

University of Groningen

Envisioning climate justice for a post-pandemic world

Turhan, Ethemcan

Published in:
Dialogues in Human Geography

DOI:
[10.1177/2043820621995608](https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820621995608)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Turhan, E. (2021). Envisioning climate justice for a post-pandemic world. *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 11(1), 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820621995608>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Envisioning climate justice for a post-pandemic world

Ethemcan Turhan

University of Groningen, Netherlands

Dialogues in Human Geography
2021, Vol. 11(1) 4–7
© The Author(s) 2021
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/2043820621995608
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Writing an academic piece amid a pandemic ravaging the world in uneven and combined ways is a complicated affair. It inevitably brings forth questions of privilege related to race, gender, class, and cultural capital. However, it also reveals the hard truths about how we use, make, and appropriate space and time. While much of the world's attention is focused on the global pandemic, we should not lose sight of the climate crisis and the need for climate justice, which problematizes the space-time of capitalist modernity based on gendered, racialized, and colonial spatial praxis as well as uneven historical responsibilities. In a pandemic-ridden world increasingly suffocated on all sides by being denied the 'universal right to breathe' (Hansen, 2020), an overarching approach to activist-academic praxis firmly rooted in an intersectional approach to climate justice can provide a much-needed corrective to the many feel-good solutions to the ills of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009). The ultimate choice, I suggest, is not between adjusting to the new normal or building back better. It is rather in the often conflictual, difficult, and tiresome paths of building and re-building counter-hegemonies toward radical transformations with the aim of envisioning a more politically robust global commons (Temper et al., 2018). In this guest editorial, I call attention to a number of key issues to consider if we are to envision more egalitarian common futures beyond the current pandemic.

I am writing these lines as my adopted city, Groningen, is holding the 'Climate Adaptation Week',

now a highly successful global outreach event reaching out to multiple audiences with a sharp eye toward building momentum for science-based policy around the world. This year's motto for the annual event was 'Act and Adapt', which speaks to the climate challenges that we are currently facing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the speakers at this event was Jem Bendell, a leading proponent of the Deep Adaptation approach of coming to terms with our looming societal collapse through embracing it with 'resilience, relinquishment, restoration and reconciliation' (Bendell, 2019). Bendell's argument is that the collapse of human civilization is likely or inevitable within our lifetimes, and we must therefore prepare to face the consequences of this global crisis. This type of assessment has the effect of depoliticizing the highly political and uneven nature of the climate crisis. Even if we give a pass for its defeatist tone, Bendell's use of the 'flawed science of Deep Adaptation' to build a collapse-aware society is eventually supporting 'flawed socio-political conclusions' as eloquently argued in Nicholas et al.'s (2020) damning critique of the approach. Nicholas et al. (2020) contend that 'almost all of the climate science claims underlying Deep Adaptation's predictions of societal collapse

Corresponding author:

Ethemcan Turhan, Department of Spatial Planning and Environment, University of Groningen, 9700 AB Groningen, Netherlands.

Email: e.turhan@rug.nl

are wrong', which leads them to conclude that such an approach does serious harm to the climate movement by sidelining the decades-old hard questions on climate injustice by 'conveniently ignor[ing] the debt owed by wealthy nations to exploited ones'. In a sense, the type of adaptation that Bendell flamboyantly fashions is one grounded deeply in the false dichotomies of post-environmentalist lifeboat ethics (Kallis and Bliss, 2019). The continuity between doomist narratives of deep adaptation and 'good' Anthropocene narratives of high-tech eco-modernism is a prime example of such false dichotomies. Yet again, 'ecological dystopia', in the words of the Out of the Woods Collective (2020), 'could still be utopia for the few'.

There seem to be quite a few parallels here with the strikingly uneven COVID-19 vaccine rollout that is already creating simultaneously experienced dystopias and utopias across the globe. Just consider, for instance, the news of \$50,000 (USD) package holidays that include private flights to Dubai, 'where the customer receives a COVID-19 vaccine at a private facility and 30 nights' accommodation while they wait for their second dose' (Robson, 2021). Emirates Airlines is even offering \$1,800 (USD) to help cover funeral costs in case the traveler dies from the virus. By contrast, take the example of the daunting inequality that the vast majority of the Global South, people of color, minorities, refugees, and folks of lower socio-economic strata face in accessing the by and large publicly-funded vaccines after so much fuss about the scientific breakthroughs. Accordingly, an all-encompassing vision of climate injustice (or public health injustice for that matter) should be better defined as the 'group-differentiated destruction of the means of our survival' (Out of the Woods, 2020). If true decolonization means giving the land back (Temper, 2019), similarly, true climate justice requires reparations for loss and damage, a major overhaul of political power structures, and payback of the climate debt. This amounts to a justice that is more than coming to terms with our ruination or the swapping of land. As the Lakota People's Law Project (2020) insists: 'The demand for Land Back is larger than just a call for returned territory. The movement is also about returning resources, buildings, and

smaller swaths of land, with a much larger benefit attached. Land back is about expanding tribal management—an essential element of climate justice work'.

'The future is slowly canceled', the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2014) observed, and this cancellation is 'accompanied by a deflation of expectations'. Such a cancellation of the future is omnipresent today, in both material and non-material terms across spatial and temporal divides, as the conspicuously classed nature of high-carbon lifestyles and the trendy green consumerism of electric SUV owners go hand in hand with the privileges of those who can afford to stay at home during the present pandemic. Migrant, unprotected, undocumented, and often 'disposable' farmworkers and careworkers across the globe who have had to work through the pandemic in extremely vulnerable conditions are but two cases of those groups whose futures are being canceled not so slowly. Ideas of development and sustainability, which are often associated with a linear view of progress measured in terms of economic growth or instrumentalized composite indices, render these lives 'adaptable'. Dominated by narrow technocratic visions of profit-driven engineering and mainstream economics, such meta-ideas on our climate-challenged world obscure the potential alternatives, radical futures, and different societal pathways. Nonetheless, against such a deflation of expectations, the century-old question still stands: 'What is to be done?' And the challenge remains: How to organize collectively to act fast and bold enough to transform the political, economic, and social power structures while ensuring that the most marginalized segments of the global population adapt first and foremost to the rising tides of climate injustice? How to ensure that acting and adapting does not mean carbon-negative gated communities and solar-powered green gentrification or the fully-equipped climate-proof bunkers of 'doomsday preppers' (Garrett, 2020)? Embracing and elaborating on the praxis of radical uncertainty, radical care, and radical adaptation could provide another way out.

Against 'the invisible foreclosing of possible futures', Scoones and Stirling (2020) argue that 'the opening up of political spaces to confront radical

uncertainty can become as crucial to emancipatory politics as many more direct assertions of neglected interests'. So, the choice is not between building back better or adjusting to the new normal. It is rather in the struggles to build something completely different, something completely care-full and radical. As Hobart and Kneese (2020) remind us, radical care is about 'a set of vital but underappreciated strategies for enduring precarious worlds' and as such it is 'inseparable from systemic inequality and power structures'. Understood as collective survival and flourishing vis-à-vis self-optimization and productivity-driven self-care, radical care valorizes a type of care that foregrounds particular histories and geographies as an expression of solidarity, not charity. Accordingly, radical care grows on our 'collective capacity to build an alternative to colonialism and capitalism' by engaging with the praxis of making the invisible, undervalued struggles visible and by building institutions from the ground-up against neoliberal, nativist, and atomized models of self-care. Radical adaptation, in a similar sense, can bring about change by skillfully weaving together multi-scalar responses to climate injustice. Therefore, the central pillars of such an approach should focus not on resiliency and bouncing back but rather on 'energy democracy, emergency preparedness, social hubs, and public participation' (Dawson, 2017).

It is indeed true that the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be a 'powerful vector of upward redistribution and increasing inequality, while net negative effects are a looming possibility' (Büscher et al., 2021). However, the very same pandemic has also proved to be 'a portal, a gateway between one world and the next' through which we can 'walk lightly through, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world' (Roy, 2020). Multi-scalar social struggles with intersectional climate justice at their heart will determine the spatial and temporal ramifications of the ongoing transformations as to whether or not they will confront the 'structures of mainstream capitalist development that give rise to persistent crises, generate unequal vulnerabilities and impede progressive change' (Leach et al., 2021). This needs to start with ourselves. Honest, open, and progressive dialogues in academia today

need to rethink the societal relevance of academic practice (Corbera et al., 2020), use the present window of transformational opportunity to redefine research efforts (Rickards and Watson, 2020), and eventually cultivate new critical publics (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020) to materialize different futures. Using the present crises of capitalism to expand the 'collective management of needs, politicize the structures and mechanisms of social reproduction, and build force from there' (Turbulence, 2009) can and should serve as the common ground for climate justice work in a post-pandemic world.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to my partner, Alaz, for having given me the space and the invisible academic labor to pen this piece amid lockdown with two young kids. Radical care, as does climate justice, starts from home.

References

- Bendell J (2019) Hope and Vision in the Face of Collapse—The 4th R of Deep Adaptation. Available at: <https://jembendell.com/2019/01/09/hope-and-vision-in-the-face-of-collapse-the-4th-r-of-deep-adaptation/> (accessed 26 January 2021).
- Büscher B, Feola G, Fischer AM, et al. (2021) Planning for a world beyond COVID-19: five pillars for post-neoliberal development. *World Development* 140(105357). doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105357
- Corbera E, Anguelovski I, Honey-Rosés J, et al. (2020) Academia in the time of COVID-19: towards an ethics of care. *Planning Theory & Practice* 21(2): 191–199.
- Dawson A (2017) *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban life in the Age of Climate Change*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.
- Fisher M (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Henley-on-Thames: John Hunt Publishing.
- Fisher M (2014) *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Henley-on-Thames: John Hunt Publishing.
- Garrett B (2020) Doomsday preppers and the architecture of dread. *Geoforum*. DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.03.014.
- Hansen BR (2020) The interest of breathing: towards a theory of ecological interest formation. *Crisis and Critique* 7(3): 108–137.

- Hobart HIJK and Kneese T (2020) Radical care: survival strategies for uncertain times. *Social Text* 38(1(142)): 1–16.
- Kallis G and Bliss S (2019) Post-environmentalism: origins and evolution of a strange idea. *Journal of Political Ecology* 26(1): 466–485.
- Lakota People’s Law Project (2020) #LandBack is Climate Justice: Honor the treaties and return stolen land. Available at: <https://lakotalaw.org/news/2020-08-14/land-back-climate-justice> (accessed 26 January 2021).
- Leach M, MacGregor H, Scoones I, et al. (2021) Post-pandemic transformations: How and why COVID-19 requires us to rethink development. *World Development* 138: 105233.
- Nicholas T, Hall G and Schmidt C (2020) The faulty science, doomism, and flawed conclusions of Deep Adaptation. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/faulty-science-doomism-and-flawed-conclusions-deep-adaptation/> (accessed 26 January 2021).
- Out of the Woods (2020) *Hope against hope: writings on ecological crisis*. Brooklyn, NY: Common Notions
- Rickards L and Watson JE (2020) Research is not immune to climate change. *Nature Climate Change* 10(3): 180–183.
- Robson M (2021) Vaccine vacations—getting a private Covid-19 shot abroad. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michelerobson/2021/01/17/vaccine-vacationsgetting-a-private-covid-shot-abroad/?sh=46d701d76be6> (accessed 26 January 2021).
- Rose-Redwood R, Kitchin R, Apostolopoulou E, et al. (2020) Geographies of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10(2): 97–106.
- Roy A (2020) The pandemic is a portal. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> (accessed 26 January 2021).
- Scoones I and Stirling A (eds) (2020) *The Politics of Uncertainty: Challenges of Transformation*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Temper L (2019) Blocking pipelines, unsettling environmental justice: from rights of nature to responsibility to territory. *Local Environment* 24(2): 94–112.
- Temper L, Walter M, Rodriguez I, et al. (2018) A perspective on radical transformations to sustainability: resistances, movements and alternatives. *Sustainability Science*, 13(3): 747–764.
- Turbulence (2009) Life in limbo? Available at: http://www.turbulence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/turbulence_05.pdf (accessed 26 January 2021).