang effect (everyone is impacted by the same risk, regardless of the initial cause/source) as stated by Beck (1986) in his theory of the risk society. Rather, marginalized groups experience climate change effects differently from the wealthy and privileged, and this vulnerability must be adequately addressed both from a political and an ethical perspective.

Most of the early writings on climate justice, which has its origins in the political ecology and disaster literature (Barrett, 2013), focused on climate change mitigation (Adger et al., 2006). Here the debates surrounded the notion of responsibility as it relates to who should be held accountable for the current state of global warming in terms of levels of greenhouse gases and determining the permissible emission quantities for nations (Adger et al., 2006; Bond, 2011). However, these debates have now expanded to examine inequalities associated with three aspects of climate change. First, there is the question of who is most responsible for driving increased anthropogenic climate change. Second, scholars have examined the capability of stakeholders to respond to climate change threats. Third, the research seeks to understand who is experiencing the adverse effects of climate change (Barrett, 2013; Cornelius, 2009; Schneider and Lane, 2006).

Within the climate justice movement, particular attention is given to those nation states and socioeconomic groups that are characterized as being highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, but which lack the capacity to effectively adapt to its associated impacts (Barrett, 2013). Equally important is the role that existing socio-ecological, political, and economic systems play in undermining the rights and capacity of poor and marginalized groups to act within a context of increased climate vulnerability. To a large extent, climate change exacerbates underlying inequalities and development gaps and places a disproportionate burden on the poor and vulnerable. A large majority of developing states suffer from what Fussel and Klein (2006) refer to as a *double inequality*, where these countries contribute little to the overall causes of climate change, while demonstrating a low capacity to resist and/or recover from its effects. Many proponents of climate justice argue that the adverse effects of climate change are experienced unequally due to a number of different factors including geography, the proportion of a country's population dependent on agriculture, inequalities in the access to services and appropriate technologies (Barrett, 2013) and the historical exploitation that many developing states have been subjected to.

2. The Caribbean and climate justice

The small island developing states (SIDS) of the Caribbean region – also referred to as the insular Caribbean – are among the most vulnerable to negative climate change impacts (Fry, 2005; Mertz et al., 2009). The ability of these island nations to cope with, and adapt to negative climate change impacts are constrained by a range of regional characteristics. These include their

* Corresponding author at: 13 Oak Drive, Hamilton, NY 13346, United States.
E-mail address: abaptiste@colgate.edu (A.K. Baptiste).

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small geographic size, high exposure to a range of natural hazards, high concentration of settlements and infrastructure along low-lying coastal strips, narrow natural resource base, limited infrastructural and human resources, and the population's dependence on agricultural activities (Boruff and Cutter, 2007; Fry, 2005; MacPherson and Akpinar-Elci, 2013; Mertz et al., 2009; Pulwarty et al., 2010).

Moreover, the Caribbean region, which to date has made negligible contributions to overall global greenhouse gas emissions, is currently experiencing considerable adverse climate change impacts (Cambers, 2009; Campbell et al., 2011; Gamble et al., 2010; Linnekamp et al., 2011; Moore, 2010; Scott, 2012). For example, in 2005 there was a vast coral bleaching event across the Caribbean region that was attributed to unusually high sea surface temperatures – a possible outcome of climate change (Whelan et al., 2007; Oxenford et al., 2008). Studies have also shown that the Caribbean Sea has warmed by approximately 1.5 °C over the last century and that sea surface levels have risen in line with that of the global mean (~1.8 mm/yr) since 1950 (Church et al., 2004; Palanisamy et al., 2012). Added to these trends is a marked increase in hurricane and intense tropical storm activities in the region since the mid-1990s, which may or may not be linked to multi-decadal changes in Atlantic sea surface temperatures (Pulwarty et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2012; Trotz and Lindo, 2013).

In spite of its global significance for biodiversity, its central location to economic trade routes, and its importance as a global tourist destination (Potter et al., 2004; Hillstrom and Hillstrom, 2004), the region has been largely neglected in the climate justice literature. The deeper question that must be asked when looking at climate justice in the Caribbean is why we should be concerned about a region that has a small number of island nation states. In order to adequately address this question, we must look at the history of the Caribbean and the ways in which the region has contributed to the global political economy.

The Caribbean has been a main driver of globalization since the 16th century. The region had a large Amerindian population that was known for subsistence agriculture and fishing. This relationship, of the Amerindian population to the land, though not well researched, suggests a balance between human-environment interactions. However, beginning in the 16th century with the voyages of the Spanish, the region became a territorial battleground among colonists. From the Spanish Crown's interest in natural resources, to the desire on the part of the British and French for settlement in the region, and the Dutch desire for trade, the region became a central hub for exploitation and extraction (Boswell, 2009). It has been well documented that the Caribbean region served as a major mining ground for colonial entities in Europe. Sugarcane production and refining dominated the region for centuries, encouraging the brutal industry of African slavery between the 16th and early 19th centuries, followed by indentured servitude in the early 19th century. These systems and processes led to the exploitation of both land and people (Boswell, 2009; Potter et al., 2004).

This history of exploitation left countries pillaged and dependent on colonial entities following independence in the early to mid 20th century. With peripheral economies that are dependent for their development on nations of the core, the Caribbean states struggled to build strong economies that could compete in the global economic and political world system. That struggle continues in modern society, where the region, though a negligible contributor to greenhouse gas emissions – the major driver of global climate change – bears a significant social and environmental burden. The region is now expected to address the consequences of climate change, yet there is limited recognition within the global community of how the history of exploitation has limited the ability of Caribbean nations to effectively address climate change impacts, both in a reactive and proactive manner.

The Caribbean's subordinate position within the global capitalist system is in part a function of centuries of colonial exploitation, which plays a role in the way the region is able to respond to the threat of climate change. It is for the preceding reasons that the examination of climate justice in the Caribbean is of pressing importance in today's environmental and geographical literature. This themed issue will begin to shed light on climate justice in the Caribbean by showcasing current and ongoing research being conducted in the region related to the threats climate change poses and the varied responses to these threats. This issue seeks to highlight the disproportionate impacts of climate change experiences by drawing out the nuances of climate justice for the Caribbean region. Using these experiences, conclusions can be drawn as to the prospects and challenges for marginalized communities like those in the Caribbean to adapt to future climate change effects.

3. Multi-scalar and multi-thematic approaches to climate justice

Defining climate justice is not an easy task. Before we define climate justice, we have to first examine the concept of global justice broadly and then apply it to the concept and movement of climate justice. Nagel (2008) indicates that when defining justice one must examine standards and the ways in which these are operationalized. Global standards of justice have traditionally been applied in instances of war and where there are have been cases of infringements on basic human rights. We would like to expand this argument by proposing that environmental resources that are shared globally within the commons must also be subjected to similar standards. As such, there must be some clarity in terms of how resources such as air, fresh water, and marine resources that are shared must be used, preserved, or exploited by different entities, from the level of the individual to that of the nation state. When we relate this to what climate justice ought to look like, we therefore should be thinking in terms of the basic standards that are needed to promote human dignity with the sharing of these global resources. In this case, we argue that the differential impacts that will eventually arise from using the commons for the emissions of greenhouse gases must be considered and there must be agreed upon standards established in order to move toward climate justice.

Following Hobbes, Nagel (2008, p. 417) claims, "actual justice cannot be achieved except within the sovereign state." Hence the argument is made that to achieve justice the government must be the enabling agent. If we accept this line of argument, then in order for climate justice to be realized, sovereign states must be the main enablers of this justice. Perhaps we can be hopeful with the forging of the new (2015) Paris Climate Deal as we are beginning to see standards being set on a global basis with respect to targets for future temperature increase, the preservation of forests, addressing the greenhouse gas emissions balance, and most importantly, having a system of accountability for bearing the economic cost and beginning to develop systems of transparency for guiding international action and support to addressing climate change. While we do not know what the global effect will be with the Paris Climate Deal, we are seeing that sovereign states are no longer shirking their responsibility of taking action and playing the 'blame and waiting' game. Rather, they have committed to attempt to set global standards for addressing the problem. One thing to note however, is that those sovereign nations that are the most impacted and the least responsible for anthropogenic climate change, needs to be at the forefront of the conversation about setting standards in order for climate justice to be genuinely effected. Justice must not be defined *for* the most impacted groups, but rather, these groups *must themselves be part of* the defining process.