Climate change has become an issue of critical concern for global society. How to respond is rapidly emerging as a question of equity and justice. The People’s Climate March that took place last September in more than 150 countries involved hundreds of thousands. Today, climate change is driving a number of complex justice issues including what climate rights and responsibilities people have and how can, or should society deal with the massive inequities that are developing in the face of climate change. Key inequities include projected disproportionate impacts on vulnerable urban coastal settlements, heightened agricultural stress and reduced production in large areas of the global South, and exacerbation of existing water shortages and emergence of new water stress locations.

The pressure for climate action raises a set of questions about how society changes the way it responds to issues of emerging justice concerns and how justice-related social conventions of today come into being. This essay addresses climate justice in this larger, longer context of social change, issue development, and pathways for action. Will current climate action seem outlandish and wrong to future generations and will we look back at 2015 and ask why did it take us so long to meaningful act?

When we look back over American history, we quickly recognize once-widespread practices that were once commonplace now seem backward and abhorrent, like legal slavery, warring on Native Americans, and legal barriers to the social mobility of women, non-whites, and the poor. Lesser phenomena like honor dueling and lynching also have disappeared from contemporary experience. The decline of these practices and the emergence of new understandings involve a shift in definition, application or reinterpretation of what is just. These new understandings and the development of social conventions are mediated by and highly enmeshed within political and economic conditions and constraints. The interaction between justice and these other contextual factors is difficult to disentangle.

Every society, whether a liberal democracy like the United States, or a monarchy, like Saudi Arabia, is built on specific understandings of rights and conceptions of justice. Of course, extensive debate is always present about what these foundations should be and how they could be articulated into law and social practice. The processes through which issues of justice emerge and are applied are varied and can reflect formal (e.g. laws) and informal (e.g. cultural norms) mechanisms within society. The processes by their very nature involve struggle and sometimes violent conflict. Fundamental issues of justice and social practice also are now discussed within the global community of nations via international laws, treaties and conventions.

Today, the connection between climate and justice is rapidly emerging as a central component of climate action. The civil society campaigns and public marches are part of the emerging struggle and drive for a meaningful response to increasing climate risks. The resolution of these debates and whether they can lead to real climate action will have significant implications for the sustainability of global society and of every city, town, and rural settlement.

Why do shifts in values and social norms occur, and what are the specific mechanisms that seem to dominate the changes? Historically, cultural beliefs, and social organization, governance, and economic activity have defined the tensions between social structures. The application and extension of justice in the public policy realm can take a variety of forms. For example, the application of fundamental assumptions of justice through debate, struggle, protest and at times violence has brought tremendous changes in civil rights, gay rights, labor rights, and women’s rights. The application of justice also has been observed within the environmental realm.

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Justice and Environmental Policy Transitions

An extensive body of research literature exists on how shifts in understanding and application of justice have led to environmental issue formation and policy implementation. Policy development involves issue identification, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Often this sequence occurs over a lengthy period as a general understanding of each issue emerges, as the justice implications are defined and debated, and as the capacity of governance structures and civil society to respond is assessed and engaged, all within a highly charged political and economic setting.

Past environmental change, crises and policy transitions provide useful examples for how to define and interpret the development of climate change as an issue of local and global policy. For example, New York City, during its rapid growth in the 19th and early 20th centuries, faced many environmental crises, attempts at solutions, heightened levels of concern, and eventual policy transition. The crises involved important public health and quality of life issues that exposed the need to redefine the social justice of the city in the face of continued economic growth. Some of the major environmental policy shifts included: 1) acquisition of a steady and copious supply of fresh drinking water (early 1840s); 2) creation of urban open green space (1850s); 3) professionalization of waste management and sanitation (1880s); 4) promotion of mobility and transit (1910s); and 5) reduction of air and water pollution (1960s).

Each transition emerged from an extensive debate regarding issues of justice and the conditions of social and economic progress, protection of those least able to protect themselves, and what residents of an enlightened society need to do to fulfill the human capacities of its members.

The character of these policy transitions also reflects larger social transformations occurring within society at the time. Modernity, like the concepts of sustainability and resilience today, became a powerful meta-narrative for the re-imagining and re-constructing of urban life during early decades of the 20th century. New York City officials and regional planners pushed forward an agenda to relieve chronic traffic congestion in Manhattan and chaotic construction patterns with policies focused on land use zoning, planning, and subway and highway construction. In the present era, the concepts of sustainability and resilience are similarly being used to promote and validate a set of global, national, and local actions.

Conceptual models of policy transition have been formulated to explain how policy shifts occur. In many circumstances, it was recognized that the costs to society for action or inaction were great but at times difficult to define and even moreso to calculate. Embedded in these policy changes was an expansion or redefinition of the parameters of justice, or more specifically, an emerging understanding that for society to live up to its moral and ethical obligations it needs to take each of these issues into account. The drivers of policy changes have included extreme disasters, policy entrepreneurs (i.e., those focused on promoting policy initiatives), available resources, and well-defined solution opportunities. Yet just as important are deep cultural contextual factors like public concepts of justice and rights. The speed of public opinion and legal opinion shifts reflects transformations in the application of justice. The recent shift to wider social acceptance of gay marriage is an excellent example.

Like today’s climate science debates, past environmental policy transitions were associated with the application of new scientific data and knowledge to practical everyday experience. For instance, the 1850s open space movement in New York flowered with the design and construction of Central Park, partially as a response to expert assertions that densely settled cities like New York needed open spaces to serve as “pressure release valves” for the working class. Similarly, advancements in public health sanitation engineering in last third of the 19th century were integrated into building design, plumbing and waste management to reduce the likelihood of disease outbreaks. Science also moved to the forefront in the mid-20th century as advances in atmospheric chemistry and meteorology were applied to air pollution policies and actions to lessen smog and deadly thermal inversions.

Climate change has begun to force people to think about climate and weather in totally different ways. People have always said they could talk about the weather but not do anything about it. Now, climate change forces us to appreciate that humans are not only changing the weather, but can, and in fact must, limit our influence on it. This has implications for individual action, like how to get to work, and collective societal action, like what type of energy fuel to favor and distribute.

As a result, another critical science-related aspect of climate justice is an understanding of the connection between human action, the impact of potential solutions, and the need for society to respond. That has been profoundly embedded in the question of environmental ethics and justice. The mid-19th century scientific writings of George Perkins Marsh helped create the understanding that human actions were changing the surface of the earth and that it had to be within society’s capacity to lessen the negative impacts. Humans throughout history have laid blame on displeased gods or external or internal sources of evil. Human sacrifice and other offerings, the driving out of societal undesirables, letting god’s will be carried out, and even misapplications of science (e.g., social Darwinism or eugenics) have been ways to respond and potentially lessen societal ills and threats. The writing of Marsh, Aldo Leopold, Gilbert White, and others have helped society recognize that the fault – and opportunity for change – lies within ourselves.
Emerging Climate Injustice

Climate change impacts already are being felt around the globe, and are likely to be associated with more significant shifts in the decades ahead. These impacts will be uneven. Specific places, populations and time periods will be more affected than others, exacerbating existing inequities and vulnerabilities, and driving a set of justice implications. This unevenness is evident at the global, regional, national, and local levels. The scientific research and civil society communities are already calling for dramatic transformations, notably forcing dramatic reduction of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The demands of a meaningful response to the threat of climate change can seem insurmountable.

What is most daunting to assessment of climate injustice is the breadth of an altered and ever-more dynamic climate. The spatial scale ranges from the very local, such as how to ensure the property rights of residents in coastal Staten Island or the Rockaways in New York City, to the global scale, such as what will increase drought and warming mean for food security in low- and medium-income tropical countries. Fracture lines already seem to be forming, pitting the vulnerable vs. the resilient, the global north vs. the global south, and the present generation vs. future generations. The question of how the loss and damages of climate change will be distributed and who will bear the costs are fundamental to these tensions within these dichotomies. The justice implications of the inequities are still emerging and contested.

At the same time, opportunities for civic engagement and policy debates have emerged in the past years. The United Nations climate change treaty negotiation process has developed steady momentum over the last two decades. It will reach a new level when nations convene at the culminating Conference of the Parties in Paris in December. A unified global response is reaching a critical moment, if not a tipping point.

As with any tumultuous subject, climate change is both a grand public policy question and a force that is pressing against and revealing stresses within fundamental justice underpinnings of modern society, embracing fairness, prosperity, human security, and the limits of governance. It is through the interplay of society, justice, and policy that understanding the differences among the various factions involved in the climate action debate can be realized.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that how to allocate the costs and benefits of climate change is critically essential but is not, of itself, a question of justice. Climate justice depends ultimately not on dollars or details but on society’s foundational belief that it must act to relieve people from as much climate change burden as possible and to ensure the dignity of all to live their life to the fullest.