

Reading 1: "Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%"

Although some climate deniers will disagree, it unequivocally the case that the climate crisis is being caused by *anthropogenic climate change*, which is another way of saying human-caused climate change.

It is not the case, however, that the climate crisis is being caused by all human beings equally. To the contrary, a small percentage of human beings are disproportionately responsible for this crisis.

Hence, this a justice issue, a *climate justice* issue.

As we shall see, climate denial is a thing.

It can take many forms, such as the fossil fuel industry and its affiliates denying that the climate crisis is real, or human caused.

Alternately, it can be people who are deeply in denial that their lifestyles have caused this existential problem for the human race.

"Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%," which is our first reading and which was published on November 20, 2023, lays out the climate justice problem with a number of startling statistics. This paper perceptively argues that "[t]he world faces twin crises of climate breakdown and runaway inequality."

Here are a few of the startling statistics from "Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%":

"In 2019, the super-rich 1% were responsible for 16% of global carbon emissions, which is the same as the emissions of the poorest 66% of humanity (5 billion people)."

"Since the 1990s, the super-rich 1% burned through twice as much of the carbon budget as the poorest half of humanity combined."

The richest 1% constitute 80 million of the planet's 8 billion population.

"The emissions of the 1% are set to be over 22 times more than the safe limit (the emissions allowed if we are to stay below 1.5°C global warming) in 2030."

“The emissions of the super-rich 1% in 2019 are enough to cause 1.3 million deaths due to heat.”

The following three slides contain the thesis statement for “Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%,” which underscores how this is a climate justice issue.

“The world faces twin crises of climate breakdown and runaway inequality. The richest people, corporations and countries are destroying the world with their huge carbon emissions. Meanwhile, people living in poverty, those experiencing marginalization, and countries in the Global South are those impacted the hardest. Women and girls, Indigenous Peoples, people living in poverty and other groups experiencing discrimination are particularly at a disadvantage.”

“The consequences of climate breakdown are felt in all parts of the world and by most people, yet only the richest people and countries have the wealth, power and influence to protect themselves. With that power comes huge responsibility.”

“If no action is taken, the richest will continue to burn through the carbon we have left to use while keeping the global temperature below the safe limit of 1.5°C, destroying any chance of ending poverty and ensuring equality. The world needs an equal transformation. Only a radical reduction in inequality, transformative climate action and fundamentally shifting our economic goals as a society can save our planet while ensuring wellbeing for all.”

Our first readings, “Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%,” takes up the issue of *climate justice*, which might be better thought of as climate in-justice.

Let's talk about justice, especially climate justice.

Among other things, Climate Crisis 101 (Engl 23) approaches the climate crisis as a social justice issue. This approach is generally referred to as climate justice.

In a certain way, the methodological approach used in Climate Crisis 101 is similar to seeing racism as something that is baked into American culture and has been ever since (and even before) our country was founded by a group of privileged white man.

One of the reasons that people seem to resist this obvious truth regarding race in America is because it tarnishes the idea of the United States for them. In other words, for people who believe (and often loudly proclaim) that the United States is a great country, this is a thorn in their side because it draws attention to the fact that the U.S. once enslaved and to this day grossly mistreats - and even still unjustly kills on a daily basis - Black Americans.

Indeed, the United States is, in a variety of ways, unjust to most Americans, including - but certainly not limited to - female identified individuals (who are over 50% of the US population), people of color (over 40% of the US population), and the LGBTQ+ community (which [Gallup predicts](#) will be over 10% of US population in the near future).

Hence, if the United States hopes to one day become a great country - it has obviously never truly been great in this regard - it will need massive reform. You can see why, to people who believe that America is overwhelmingly a great country, or at least was until relatively recently (and hence, believe that they can "make America great again" with the right leadership), this could be a deeply unsettling thought.

However, to be clear, this does not mean that we need to turn our back on our country. To the contrary, in order to address the injustices and suffering, we need to roll up our sleeves and make this, for the first time, a truly great country - which I personally believe it can one day become. Moreover, we need to stop thinking nationally, as the climate crisis as a global problem. Hence, perhaps our motto should be "make Earth great."

Similarly, for people who believe that the United States is and has been an overwhelmingly great country, the climate crisis may be unsettling.

There are nearly 200 sovereign states (countries) on this planet. Of all these, one country has contributed more to the climate crisis than any other - by a longshot. When approached from the perspective of population, this relatively tiny country, which has just 4% of the Earth's people, has been responsible for 25% of historical greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

(Incidentally, this was largely done in the past 75 years.) In contrast, the poorest 3 billion people on earth have contributed only 5% of GHG emissions.

Ironically, because this country amassed so much wealth through its fossil fuel economy, it will likely suffer less than most countries. Who will suffer the consequences of climate change the most? Those poorest 3-5 billion people who did virtually nothing to bring about this crisis. This is, obviously, a deeply unjust state of affairs. Expressed another way, this is an extraordinary injustice – and hence, a prime example of climate justice.

So, which country committed this almost unimaginable crime against our planet and billions of its people? You know the answer, though it is difficult for us in the US to come to grips with what we, as a country, have done. Approached from the perspective of the climate crisis, not only isn't the USA the greatest country, it is the absolute worst - by a longshot.

If you were not already mortified to be a U.S. citizen because of our history of societal racism and other acts of systemic injustice, climate justice gives you yet another compelling reason to feel so. It is also reason to stop and reflect on what the fossil fuel economy has given us: extraordinary wealth and privilege - which has come at an even more extraordinary cost.

Incidentally, issues like societal racism and climate justice are often intersect, sometimes deeply. We called this *intersectionality*. This might be easiest to see with the related issue of environmental justice.

When new facilities that will pollute the environment, such as chemical factories or power plants, are planned, where do you think they are located? In posh white neighborhoods or poor Black ones? In the United States, it has historically been the latter, which means that people in these neighborhoods, as well as their land and groundwater, are often exposed to toxic substances.

In this example, environmental justice and racism intersect.

All sorts of marginalized individuals and communities can be impacted by environmental justice issues. For example, people with uteruses are at greater risk of being harmed, as being exposed

to toxic materials can threaten their reproductive health. This is another example of environmental justice intersecting with another issue.

Returning to climate justice, which is concerned with the impact of climate change across the planet, rather than with just point-source pollution that can come from a factory or power plant, issues like race clearly come into play. Although there has been a welcome improvement in racial diversity in the U.S. in recent decades, when I was born (1959), roughly 90% of Americans were white.

And those poorest 3 billion human beings on Earth? Overwhelmingly, most are people of color.

The climate crisis presents a challenge for individuals who have been led believe that the United States is an overwhelmingly great country. For older Americans, it can be especially difficult to come to grips with the crisis, as the most of the GHG emissions in the Earth's atmosphere from the United States happened in their lifetimes (somewhere between 85 to 90% of all GHG emissions in the Earth's atmosphere we put there during the lifetimes of Donald Trump and Joe Biden). This can lead to denial, deep denial.

When we think about climate change denial, we often, naturally enough, think about fossil fuel companies wanting to deny the validity of the crisis so that they can continue to make a profit. Indeed, we now know that executives at companies like Exxon have known the truth about the impact that burning fossil fuels would have on climate change for more than four decades.

However, there are many types of climate change denial. Perhaps one of the strongest forms of denial does not come from people who know the truth but publicly deny it, but rather from individuals who, deep down, just can't come to grips with the truth.

In this, psychological sense, "denialism is a person's choice to deny reality as a way to avoid a psychologically uncomfortable truth. Denialism is an essentially irrational action that withholds the validation of a historical experience or event when a person refuses to accept an empirically verifiable reality" ([source](#)).

Some people in the US, who want nothing more than to be proud to be an American, are deeply in denial, desperately working to convince themselves (as well as other people) that the climate crisis isn't real. After all, admitting so would also necessitate abandoning the thought that we are the greatest country in order to accept the fact that, when it comes to our nation's contribution to anthropogenic climate change, we are unequivocally the worst country on Earth (and to the Earth).

Consequently, such individuals can have an incredible personal investment in denying the truth of climate crisis to themselves - and anyone willing to listen.

And, make no mistake, this issue can really hit home.

The carbon footprint for the average American is 35 times greater than the average Bangladeshi. Unfortunately, Bangladesh, which is a poor country, will be disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis, as 40% of the country will be lost with just two feet of sea level rise - an amount that will occur in the next few decades. Since Bangladesh did very little to contribute to climate change, this is an obvious climate justice issue of staggering proportions.

If this we're not bad enough, the so-called American Dream, to which we are encouraged to aspire (and some people believe they have, in various ways, actually achieved), is a climate nightmare of unbridled consumption. Big houses. Big cars, and lots of them. Boundless air travel. An endless supply of stuff delivered right to our doors. Beef, which is a major contributor to the climate crisis, at every meal. The list goes on, and on.

People who come closest to realizing the dream, like A-listers, may have a carbon footprint many times larger than the average American. For example, traveling in a private jet emits ["40 times as much carbon per passenger as regular commercial flights."](#) Hence, in its supersized forms, a single person "livin' the dream" (the American Dream in the US) likely is responsible more GHG emissions than an entire village of hundreds of people in Bangladesh. When investments are taken into account, the GHG emissions can rise even more significantly.

In other words, from a climate and climate justice perspective, the belief that America is an overwhelmingly great country could not be more wrong. And with respect to the American dream, it is, to the contrary, a climate nightmare.

As with systemic racism and a host of other social justice issues, it falls to the current generation to undo the injustices of the past.

Again, this is not to say that we need to turn our back on our country. To the contrary, I would argue that the U.S. has never needed us more. If we bravely confront the past, and then roll up our sleeves to do all that we can to right the injustice of all this, the United States, and the Earth, will greatly benefit.

Class discussion of Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%

If you have not already made your weekly comment, I am curious to hear your thoughts.

The following observations have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, sometimes just part of the comment is reproduced here.

As I began to read, anger and frustration began to invade my mind and body. It is really frustrating how people - white privileged men - who have the opportunity to shed more light to the climate crisis and take action do not do anything. Instead, they are the ones making decisions that only benefit themselves whether it be economically and/or politically, while forgetting the rest. It is as if their intention is to destroy minorities to keep on possessing the title "powerful and privileged." They are supposed to be taking actions so that our future can be clean and green, not gray and dusty. These climate problems that we are facing now have long-lasting effects on our environment, our health, our lifestyle, therefore if they are not going to do anything about it then there are people who will - us.

All in all, I think this article illustrates very well many of the shifts that would be necessary in order to mitigate the disastrous spiral we as a species have entered in terms of our treatment of the planet, but I am incredibly doubtful that these shifts will occur to any effective degree before it is too late to save much of the world.

What caught my attention the most was when Greta Thunberg stated that one short trip on a private jet produces more carbon than the average person will produce annually. This stuck with me because recently there has been controversy over the extremely popular artist Taylor Swift and her various private jet rides to see her new boyfriend Travis Kelce who plays professional football for the KC Chiefs. With Taylor being in the top 10%, many of her fans and people around the world are questioning her morals and decisions as she is constantly wrecking the planet.

Overall, this article tries to put blame on the 1%, and shows that they should also be the solution. This will never happen. The way that we solve this is by working with them. They have all the money, the resources, and the power in this country. The only way we get out of this mess is by working together, not alienating those who we believe is at fault.

I also couldn't agree more with Thunberg's statement about the white men in power who are guilty of mass contribution to climate change and yet we still leave them in power with the authority to dictate the outcome of our planet and future.

[A]s much as we learn from reading information, I think that numbers and statistics are what are most impactful. When I read that the emissions exclusively from the top 1% can be linked to 1.3 million deaths that are heat-related, it was jarring. It is disheartening because it shows that even if we, everyday people, change our day-to-day lives, like riding a bike or eating less meat, it seems like the effects would be so minimal. I do believe that if we apply Njoki Njehu's philosophy by creating a movement that is too large to ignore, then maybe climate change counter measures would finally be seen.

On page 17 the image states, " The death toll from floods is seven times higher in the most unequal countries compared to equal countries." I can't even imagine that people unnecessarily die because their homes aren't built for disasters and have fewer resources to cover after reaching impact.

[T]he top 1% (who have enough money to completely end climate change) earn their profits through their investments in these same companies that prevent any real progress to ending climate change. This article only reiterates how companies and wealthy individuals are more fixated on profits rather than environmental concerns. A 60% tax on incomes of the super-rich could not only significantly cut carbon emissions but could raise US \$6.4 trillion to finance renewable energy and transitioning away from fossil fuels...An idea for a 60% tax may sound extreme, but in light of these figures it becomes an understandable action plan.

I agree with your statement, Mengchun, that 60% is a significant portion of an income. The ultra wealthy are not going to accept this proposal and they have the means and power to defend themselves; the article illustrates their "undue influence...over the media, the economy and politics and policymaking".

While the steps for equal transformation laid out by the article of, an increase to equality, transitions away from fossil fuels, and a shift in economic goals, are inherently good for society. I feel as though the solutions are unfortunately far too radical to be passed by the government. As the article stated previously, the rich are among the lawmakers and actively sit in government positions; the idea that they will pass legislation in which taxes the top 1% income by 60% seems far too high to be considered. Unfortunately, in my opinion, these radical increases in equality will prove to be unsuccessful when reaching lawmakers who have incentives to increase their profits. Smaller, more gradual changes could potentially open the door for these larger propositions in the future.

I felt like this week's readings posed an argumentative point of view against higher classes within our societies that wanted to pull a string in casual readers; in an attempt to make them see people in the top ten and one percent as almost villainous. Though I understand that statistics show higher percentages of carbon emissions illustrating that an extreme portion comes from activities and items in the top ten percent, I would just like to simply point out that Njoki Njehu from the article traveled across large parts of terrain in Africa for her movement to gain influence and increase in size. That being said, I find it very unlikely that she had made her whole journey without producing an individually significant amount of carbon emissions considering the impacts alone that come from traveling by cars...