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A Research Agenda for Climate Justice

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5. National climate-mitigation policy: the spatial framing of (in)justice claims

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Introduction

Mary Robinson, founder of the Mary Robinson Foundation: Climate Justice, describes climate justice as a human-centred approach to managing climate change based around safeguarding the rights of people most affected by climate change while ensuring that justice also underpins low-carbon transitions, including people's right to development (Robinson 2018). These are compelling ideals, yet progress towards integrating climate justice into policy remains faltering in many countries, particularly when it comes to measures to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Controversies over climate mitigation policy typically centre on the economic impacts of initiatives and their implications for consumer lifestyles, but it is also important to appreciate the potential for actions to control climate change to trigger disputes over how notions of fairness should be defined and applied where climate policies impinge on other societal justice concerns (Bailey 2017).

My goal in this chapter is to argue that climate justice scholarship and activism need to pay greater attention to how justice on climate issues is contested within real-world political debates. The climate justice literature has made important progress in articulating the principles of climate justice and in pressing for their incorporation into decision-making (Okereke 2010, Schlosberg 2012). However, less attention has been paid to how climate justice negotiates its relationship with other economic and social justice concerns affected by climate initiatives. My contention is that closer examination of how notions of justice are debated within climate politics is essential to avoid climate justice being treated as somehow isolable from, or axiomatically superior to, other justice concerns. What is needed instead is a consciously relational outlook in climate justice research that actively explores how tensions between climate justice and other forms of justice are expressed and influence the

development of climate policy (Klinsky et al. 2012, Schlosberg et al. 2019). This also implies a need for conceptual analysis to be complemented to a greater degree by empirical investigation of the distinctive politics, power relations and opportunities influencing how climate justice is defined, debated and applied in different geographical settings (Bulkeley et al. 2014).

Thinking about justice on climate issues as a contested concept in turn invites attention to the phenomenon of *justice claim-making* in climate politics, whereby actors participating in policy debates employ justice arguments to defend standpoints that might not gain support unless attached to an (in)justice claim (Beckman and Page 2008). In simple terms, disagreeing with a proposed action because of differences of opinion or because it clashes with an actor's interests is likely to be less persuasive than if the action can be portrayed as unjust. Consideration then needs to be paid to the tactics used to gain traction for such (in)justice claims. These may include mobilizing accepted discourses about the importance of economic growth for societal well-being, utilizing the media to promote viewpoints (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007), or personalizing issues by identifying victims and perpetrators of climate and other injustices (DiFrancesco and Young 2011). Another less researched tactic involves attaching spatial representations to (in)justice claims in order to enhance their appeal with key audiences by creating links between injustices and identifiable groups and/or places (Bailey 2017). Corporations, for instance, might be given short shrift for stressing the commercial effects of climate policies, even if they accuse governments of acting prejudicially against the company or sector. However, similar arguments may gain greater sympathy if corporations stress the risks to national economies or employment in areas that depend on the sector. Alternatively, opponents of climate initiatives may attempt to influence policy by accusing governments of imposing unfair and irresponsible burdens on the economy because other countries are not taking on similar responsibilities to reduce their emissions. In essence, these and other types of spatial anchoring seek to appeal to the concerns of selected audiences by crafting tailored messages about the injustices of climate action or inaction, and can particularly influence policy debates where they also target politicians' electoral incentives and media reporting further erodes public support for climate action.

Spatial framing and justice claim-making in national climate policy

To explore the influence of justice claim-making on climate policy, I examine the ways spatial constructions of (in)justice have shaped the evolution of national climate mitigation policy in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. These countries provide interesting contrasts in the use of spatial representation to depict justice issues associated with climate change and climate policy. Climate change remains a politically venomous issue in Australia and the US, and even when they have tried, the two federal governments have made limited headway in establishing coherent national mitigation strategies. In the US, the Trump administration has sought to repeal many of the climate measures introduced by Donald Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, while Australia has engaged in protracted and acrimonious debates over the introduction of carbon pricing. A Carbon Pricing Mechanism was legislated by Julia Gillard's minority Labor government in 2011 after two previous failed attempts, but this was repealed in 2014 by the successor centre-right coalition administration, led by Tony Abbott (Bailey 2017). In New Zealand, a national emissions trading scheme started operating in late 2008. However, until the election of a Labour-led coalition led by Jacinda Ardern in 2017, the policy was constructed in ways that avoided exerting significant downward pressure on emissions (Bertram and Terry 2010). In the UK, the Climate Change Act of 2008 established a statutory long-term emissions target to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050 and five-year interim carbon budgets. However, the policy has moved into more challenging terrain since 2010 as deeper emissions cuts have been required and tensions have accumulated within the UK's cross-party consensus on climate change (Gillard 2016).

The evidence from these countries indicates that opponents of stronger climate action have shown considerable skill in developing spatially and socially recognizable discourses about the injustices of climate policy, emphasizing the failure of other countries to act and the economic impacts of policies on vulnerable regions. Supporters of stronger climate mitigation policy, in contrast, have relied more heavily on narratives highlighting the responsibility on wealthier nations to lead low-emissions transitions. National and local climate justice issues have also featured in pro-climate action narratives but usually in abstract and long-term future-gazing ways that have weakened their traction in debates on national climate policy. Particularly within the US, Australia and New Zealand, clear associations can be identified between the use of national, regional and local injustice claims to obstruct or dilute climate initiatives and the difficulties experienced by governments in introducing or strengthening national climate mitigation policy.

Framing climate justice in an international and national context

The portrayal of climate change as an international justice issue has been one of the main arguments used by non-government organizations and academics to press for stronger climate action by wealthier nations. In its more straightforward usage, it invokes a non-judgemental moral responsibility to protect fellow human beings around the world and in the future from the adverse impacts of climate change (Gardiner 2011). Other variants are more forthright about the need to redress historical and ongoing injustices experienced by countries in the Global South resulting from the ecologically unequal exchange of resources and energy with the Global North through the application of international climate justice principles (Godard 2017, Roberts and Parks 2009).

Such global representations of climate justice have also been employed extensively by political leaders to build support for climate action internationally and in their own countries. In their speeches at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris in 2015, US President Obama and Chinese Premier Xi Jinping both stressed the international justice dimensions of climate change to communicate their agendas to their negotiating partners and domestic audiences. When Obama declared that, ‘As the leader of the world’s largest economy and the second largest emitter ... the United States of America not only recognizes our role in creating this problem, we embrace our responsibility to do something about it’, he used international justice framings simultaneously to acknowledge the US’s responsibilities and to press for reciprocal commitments from other countries (Obama 2015). This framing, also aimed at convincing political actors at home that climate action by the US would not threaten its economy, was mirrored in Xi Jinping’s call for international partnership and equity, a reassurance to other countries about China’s intentions but equal insistence that any deal should enable China to continue its economic and development strategies: ‘Tackling climate change is a shared mission for mankind ... Let us join hands to contribute to the establishment of an equitable and effective global mechanism on climate change, work for global sustainable development at a high level and bring about new international relations featuring win–win cooperation’ (Xi 2015).

While politicians have used international climate justice framings both for offertory purposes and to assert entitlements in international negotiations, they have also been used extensively

in domestic politics to legitimate new climate initiatives. One more notorious example of this was former-Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's repeated description of climate change as a 'great moral challenge' between 2007 and 2010 during debates on his government's proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (Rudd 2008). Although the scheme faced strong industry opposition and was withdrawn after being rejected twice by the Australian Senate (Bailey et al. 2012), other leaders have enjoyed greater success using international framings of climate justice. As UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair was energetic in using moral framings to push for international cooperation on climate change and as a way of laying the ground for the UK's Climate Change Act. In 2004, Blair announced his desire for major industrialized nations to show greater climate leadership, declaring that: 'The world's richest nations in the G8 have a responsibility to lead the way: for the strong nations to better help the weak' (Blair 2004).

Accentuating the international climate responsibilities of wealthier countries, while ethically and practically self-evident to some, nevertheless exposes new climate measures to accusations of proffering one-sided sacrifices. One option to restrict the scope for counter-claims of national injustice is to develop messages aligning proposed actions with core national interests. This reasoning featured prominently in the 2008 and 2011 Garnaut climate change reviews commissioned to inform Australia's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and Carbon Pricing Mechanism, both of which claimed that climate action by Australia offered national benefits in combating climate insecurity and would give the country competitive advantages in low-carbon innovation (Garnaut 2008, 2011). The corresponding sub-text was that failing to act would lead to adverse consequences and, by extension, injustice for future generations. According to the 2011 Garnaut review,

Modelling showed that the growth rate for Australian national income in the second half of the 21st century would be higher with mitigation than without. The present value of the market benefits this century fell just short of the costs of mitigation policy. However, when we took account of the value of Australians' lives beyond the 21st century, the value of our natural and social heritage, health and other things that weren't measured in the economic modelling, and the value of insuring against calamitous change, strong mitigation was clearly in the national interest. (Garnaut 2011: x)

One conspicuous omission from these portrayals, however, was any direct invocations of justice to underpin the case for climate action. National interest was instead presented as a matter of rationality, supported by general referents to social heritage, health and ‘national utility or welfare over time’ (Garnaut 2008: 15). It is perhaps not difficult to see how, for public and business audiences contemplating the prospect of paying more for goods and services as a result of carbon pricing, the lack of reinforcement of links between climate change and fairness left them unclear as to what inaction on climate change meant for them and unpersuaded of the value of carbon pricing except in respect of altruism for future generations.

Opponents of climate mitigation often offer starkly different interpretations of international climate justice to rationalize their stance against the strengthening of measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. One common tactic is to contrast proposed measures by one country with the absence of equivalent action by other countries as a way of arguing that the policy would create disproportionate risks to critical national interests and should be recalibrated to reflect commitments made by other countries (Garnaut 2011). From the George W. Bush administration to the Trump administration in the US, officials have routinely used national competitiveness and free-rider arguments to depict China and India as gaining unfair advantages in the global economy at the expense of US interests (Harris 2013, 2016). Defensive comparisons with other countries have also been a recurring theme in Australian climate politics, from John Howard’s refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in 2003 for fear it ‘would destroy jobs and the competitiveness of Australian industry’ to Tony Abbott’s pitch to make the 2014 general election a referendum on Australia’s ‘economically devastating’ carbon tax (Rootes 2014, The Age 2003).

This reasoning has proven especially effective in stirring up anti-climate justice sentiments when used in conjunction with narratives emphasizing the insignificance of actions by individual countries in reducing global emissions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, insignificance has formed a key argument among actors resisting reforms to strengthen the New Zealand emissions trading scheme (Bailey and Jackson Inderberg 2016). The New Zealand Labour Party has challenged this assessment, arguing: ‘It is not good enough to say we are too small to matter – most countries individually could claim the same’ (Labour 2017). Aligning sectoral interests with national interests has nevertheless formed a key defence against pricing biological emissions from agriculture, despite the sector making up nearly 50 per cent of New

Zealand national emissions. The foundation for this argument has been that agriculture is vital to New Zealand's national economy and that pricing biological emissions would damage the sector's competitiveness, unless other countries introduced similar measures, because it is strongly export-oriented and a price-taker on international commodity markets. Not only would New Zealand farmers be penalized, the argument continues, the move would yield no reduction in global emissions because production would simply move to countries with less emissions-efficient agricultural sectors (Cooper and Rosin 2014). Prior to winning the Australian Prime Ministership, Tony Abbott similarly argued that Australia only accounted for one per cent of global carbon emissions and that China's annual increase in emissions matched Australia's entire carbon output. According to this logic, climate leadership by Australia risked damaging industry but would make limited difference to global emissions (Abbott 2009), and even the European Union felt the need to introduce safeguards against carbon leakage arguments when reforming its emissions trading scheme in 2009 (van Asselt and Brewer 2010). However, the extra strength of justice arguments against pricing agricultural emissions in New Zealand was its focus on a profession respected for its industry and (sometimes flatteringly) for its custodianship of New Zealand's green, clean image (Cooper and Rosin 2014), a tactic that magnified the sense of injustice against New Zealand's national interests from the implementation of 'reckless' climate measures.

Even in countries with more ambitious climate policies, comparable justice claims and counterclaims have occurred. In the UK, for example, Carter and Jacobs (2014) argue that the introduction of the 2008 Climate Change Act was significantly aided by the government's use of three focusing events – the Gleneagles G8 Summit in 2005, the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006, and the publication the *Stern Review* (Stern 2007) – to frame climate change as an urgent environmental and economic issue. In particular, the economic frame – based around the threats to the global and UK economy from climate change and the national rewards from building a low-carbon economy – combined with Prime Minister Blair's moral oratory helped to build new constituencies for climate policy and enlarged the political space for policy development. However, later institutional analysis by Gillard (2016) suggests the surfacing of more inward-looking portrayals of the UK's national interest following the global financial crisis and the onset of government austerity. This shift was expressed in a diminishing accent on the UK's moral imperative to act urgently against dangerous climate impacts and to correct previous policy failures in favour of rhetoric justifying the setting of future carbon budgets based on their ability to produce economic and

social co-benefits. The practical effect of this included the replacement of support across the political spectrum for carbon budgets that were as ambitious as economically possible during the first three budget-setting rounds with a more cautious and contested approach to the fourth and fifth budgets (Gillard 2016).

Contesting climate justice at the regional and local level

Supporters and opponents of climate action have both framed climate change as an international and national justice issue. However, opponents of new climate initiatives have been conspicuously more energetic in invoking claims about the regional and local injustices of climate mitigation policy. During the 2016 US presidential election campaign, Donald Trump made major gains in states like Wyoming, West Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania by pledging to revive the fortunes of coal mining and other energy-intensive industry communities: ‘We will unleash America’s energy, including shale, oil, natural gas and clean coal. We will put our miners back to work. We will put our steel workers back to work’ (Schrock et al. 2017: 14). The critical feature of Trump’s campaign was not simply its pinpointing of justice narratives towards regions where there was a chance of electoral gains, but also the appeal to wider emotional grievances about overregulation and the neglect of US regions and blue-collar workers by Washington elites, while at the same time rebuking previous administrations for allowing other countries to steal unfair advantages. Trump also found an unintentional ally on this issue in Hillary Clinton, who, at a town hall meeting in Columbus, Ohio, in March 2016, remarked that she would bring economic opportunity in coal-mining areas through renewable energy and ‘put[ting] a lot of coal miners and coal companies out of business’ (Clinton 2017). Although Clinton’s intention was to project a vision of positive transitions for coal-reliant regions and the global climate, it drew fierce criticism for appearing to trivialize coal workers’ concerns and deny them fair treatment.

Regional and local injustice claims similarly became a hallmark of debates over Australia’s Carbon Pricing Mechanism. Barnaby Joyce, the then Shadow Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, and an outspoken critic of carbon pricing, orchestrated media releases specifying areas he claimed would be devastated by a measure the opposition political parties pejoratively dubbed ‘the carbon tax’:

New South Wales [NSW] Treasury figures show that the carbon tax will lead to 31,000 lost jobs in NSW but over 26,000 of these would be in regional Australia, including 18,500 in the

Hunter, 7,000 in the Illawarra and 1,000 jobs in the central West.... If [the minister] wants to continue his 'embrace the challenge' tour of regional Australia he needs to come clean [about] how they are meant to embrace the challenge of fewer employment opportunities.... A carbon tax will clearly hurt regional Australia the worst (Joyce 2011).

Parallel warnings from *The Australian* newspaper swelled this regional injustice narrative:

Explosive economic modelling warns that the carbon tax could force eight black [bituminous] coalmines to close, costing nearly 3000 jobs in regional NSW and more than 1100 jobs in Queensland in its first three years. Independent modelling commissioned by the Australian Coal Association warns that the number of early mine closures could reach 18 within nine years and result in Australia forgoing coal sales of \$22 billion from existing mines over the next decade (The Australian 2011).

Other noteworthy features of these portrayals were their combining of regional injustice narratives with references to 'independent' or government modelling and the specification of short- and longer-term effects to authenticate claims about carbon pricing while heightening their cognitive-emotive impact through rhetoric seeking to trigger aggrieved reactions (Schrock et al. 2017). This linguistic tactic was extended to the level of individual cities and households through warnings of blackouts as energy companies struggled with the costs of the pricing mechanism, Tony Abbott's references as leader of the opposition to carbon pricing as 'a great big tax on everything', and accusations that the price of a Sunday roast dinner would spiral to AU\$100 (McNair 2014). Such claims further personalized and dramatized carbon pricing by constructing innocent victims and by suggesting the policy would negatively affect every aspect of people's lives. Outrage about these 'instantaneous' impacts was further heightened by scientifically questionable allegations about the lack of environmental benefits of carbon pricing. In 2012, the year following the introduction of the Carbon Pricing Mechanism, Joyce – a renowned political brawler – remarked during an interview: 'Has it become remarkably colder? Are we now living in a global nirvana because we've brought in the carbon tax? No, it's exactly where we left it. However, people are definitely poorer because of the carbon tax, and it's done nothing to the climate' (Sydney Morning Herald 2012).

The portrayal of regional victims in injustice arguments also featured heavily in disputes over whether to include agricultural biological emissions in the New Zealand emissions trading scheme. As noted earlier, the imagery of New Zealand as an agricultural nation continues to hold high currency in New Zealand society despite growing concerns about the impacts of agricultural intensification on forests, soil erosion and water quality (Driver et al. 2018). The prospect of pricing biological agricultural emissions consequently sparked accusations of farmers being persecuted by ‘city-dwelling greenies’ who misunderstood the short lifespan of methane emissions and the lack of opportunities available for farmers to reduce biological emissions except for destocking and converting productive land to forestry, both of which eroded rural livelihoods (Jackson Inderberg et al. 2018). Further disagreements emerged over proposals for sector-level monitoring and enforcement of agricultural emissions, which lobby groups claimed denied individual farmers the opportunity to benefit from cost-effective farm-scale initiatives (Cooper and Rosin 2014). Framing this as a victims-and-villains story in which well-meaning farmers have been prevented from ‘doing the right thing’ by urban elites has strong similarities with the divisive international comparisons used by US and Australian governments to justify refusal to adopt stricter emissions targets and policies. It also reinforces the importance of identifying worthy, downtrodden victims to contrast against blameworthy perpetrators to accentuate the perceived injustice of new climate policies (Schlosberg 2012). In reality, New Zealand agriculture is a well-organized, industrialized sector that benefits from significant foreign direct investment, but cultural images of farmers as guardians of Arcadian ideals and bedrocks of the economy have fuelled emotive claims about lack of fairness in the design of emissions trading in New Zealand (Cooper and Rosin 2014).

Importantly, discussion of the regional and local injustices of climate policy has been noticeably more muted in countries that have made greater progress in developing national mitigation strategies. The UK especially illustrates the effects of consensus among the main political parties in diminishing the capacity of climate policy opponents to provoke controversy through injustice claims. In contrast, sectarian climate politics and the greater lobbying power of extractive and energy-intensive industries in the US and Australia have contributed to rancorous disputes over the justice implications of climate policy, where attacks have continued to haemorrhage the credibility of policies even after their adoption. New Zealand represents a more mixed case; although the National Party resisted emissions trading legislation while in opposition, neither main political party has been prepared to

oppose carbon pricing outright and debates have instead focused on how much action New Zealand should take to do its ‘fair share’ on emissions reduction – to avoid falling foul of global justice narratives – while not undermining the economy and well-being of key sectors. Once in government, the National Party nevertheless used national and local justice arguments to justify reducing the scheme’s practical impact. The spatial framing of (in)justice claims, either for ethical reasons or pretextually to defend vested interests, has nevertheless exerted a profound influence on climate policy across the countries examined.

Rethinking the spatial representation of climate justice

Particularly in the US, Australia and New Zealand, opponents of stronger action on climate change have scored notable successes in obstructing or diluting climate initiatives by employing multi-scalar injustice narratives that stress the unfair impacts of measures like carbon pricing at the national, regional, local and household levels. In contrast, advocates of stronger climate action have tended to rely more heavily on representations of climate change as a global justice issue and on appeals for wealthier nations to show climate leadership. Even where they have attempted to stress the long-term national benefits of action, these have rarely included explicit messaging about the potential distributive injustices for their countries of failing to act on climate change. The evidence indicates that these more abstract representations of climate justice often struggle to capture the imagination of audiences compared with the more personalized justice messaging of their political rivals.

If climate justice is to become more of a transformative force in national climate politics, climate justice scholars and practitioners need to find more imaginative ways to spatialize the justice arguments for stronger climate action. This is likely to require a more direct focus on national, regional and local concerns, and on co-benefits over and above stand-alone arguments about constraining and managing climate change. Hillary Clinton herself expressed regret at saying she would put coal miners and coal companies out of business even though she also stressed the prospect of bringing new economic opportunities to coal country by incentivizing renewable energy (Clinton 2017). The negative element of this message dominated media coverage when an alternative framing reminding audiences of the harmful effects of the coal industry on the health and well-being of people living in coal-mining areas may have made them more responsive to her vision of a clean energy future. New ways of spatializing the justice arguments for greater climate action might equally invoke images of the possible effects of climate change on individual areas and sections of

society, though the spatial and temporal unpredictability of climate impacts makes such framings prone to allegations of alarmism and of making misleading connections between weather events and climate change. Equally, challenges exist in finding framings that increase the *saliency* of climate justice while also offering persuasive narratives about the possibility of effective and equitable action (O'Neill et al. 2013). The potential for similar spatial framings to produce different responses in different countries also underscores the need for bespoke approaches to reduce psychological distancing between audiences' underlying sympathies with the notion of climate justice and the practicalities of advancing climate policy (Spence et al. 2012).

Possibilities for navigating such difficulties include aspirational narratives emphasizing the potential for cities and regions to become hotspots of cleantech innovation, and governments as facilitators of effective and fair transitions from carbon-intensive activities (Gibbs and O'Neill 2014). More premonitory framings might stress the competitive risks and unequal outcomes of lagging behind in the de-carbonization of the global economy, although research indicates that cautionary messages often elicit mixed responses, while unfocused warnings may again lack credibility (Spence et al. 2012). Either way, increasing the relevance of the justice issues associated with climate change to the locality of audiences and identifiable social groups is crucial in promoting greater willingness to accept or tolerate new mitigation responsibilities.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that research on climate justice needs to pay greater attention to exploring conflicts between climate justice and other societal justice concerns. Climate justice scholarship has made important strides in exploring the principles of a distinctive climate justice and how these ideas should inform decision-making on climate issues. However, it has paid less attention to how tensions between climate justice and other justice concerns have hampered attempts by governments to respond to the challenges of mitigating and adapting to climate change (Barrett 2012, Bulkeley et al. 2014). Understanding how these tensions are expressed and managed requires scholars to move beyond normatively focused analyses of climate justice and to develop deeper understandings of how political actors utilize arguments about the economic and social injustices of climate action (or inaction) to build legitimacy and support for their stances towards climate initiatives. Examining climate justice instead as one of many interpretations of justice competing to influence climate policy

may provide important insights on why – beyond national and commercial interests – rights-centred approaches to managing climate change often struggle to achieve political traction.

Spatial (in)justice framings have been used extensively within national climate politics to accentuate and give personality to justice arguments for and against more purposeful action on climate change. So far, opponents of stronger climate policy have spatialized the injustices of climate initiatives in more diverse and persuasive ways than have those advocating more decisive action. Regardless of whether these framings reflect ulterior motives or sincere concerns about the impacts of climate policies on national, regional and local economies, climate justice research needs to respond by finding new and imaginative ways to spatialize the justice arguments for stronger climate action.

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