

Reading 7, Social justice, environmental justice, climate justice, and the injustice of it all (2024)

Let's do something different today.

Since this week's short films are on the Green New Deal, it would be pretty redundant if I made two videos on the Green New Deal.

So, let's take up the climate crisis and justice, which are in many ways the cornerstone of the Green New Deal.

As I have repeatedly noted (you're probably tired of hearing me say it!), this course focuses on the sort of cultural changes that we need to make in response to the climate crisis. While, as I noted in a previous video, personal actions (like switching to largely plant-based diets and away from flying and automobiles) are absolutely essential, we need to do more.

We need to collectively address this problem. Although the climate crisis is obviously a global problem, different parts of the world (i.e different countries) have their own individual challenges with respect to the crisis.

In some, like the US, the challenge is to reel in our environmentally disastrous lifestyle. Economically, this means that we arguably need to enter into a period of degrowth, where we work out how to live rich and meaningful lives while reducing our population and economy – and in the process emit far fewer greenhouse gasses.

Alternately, in low- and middle-income countries, the challenge is how to raise the quality of life for everyone, so that everyone there can also live rich and meaningful lives, while not raising greenhouse gas emissions to unacceptable levels in the process – which is, sadly, exactly what wealthy countries like the U.S. did.

Because every country is facing somewhat different problems, the Paris Agreement signed at the COP21 in 2015, left decisions on climate action up to individual countries.

In some cases, these climate actions may be related, as every part of the world will need to rely on renewable energy sources like wind and solar.

However, in wealthy countries, part of the challenge will be to use far less energy than we currently are using. In low- and middle-income countries, by contrast, the challenge will be to use more energy – such as by electrifying villages across the planet – but to do so responsibly and sustainably.

Simply put, wealthy countries will need to enter into a period of degrowth; low- and middle-income countries, sustainable, responsible growth. In both cases, this will involve profound cultural change.

Because this is a course taught in the US, it has addressed a range of problems that too much of the world may well seem absurd.

For example, this course has considered reducing our meat consumption, which is hardly a problem for places like Bangladesh, where the per capita meat consumption is 4 pounds per year (compared to 265 pounds per year in the US.). To put that in perspective, people in America not only eat more meat than people in Bangladesh, we eat 6,600% more meat.

I know, it is difficult to even imagine such a huge difference, especially when it comes to food. Nonetheless, the US. has a problems with people eating too much food, which impacts 40% of Americans, which can lead to “heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer. These are among the leading causes of preventable, premature death.”

Conversely, one in ten people across the globe experience chronic hunger daily. Returning to the example of Bangladesh, approximately 40 million people are close to starvation there and “40% of the country falls under three categories: hunger, starvation and chronic hunger.”

We have also taken up the issue of air travel. In the US. there are 2.5 flights per person per year. While not everyone is taking this many flights, as a country, we obviously fly quite a bit, with frequent flyers flying a great deal. In contrast, in Bangladesh, just 1 in 55 people fly every year.

If you had trouble wrapping your head around the fact that the average person in America eats 6,600% more meat than the average person in Bangladesh, the difference with air travel is even harder to imagine: as the per capita air-travel in the U.S. is 14,000% greater than in Bangladesh.

Finally, we have also taken up car ownership, which is hardly a problem in a country like Bangladesh, where only four people in a thousand own a car. In contrast, in the US. 838 people in a thousand have cars. The difference here is even more mind boggling, as per capita automobile ownership in the U.S. is 21,000% greater than in Bangladesh.

Recall from the documentary *The True Cost* that Bangladesh is where the Rana Plaza disaster happened. In case the film left you wondering why people would take jobs in such horrible conditions for such low salary, if one out of four of your friends was starving, it would probably be quite an incentive to take any job on offer.

All this brings us to the questions of social justice, environmental justice, and climate justice, which are all interrelated.

The horrific conditions under which people are forced to work in Bangladesh is an example of a “social-justice” problem.

The environmental damage done to the places by, for example, factories that pollute there, (which we often call point-source pollution) is an example of “environmental justice.” The phrase is a little confusing, as we really are talking about injustice here, which includes the facts that these factories are frequently located in areas where people are generally quite poor. Bangladesh is an obvious example: as poverty there is so great that the people have little choice but to take any sort of development, even if it destroys their local environment.

“Climate justice” looks to how global climate change impacts people across the globe, with the poor being impacted the most. For example, by flooding related to sea-level rise. “Each year in Bangladesh ...10,000...square miles...(around 18% of the country) is flooded, killing over 5,000 people and destroying more than seven million homes.” Let me just repeat that: this many people, 5000, are killed and this many homes, seven million, are destroyed each and every year. “During severe floods the affected area may exceed 75% of the country” of Bangladesh. The last time that this happened, “30 million people were made homeless.”

There is an extraordinary, deadly gulf between the wealthiest and poorest people on earth. It not only impacts our planet’s poor directly through things like working conditions, it also does so indirectly through the contamination of their countries, such as Bangladesh.

Climate justice also comes into relief here, as wealthy countries are far better equipped to protect their people from its impacts.

Take the Thomas Fire, which I have previously mentioned and which came pretty close to my house in December of 2018. At one point, 8,500 firefighters mobilized to fight it. And then there was the firefighting equipment, including aircraft from across the nation and nearly 300 fire engines from eight nearby states. All told, it cost hundreds of millions of dollars to fight this wildfire.

I am, of course, profoundly grateful for all this, especially for the firefighters who risked their lives putting out this fire.

But how many other countries could afford to mount a response like this? How many would even have the equipment on hand to mobilize?

In other words, if I lived pretty much anywhere in a low-income country, during the Thomas Fire my little old wooden house would have burned to the ground along with all my possessions – and the rest of my town. Perhaps my family and I would have survived, perhaps not.

This is an example of climate justice – or more accurately, climate injustice.

In part because the U.S. put 25% of all greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, we now have, in many cases, the wealth to protect ourselves from the devastation that the climate crisis is already bringing to our planet.

On the other hand, the 30 million people made homeless by the last great flood in Bangladesh, have no such protection.

Incidentally, in 2018 the Trump administration slashed funding to Bangladesh to two thirds the level of the previous administration. The slash was even greater with respect to the health sector, where funding was reduced to less than half by the Trump administration.

So, what can be done regarding all this?

Yes, we can buy fewer clothes, but what about the social, environmental, and climate justice issues in places like Bangladesh?

The Green New Deal – which I think is absolutely necessary – is primarily focused on the U.S. economy. But what responsibility does the U.S. have to the rest of the world, to places like Bangladesh?

Specifically, as a trading partner – and in terms of social justice – what responsibility do we have to mitigate the sort of cultural problems that led to the Rana Plaza disaster?

Regarding environmental justice, should we play a role in making sure that countries like Bangladesh have strong environmental laws – which would prevent the production of stuff for the US. and the rest of the world from destroying the environment of Bangladesh?

Finally, with respect to the climate crisis, should we help Bangladesh when they suffer the consequences of it?

Class discussion of Social justice, environmental justice, climate justice, and the injustice of it all

(Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote an observation by a student, followed by my thoughts.)

The statistic you mention regarding the loss of life and homes in Bangladesh is astonishing. I was truly struck by it. I paused the video and rewound it several times to make sure that I heard you right. 5000 lives lost per year, six million homes, and even more in some cases. How could this be allowed to happen? My gut reaction was “Why am I here learning about this when I could be there, on the ground actually helping those impacted by the flooding?” ...Instead of caring about what these people face every day, we create false realities that benefit a wealthy few and call it good...I am truly fuming and I worry this is a jumble of unconnected thoughts. Really my takeaway is that the US has no right to be considered a world leader (and in fact in the wake of the Trump era is not a world leader) when we allow such events to happen and do nothing to avoid them.

As I have noted, because this course is taught in California, we have principally taken up the impact that the climate crisis is having in this part of the world, such as wildfires on the West Coast. However, global climate change is impacting different parts of the world in different ways.

["Climate experts predict that by 2050, rising sea levels will submerge some 17 percent of...\[Bangladesh's\]...land and displace about 20 million people."](#) And this is just the tip of the iceberg, as during storms many more people will be impacted.

Although we may feel disconnected from the people of Bangladesh and this problem, wealthy countries like the United States (and the United States in particular) are the reason that the climate crisis and this sea level rise is happening.

Moreover, the US is Bangladesh's principal trading partner, as [more of the country's exports go to the United States than any other country](#). Even though Bangladesh does not play a very significant role in the US economy (when it comes to the US's trading partners, [Bangladesh is #46](#)), the US is nonetheless of central importance to Bangladesh.

Prior to this course, you may have never thought much about Bangladesh, if at all. But what is happening in Bangladesh right now, from sea level rise and storm surges to horrific working conditions (which, at root, is caused by the fact that we are not paying them nearly enough for the products that they are supplying), is being caused by wealthy countries like the US (and, again, the US in particular).

Why are we not doing anything to correct these problems that we have created? As this person aptly notes in this comment, "Instead of caring about what these people [in Bangladesh] face every day, we create false realities that benefit a wealthy few and call it good."

In order for this to work, all that we generally hear about from marketers is the product that they are selling us. They neither want us to think about where the product comes from (places like Bangladesh, where many of our clothes are made) nor where it goes when we are finished with it.

When we throw something away, they do not want us to think about where "away" is. Most of us never raise this obvious question. For their part, marketers are perfectly content to let us believe that, when we drop a pile of clothes off at Goodwill, they actually go to people in need, which they rarely do.

When confronted with the reality of what is going on here, the person who made this comment, much to their credit, said in exasperation "[w]hy am I here learning about this when I could be there, on the ground actually helping those impacted by the flooding?"

It would be incredibly commendable to go to Bangladesh in order to help with the suffering. However, this would really be little more than putting a Band-Aid on the problem, as it would do little to put an end to the cause of the suffering.

Respect to the United States, to do that, we need to 1) immediately and significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused, both directly and indirectly, by the United States, 2) reel in the free-market system that makes us in the US richer but keeps the people of Bangladesh in abject poverty, and 3) use the wealth that the fossil fuel economy

has given the US to help mitigate the damages of the climate crisis in places like Bangladesh.

To do all that, we need both climate activists to make people aware of these problems and to elect politicians that will enact these changes.

Ken posed various questions of whether the United States has a responsibility to help countries such as Bangladesh mitigate the social, economic, and environmental disasters our country has caused. I believe that the United States absolutely has a responsibility to aid Bangladesh, other developing nations, and the rest of the world in moving towards a cleaner future. Over the past few years especially, I have felt that the sense of nationalism and patriotism in the United States has outweighed the compassion and empathy we should have for other human beings on our planet. While people's feeling of pride for their country is great, I don't believe that it should be placed ahead of caring for other people and other countries. While America is focused on maintaining our strong economy and making revolutionary technological, medical, and scientific advancements, we fail to realize the impact that our actions are having on the rest of the world. I believe that the Green New Deal needs to include specific ways in which America can aid the countries which we have harmed, such as a plan similar to the Global Marshall Plan created by Al Gore [published in 1992!].

What do you do if you live in Bangladesh, or someplace similar, that is impacted by the climate crisis? What if you are one of those aforementioned 20 million people that will need to migrate when 17% of Bangladesh is submerged by 2050? You really have no choice; you would need to migrate.

Across the planet, there are already millions of climate migrants, people who have no choice but to leave their homes. As astonishing as it may sound, even back in 2017, 68 million people worldwide were forced to become climate migrants. As the Brookings Institution notes, "[one-third of these...were forced to move by 'sudden onset' weather events—flooding, forest fires after droughts, and intensified storms.](#)"

By the way, that is an extraordinary number of people, "about three times more [people] than those displaced by conflict" and war during that time. It used to be that wars and other conflicts were often the greatest challenge faced by people across the planet, now the climate crisis is becoming even worse.

Regarding the other two thirds, Brookings Institution notes that "[it is becoming obvious that climate change is contributing to so-called slow onset events such as desertification, sea-level rise, ocean acidification, air pollution, rain pattern shifts and loss of biodiversity.](#)"

Let's take Central America as an example.

First, central America is now experiencing more, and more severe, of those "'sudden onset' weather events" mentioned by the Brookings Institution. For example, in 2020, the

region experienced two catastrophic storms within two weeks: Eta, a Category 4 hurricane, and Iota, which was briefly a Category 5 hurricane.

These two storms, "[impacted 6 million people, destroyed thousands of homes and displaced nearly 600,000 \[people\] in Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua.](#)" In addition, "many people...also lost their livelihoods. The Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock in Honduras estimates that up to 80% of the agricultural sector was decimated by the storms - an industry that...provided one-third of the country's employment."

Second, in terms of the "so-called slow onset events such as desertification" mentioned by the Brookings Institution. The FAO (the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) notes there is something called the "Dry Corridor strip, which stretches from Southern Mexico down to Panama and suffers from severe inclement weather due to El Niño...Although the term "Dry Corridor strip" didn't even exist until 10 years ago, today it symbolizes the region's vulnerability to the effects of climate change."

The impact of this desertification is profound. For example, in "[\[i\]n 2018 alone, a dry spell caused crop losses for at least 2.2 million people.](#)" "[\[L\]osses in bean and corn crops planted by subsistence farmers ranged from 75 to 100 percent](#)" in the Dry Corridor.

So, with the devastating one-two punch of "'sudden onset' weather events" and "slow onset events such as desertification," what are impacted people in places like Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to do?

Shortly after hurricanes Eta and Iota hit, "[\[w\]ith few options at home, in mid-January \[of 2021\] up to 9,000 people gathered to join a caravan in Honduras heading to Mexico and the United States in search of opportunity.](#)" This was just the most recent such event, as people have been, in part because of severe climate change, leaving the Dry Corridor for a decade now.

What is happening in the Dry Corridor has profoundly altered who is attempting to enter the US from our southern border. "[In 2011, 86 percent of people arrested trying to cross \[the southern border into the United States\] were from Mexico; in 2019, 81 percent were \[not surprisingly, if you are familiar with what is happening in the Dry Corridor\] from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.](#)"

Returning to this person's comment, allow me to repeat a portion of it: "Over the past few years especially, I have felt that the sense of nationalism and patriotism in the United States has outweighed the compassion and empathy we should have for other human beings on our planet. While people's feeling of pride for their country is great, I don't believe that it should be placed ahead of caring for other people and other countries."

In 2018, the then President of the United States, Donald "[Trump...called a caravan of Central American migrants heading toward the U.S.-Mexico border an 'invasion' and pledged to use the military to stop people from entering the U.S.](#)": "[This is an invasion of](#)

[our Country and our Military is waiting for you!](#) the president tweeted." 5000 US troops were deployed to the border in what the Pentagon named "Operation Faithful Patriot."

The profound irony here is that "[Central America is among the most vulnerable regions on the planet to climate change, despite producing less than 1% of global carbon emissions.](#)" In dramatic contrast, the United States emitted roughly 25% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

In other words, the US is playing a leading role in bringing about a situation that devastated the lives of millions of our southern neighbors. However, with little choice than to become climate migrants, when these neighbors come to us looking for a new life, we respond with deadly, military force.

Sadly, this hints at the future, as we have seemingly already decided how we are going to act during the climate crisis with respect to humanitarian aid.

A lot of the time we Americans don't recognize how climate change isn't just an environmental issue but a social issue as well. The Green New Deal does an amazing job at acknowledging the social issues that have arisen as a result of climate change. Americans are going to... countries in the Middle East and fighting these wars in order to secure oil. While there fighting these wars, they're ruining the conditions of innocent people who live in war zones. It's disheartening to see the measures Americans are willing to go in order to secure oil. This is why just as Ken said important to vote for candidates that are willing to put our climate first since if this issue isn't solved soon we won't see a future on earth. If candidates see how important the general population views the climate they will begin to support pro-climate legislation such as the Green New Deal.

In the past 30 years, the United States has fought two major wars, the Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War beginning in 2003, in a part of the world rich in oil. Arguably, these wars fought were over securing just who would control that oil. Consequently, as this person notes, "[i]t's disheartening to see the measures Americans are willing to go in order to secure oil."

When we talk about the cost of petroleum oil, we generally referred to the financial cost, the cost in dollars, such as the cost per gallon of gasoline. However, there are all sorts of costs to securing oil.

Tens of thousands of people, including civilians, died during the Gulf War. And there were environmental costs. Iraq intentionally "[dumped 400 million...gallons...of crude oil into the Persian Gulf, causing the largest offshore oil spill in history at that time,](#)" and set fire to 700 oil wells, thereby, as this person notes, "ruining the conditions of innocent people who live in war zones."

When we fill up our tank at a local gas station, we nearly always forget about these extraordinary costs and how unfair and unjust this is to all sorts of people, such as those living in this war zone.

So far, we have largely been discussing social justice issues that are a consequence of the climate crisis. In other words, how people across the globe, many of whom did little to contribute to the crisis, will be impacted by climate change.

However, as this person rightly notes, social justice issues arise before we even burn the extracted fossil fuels. This happens all across the planet, and not just during wars.

For example, if you were under the impression that Egypt or Libya was the largest oil producer in Africa, think again, as "[Nigeria is Africa's main oil producer...The petroleum industry accounts ...for almost 90 percent of all export value](#)" in Nigeria. However, this does not at all translate into wealth for the Nigerian people, where the per capita income is under \$2400 (US dollars) per year.

This is in part because of corruption and in part because the oil companies making a profit there are from foreign countries, such as the United States. Three of the biggest oil companies in Nigeria are US companies: Exxon, Chevron, and Shell.

In short, the fossil fuel economy creates all sorts of justice issues for all sorts of people across the planet.

The US is really internally two separate countries, the wealthy and privileged, and poorer, primarily BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). We live two different experiences, with the former oppressing the latter. Although the US has outlawed segregation, and although we've relinquished many of our imperial territorial possessions, it's clear that these power hierarchies are still in place. The histories are impossible to ignore, both in developing nations like Bangladesh, and in minority communities right in our cities. It's disgusting. The environmental movement has to be intersectional. Solutions offered like electric cars are only for the privileged global elite, when as Ken mentions only 0.4% of Bangladeshis own a car. I want to scream, it's all so unfair. This is why I like the Green New Deal. Its authors acknowledge these inequalities, and focus on addressing them. Different communities will have different solutions to climate change, and we kind of rely on those in power to understand this reality and work to simultaneously fix climate change and fix the systemic issues with how this country treats the poor.

This person aptly and concisely notes, "[t]he environmental movement has to be intersectional." If we ignore how the climate crisis is impacting BIPOC people in the US and across the planet, billions of people will suffer unjustly.

Hence, we really need to look at where environmental issues and social justice issues collide, as it is at these intersection points that human suffering is already occurring.

Here are two examples. In order to address the climate crisis, we need to end coal extraction in the US, as well as dramatically downsize the air transportation industry. The problem is that these industries employ many people. [The air transportation industry directly employs around half a million Americans](#) and indirectly far more.

What will happen to people in these industries - along with many more industries – when we reinvent our economy in response to the climate crisis? Millions of lives could be devastated.

Hence, the Green New Deal sees this issue holistically, as it is designed to protect individuals who would be negatively impacted by, for example, the downsizing of the air transportation industry. It does so by providing unemployment benefits, access to education, guaranteed healthcare, and so forth.

We also need to squarely confront the fact, as this person rightly notes, that some of the "[s]olutions...[to the climate crisis]...like electric cars are only for the privileged global elite, when as Ken mentions only 0.4% of Bangladeshis own a car. I want to scream, it's all so unfair."

In part because of colonialism, the fossil fuel economy that emerged in the past two hundred years has been profoundly unjust to most people on the planet, as only certain individuals in wealthy countries benefited by this economy.

When we make lifestyle changes and transition into a new economy based on renewable energy, the danger is that this profound injustice will only be reproduced. As this person rightly notes, electric cars are a prime example. It doesn't matter whether they are electric or not, wealthy people in wealthy companies will continue to have their cars, while poor people will still be without them.

The solution is not to give cars to everyone on the planet, as this is, of course, completely unsustainable. Rather, we need to reimagine how we get around, so that everyone in the US (and across the planet) has equal access to sustainable transportation.

If we fail to do this, we will build a world where the inequalities of the past will live on in the future.

However, as daunting as all this sounds, we are presented with a remarkable opportunity to work at righting the wrongs of the past and build a world that is not only more sustainable, but is more just and fair to people across the planet, including BIPOC communities.