

# 06 Climate Justice



## Global Resistance to Fossil-Fuelled Capitalism

### About the authors and their positions

Tadzio Müller was born in 1976 and has been involved in the climate justice movement for a decade, before which he was active in the alterglobalisation movement.

As an activist, his main area of focus is the organisation of mass civil disobedience, for example, the successful Ende Gelände<sup>1</sup> protests. He currently works as an expert on climate justice and energy democracy at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

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### 1. What is the key idea of Climate Justice?

#### We are not all in the same boat: The climate crisis as a crisis of justice

What is climate change about? First and foremost, justice! The best symbol for this process is not the sad polar bear, but New Orleans destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. There, the majority of the wealthy *white* population succeeded in fleeing from the floods and the ensuing chaos, because they (for the most part) owned their own cars, which they could use to leave the city. The mostly poor black population largely remained behind, and was subjected to the government's incompetent and repressive disaster management for several weeks. Burned into our minds are images of African-Americans, standing on rooftops, signalling to the helicopters flying over the city that they need help – and yet being wantonly ignored.

We often think of ourselves as being all in the proverbial 'same boat'. Unfortunately, this is not true. If we are all in the same boat – let's say, the (space)ship Earth – then there are several classes on this ship, and in the event of an accident, the lower decks are flooded first. And just like on the Titanic, there are lifeboats available for those who can afford them. Another example is rising sea levels. They are rising for everyone, but in Bangladesh people are being flooded, while in Holland floating cities are being built with resources accumulated there while using the global environment as a dump, all without a second thought.

In summary: On average, those who have contributed least to climate change suffer the most, while those who have contributed most suffer the least. The latter usually have sufficient resources to protect themselves from the effects of climate change. They have accumulated these resources, this wealth, precisely through those activities that have driven climate change. This central fact, which, by the way, applies to almost all so-called 'environmental crises', is perhaps best described as 'climate injustice'. That is why the call for mere climate protection does not go far enough. What we need is *climate justice*.

<sup>1</sup> Roughly 'Until here and no further'

## 2. Who is part of the Climate Justice movement, what do they do?

### From the environmental justice movement to the climate justice movement

In order to understand the demands and requirements of the climate justice movement, it is worth taking a look at the history of social struggles, in particular the emergence of the environmental movement in the USA in the 1960s, which was first and foremost a movement of the *white* middle class for the *white* middle class. It originated in relatively privileged ‘white’ city districts and towns, and fought to keep these communities free from air pollution and to prevent the inhabitants’ children from being poisoned by chemical plants and power plants. As understandable as these demands were, they had a regrettable effect. Instead of such plants being closed down, they were simply moved; from the richer communities to the poorer ones, populated mostly by African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and other marginalised groups. The struggles of the liberal environmental movement did not lead to the solution of the problems they had criticised – instead, they were simply shifted a few steps further down the ladder of social power.

#### *Resistance to environmental and climate racism*

The communities of colour, suddenly oppressed by a whole range of polluting industries, did not merely become passive victims. Instead, they organised themselves, accused the environmental movement of ‘environmental racism’, and began their own movement for environmental justice. Analytically, this means: If apparent environmental problems are not seen as social problems, if there is no awareness of how a single polluting factory is embedded in broader social structures of domination and exploitation, not only are these problems impossible to solve, but existing social inequalities will be exacerbated.

In the 1980s, as the debate on climate change began to gain momentum, the idea developed that the problem was above all *technical* –that the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere had to be reduced and eliminated through certain mechanisms. In the 1990s, this in turn facilitated the development of so-called market mechanisms to combat climate change. Without opening up the entire critical debate on these impressively ineffective environmental policy tools (Altwater/Brunnengräber 2007; Moreno/Speich Chassé/Fuhr 2015), they are based on a technical logic that does not take social structures into account; i.e. that because every CO<sub>2</sub> particle is the same, it does not matter who saves CO<sub>2</sub> where and under what conditions.

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In economic terms, it is actually best to save CO<sub>2</sub> where it is cheapest, and that is easiest in the global south, where everything is cheaper on average. So, we could give money to development aid organisations to protect forests from deforestation, so as to protect the climate, while we in the global north continue to burn fossil fuels. However, this idea has a huge catch: the forests which were suddenly to be saved from excessive deforestation were often home to indigenous peoples who have excelled at sustainable forest management for thousands of years. And these peoples were threatened by expulsion from their ancestral lands, so-called ‘green grabbing’ (see Heuwieser 2015) through the market mechanisms negotiated in the 1990s as part of the Kyoto Protocol. In the context of these negotiations, the story of environmental justice was once more taken up. In response to the ‘climate racism’ of official climate policy, American activist for indigenous peoples and founder of the *Indigenous Environmental Network* Tom Goldtooth, who himself comes from the environmental justice movements, for the first time formulated the demand for climate justice. Thus began the fight to construct climate change as a question of human rights and justice.

The next step in the development of the climate justice narrative was the publication of the *Greenhouse Gangsters vs. Climate Justice* report (Bruno et. al. 1999). The report focused on fossil fuel energy companies; and instead of suggesting solutions at the individual level (for example, ethical consumption), it focused on major structural transformations. In addition, the struggle for climate justice was quite explicitly described as a global struggle. The report also put forward the movement’s most important policy framework to date, namely a critique of the Kyoto Protocol’s market mechanisms as ‘false solutions’.

#### *A global movement for climate justice is created*

In Bali in 2002, the organisations that would later become the core of the movement, and articulate the Bali Principles of Climate Justice, met for the first time. In 2004, several groups and networks which had long been working on a critique of market mechanisms in general, and emissions trading in particular, came together in Durban in South Africa and founded the *Durban Group for Climate Justice*. The final breakthrough came at the 13th Climate Change Conference in Bali in 2007. The aforementioned network of critical organisations provoked an open conflict with the politically more moderate *Climate Action Network*, whose cosy lobbying strategy had been shown to be something of a flop. One result of this conflict was the founding of the *Climate Justice Now!* network in 2007. The [press release](#) announcing the formation of this new actor articulated a number of claims which still apply to the climate justice movement today. Later translated into a sort of founding manifesto, the press release demanded:

- that fossil fuels be left in the ground, and replaced with investment in suitable, safe, clean and democratic renewable energies;

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- the drastic reduction of wasteful overconsumption, especially in the global north, but also in terms of southern elites;
- a massive transfer of funds from North to South, under democratic control, based on the repayment of climate debt (...);
- resource conservation based on human rights and enforced under indigenous land rights, with control of energy, forests, land and water driven by these communities;
- sustainable, small-scale farming and food sovereignty.

To achieve these goals, the movement has made use of a wide range of instruments, from the publication of clever reports and day-to-day political work in communities particularly affected by climate change, through civil disobedience (for example coal mine blockades), to the militant struggles of the Ogoni in the Niger Delta.

In summary: the climate justice movement is a descendant of the environmental justice movement. Like the environmental justice movement, the climate justice movement originated in the global south (see below), and aims to focus less on technical change and more on basic social structures. I would venture the following definition: Climate justice is not so much a state of affairs – e.g. the fair distribution of the costs of a potential solution to the climate crisis– but more a process, namely the process of struggling against the social structures which cause climate injustice.

If we heed this broad definition, we can even say that many of the struggles for climate justice are not necessarily being fought under the banner of climate justice, but are represented as struggles for land, water, and other basic needs and human rights.

#### *USA: Indigenous peoples and communities of colour as supporters of resistance*

The fact that the climate justice movement arose in the US also structures the way that the project's social base is viewed. On average, alleged 'environmental problems' hit the most socially vulnerable the hardest. In the US, this usually means the communities of colour, among which Native American communities are once again generally the most marginalised. The groups designated in the USA and Canada as First Nations see themselves as part of a global indigenous network which is most affected by environmental disasters. In addition to this, they live (on average) in places where the highest biodiversity is concentrated, and their socio-ecological practices –for example, forest use– are highly sustainable. Our survival may also depend on them, as learning from them could mean learning real sustainability. This is why so-called 'frontline communities' or 'affected communities' (often indigenous communities) are the main supporters of the resistance, the famous 'revolutionary subject' of the climate justice movement.

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These 'frontline communities', often communities of colour in the USA, thus join forces with typically white and/or otherwise privileged 'allies' (see Moore/Kahn-Russel 2010). With regard to these activists, we tend to find the social milieus we have been expecting in this part of the world since the emergence of the so-called 'new social movements' from 1968 onwards: younger, more mobile, better educated, and often slightly more 'alternative' than the social average.

#### *The view of Europe: The role of allies, and differences from the environmental movement*

The European wing of the movement, which does not have the US's tradition of environmental justice struggles to fall back on, and which is dealing with different social structures, is significantly more represented by the *white* and privileged than the movement in the US. This is quite logical to a certain extent: in the global north, there are simply fewer affected groups or 'frontline communities' –with a handful of exceptions, such as the villages in the Lusatia region and the Rhineland which still fall victim to the madness of lignite mines. Most of us act, globally speaking, in the role of allies.

In Europe, the climate justice movement differs from the broader environmental movement in two main elements: firstly, through its conceptual anti-capitalism, including a clear rejection of all varieties of green capitalism (green market economy) (see Müller/Kaufmann 2009); and secondly, through its focus on the tactics of civil disobedience (often mass civil disobedience) and deliberate rule-breaking, in contrast to the more legalistic tactics of traditional environmental organisations. Examples of this type of climate activism in the global north are the civil disobedience campaigns at the climate summits in Copenhagen (2009) and Paris (2015), but above all sit-ins and blockades of coal power plants and coal mines, airports and other places where climate change is generated. Of the above-mentioned key demands made by the climate justice movement, the central one is: 'Leave it in the ground!' –fossil fuels must be left in the ground!

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### **3. How do you see the relationship between Climate Justice and Degrowth?**

#### **Climate justice and degrowth: United against fossil capital!**

There is a positive, fairly close relationship between the climate justice movement and the degrowth movement, something which should come as no surprise to anyone after the Degrowth Summer School at the Rhineland Climate Camp in 2015. The reason for this is obvious: they have a common enemy, namely the fossil fuel-based energy system.

On the side of the climate justice movement, the argument is quite clear: Climate change, as explained above, is a deeply unjust phenomenon. Behind

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this are a number of social structures, but the key driver of climate change is an energy system that has been based on fossil fuels since the Industrial Revolution. After the COP21 climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009 demonstrated to the climate change movement and its more radical climate justice wing that little should be expected from 'the powers that be' in the fight against fossil fuels, they began to focus on local and national energy struggles (see Müller 2012; Bullard/Müller 2011). The core of the climate (justice) movement now consists of fighting for a rapid phasing out of fossil fuels, opposing fracking and the development of gas infrastructure, and campaigning for the development of democratically controlled, largely decentralised renewable energies.

From the perspective of degrowth, the argument is a little more complicated, due to the 'political polyvalence of the growth-critical paradigm' (Eversberg / Schmelzer 2016). In other words, there are a wide range of political positions on the degrowth spectrum, some of which are more critical of capitalism than others, and some which concern themselves with environmental issues to a greater or lesser extent. Nevertheless, Eversberg and Schmelzer describe degrowth as having a perspective of transformation which is predominantly 'critical of capitalism', and which has abandoned the idea that sustainable development is possible in the context of a capitalist economy. Although there are also non-ecological reasons to be interested in the topic of degrowth, it appears that many people become involved with the issue due to the constantly escalating socio-ecological crises with which we have been confronted in recent years.

And so we come to the crux of the matter: If the post-growth movement is first and foremost about the destruction of our natural resources, then it also has to be about capitalism, because capitalism has an in-built microeconomic compulsion towards infinite growth. The growth dynamics of capitalist production are not explained through oft-cited metrics such as gross domestic product, but through the microeconomic behaviour of individual companies, which are driven by market forces to invest money today in order to make more money tomorrow – companies that don't achieve this don't survive. If this is not mere speculation, then the result is the following correlation: money  $\Rightarrow$  commodity production  $\Rightarrow$  consumption  $\Rightarrow$  more money, followed by the re-investment of at least part of this money. Or in summary:  $M \Rightarrow C \Rightarrow M'$ . This microeconomic equation represents the general formula for capital, and it expresses the compulsion to act felt by each businessperson every day. From an ecological point of view, this means that this necessary additional daily profit must come from somewhere 'in nature'. If every day more workers convert more raw materials into commodities by using more energy, then  $M \Rightarrow C \Rightarrow M'$  also means a continuous rise in global resource consumption (see Müller 2014). This is the nature of capitalism.

And capitalism would not have developed in this way, perhaps would never

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have arisen at all, if it had not entered into a quasi-symbiotic relationship with fossil fuels (coal at that time) in 18th century England (see Malm 2016). I do not believe that a form of capitalism based on renewable energies is impossible, but the capitalism which exists today, and which has already passed several 'environmental limits', could never have existed without fossil fuels. Whether we speak of fossil capital or fossil-fuelled capitalism, capitalism is the root of our global need for growth, and its motor runs on fossil fuels –precisely those fossil fuels which are also driving climate change.

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#### 4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

##### **Better together: The weaknesses of one are the strengths of the other**

Accordingly, the climate justice movement can provide the degrowth movement with something that the latter occasionally lacks: a common, antagonistically structured field of practice. This has nothing to do with the now somewhat tedious question of whether degrowth is a movement or not, given that it has no identifiable opponents. I accept the argument of Eversberg and Schmelzer (2016) that the target of the post-growth movement is not a single sector or institution or external process, but the 'imperial mode of living' as a whole, which we in the global north have –at least to a certain extent– internalised. This is not about the academic definition of a movement, which is ultimately irrelevant anyway, but about the motivation of the people involved, and the need to create conflicts so that the movement can develop transformative potential beyond articles in the culture section and niche day-to-day living practices. In 2015, the *Ende Gelände* campaign brought more than 1,000 people together (and over 4,000 people in 2016!) in an act of mass civil disobedience, namely the peaceful occupation of a lignite mine. This action created a conflict which the campaign then won, thus generating an enormous sense of collective empowerment (see The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination 2015). It is this collective empowerment that enables the creation of a type of antagonistic identity construction, without which major social transformation is almost certainly impossible.

In turn, the degrowth movement can offer the climate justice movement something that it lacks: a narrative that will have strong appeal in parts of Europe and the global north. *Exhibit 1:* The fourth Degrowth Conference succeeded in gathering together approximately 3,000 people in Leipzig, while no other social movement I am aware of can muster more than 2,000 (even in Berlin); I would hazard that a conference on climate justice would find it difficult to attract even 1,000 participants. Doubtless this success is in part due to the amazing work of the organisers. But it is also an indicator that the degrowth narrative is attractive to more than just the 'usual suspects' who attend social movement events. (This impression is reinforced by the fact that many of the participants had never been to a social movement

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conference before.) *Exhibit 2:* The culturally important (albeit politically somewhat irrelevant) German parliamentary commission of inquiry on 'Growth, Prosperity, Quality of Life' from 2011 to 2013 shows that criticism of growth has even 'infected' conservative and liberal cultural milieus. *Exhibit 3* (from my own experience): When I try to convince my conservative grandfather of the climate justice narrative, and of the fact that the wealth we have accumulated in the global north is –in reality– a great debt that we should return to the global south, he usually ignores me. When I present him with perhaps the central point of degrowth reasoning, namely that you cannot have infinite growth on a finite planet, he is forced to agree. On this basis, we can then start a conversation critiquing capitalism. In this story, my grandfather is representative of many people in the global north who have little interest in 'climate justice', but who share the unease that the degrowth movement is able to formulate.

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### 5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

#### Strategy, strategy, strategy!

Politically speaking, the climate justice movement reached a new peak in May 2016. In the second round of *Ende Gelände*, this time held as part of a global campaign entitled *Break Free from Fossil Fuels*, which led actions against fossil fuels and in favour of energy democracy on five continents, we achieved a number of significant successes. By gathering together approximately 4,000 participants in a highly tactical and strategic act of civil disobedience in the field of climate action, we have set new standards; the level of international participation in the act itself, and the international coordination of the act in the context of the Break Free campaign are reminiscent of the degree of internationalisation which made the alterglobalisation movement so inspiring. More important, however, is the fact that this time we did not remain in the coal mine; instead we reacted to the tactical and political retreat of our opposition from the pit (Vattenfall and the Brandenburg Ministry of Interior) by playing off our political and moral strength and setting up the blockade on the tracks. 'On the tracks' here refers to the railway tracks in the Lusatia region that supply the coal-fired Schwarze Pumpe (Black Pump) power station with lignite from three opencast mines. This rail blockade was of prime importance because we in the global north do more damage to the planet through expanding our industrial and service sectors than through primary resource extraction (such as lignite mining): this primarily refers to power plants, factories and server farms, not to gold mines and coal mines.

Why am I writing about this at the end of this text? Because this time something happened that very rarely happens in the social movements that I have experienced: They assessed their own strength realistically, and develo-



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ped tactics and strategies which related this strength realistically to the scale of the challenge. So if I could articulate a wish to both movements (a somewhat strange task, I might add, as for me the two are not unrelated), it would be: Let us plan strategically, let us act wisely, and not merely expressively, because we are few, with scarce resources, and we have an enormous task ahead of us (the abolition of capitalism, saving the climate etc. ...). Consequently: strategy, strategy, strategy. Without strategy, it's all bullshit.

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#### Links and Literature

##### Links

Ende Gelände: <https://www.ende-gelaende.org/en/>

Socio-ecological restructuring at the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung:

<http://www.rosalux.de/kapitalismusalternativen/thema/sozialoekologischer-umbau/2372/287.html>

Beautiful Trouble – A Toolbox for Revolution: <http://beautifultrouble.org/>

##### Applied as well as further literature

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