

Advocating for Climate Equity

About: Michel Bourban, *Penser la justice climatique*,
PUF

by Pierre André

Climate change does not affect all of us equally. Developed countries are the largest contributors to global warming, but the main victims are the poorest and future generations. This raises a rarely addressed moral and political problem.

Climate justice is undoubtedly one of the most important issues of the 21st century. But to date, the question has attracted little interest in France. Michel Bourban fills this gap with the first comprehensive work in French dedicated to the specific issue of environmental inequality: *Penser la justice climatique*.¹ This major (429 pages) and well-documented work starts by seeking to establish a moral diagnosis of climate change. It goes on to develop political proposals to address this vast challenge. Far from presenting a philosophy disconnected from reality, the author—who is not afraid to deal with scientific and economic data or to take a stand in favour of concrete policies—develops an applied approach to ethics and political philosophy.

¹ Ségolène Royal's manifesto (*Manifeste pour une justice climatique*, Paris, Plon, 2017) remains highly allusive and Olivier Godard's essay (*La justice climatique mondiale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2015) essentially seeks to deconstruct the concept.

Theorising Climate Injustice

The work begins with a serious summary of scientific data, fully embracing the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the matter. Beyond raising the usual alarms, here the specificity of the issue of justice involves an examination of climate change through the lens of inequality. Michel Bourban clearly demonstrates that inequality exists at two levels, both in the contribution to the causes of global warming as well as in the vulnerability to its effects. On the one hand, greenhouse gas emissions are very unequally spread over countries, and on the other hand, the effects of climate change are also extremely unequal, and primarily affect the least privileged as well as future generations. Thus, the populations of developing countries and future generations are the most affected by the effects of climate change, although they have not yet, or not greatly, contributed to its causes, unlike the present and past populations of developed countries.

But how does one distinguish unfair inequality from tolerable inequality? How does one shift from a language of inequality to that of injustice? This is where the philosopher steps in to complete data from economics and the social sciences by questioning what constitutes legitimate value judgements. M. Bourban's approach is based on human rights (p. 71), as the effects of climate change threaten the rights to life, health and subsistence. This widely accepted moral foundation serves to define a threshold of universal dignity. In addition, human rights are based on an unquestionable principle: the harm principle, not underpinned by any particular theory of justice. This principle is also reinterpreted in order to encompass the harms provoked by the mere participation in a system that promotes 'structural injustices' (p. 91).

As inequality related to climate change disregards both human rights and the harm principle, policies to reduce emissions, to promote climate change adaptation and to compensate loss and damage need to be implemented. M. Bourban questions the fairness of burden-sharing by adopting a distributive approach to justice. He examines various distributive principles in order to interpret the UN norm of 'common but differentiated responsibilities' and 'respective capabilities'. At the end of his analysis, he declares his support for a hybrid approach, a combination of the 'polluter pays' principle, applicable to recent and future emissions, and the 'beneficiary pays' principle for so-called historic emissions, or those prior to the publication of the first IPCC report in 1990 (p. 116). A fair sharing of the burden along these lines would

help reconcile the fight against climate change with the development demands of the poorest countries.

The problem of global justice is compounded by the issue of intergenerational justice, and the author underscores the tragic nature of this injustice. After defusing the vast philosophical problems of the non-existence and non-identity of future people, the author uses cinematographic and literary works of science fiction, like *The Day After*, *Snowpiercer* or even *Mad Max* to illustrate the present generations' responsibility to future generations. These post-apocalyptic narratives allow us to fathom the scale of our responsibility in the various possible worlds we might leave to those who will come after us (p. 163). Imagination becomes a means of compensating for the lack of moral appreciation of the consequences of daily acts.

Ideal, Feasibility and Motivations

This first stage that clarifies the moral issues involved in the issue of climate change is important in itself as it contrasts with the mainly economic and technical dominant discourses. But M. Bourban's book goes further by looking at the policies that would need to be implemented to reduce climate injustice. From this perspective, he seeks to reconcile the ideal of justice with political feasibility. He identifies two main obstacles to climate justice: the institutional weaknesses of international climate governance, and the lack of motivation states demonstrate when it comes to fulfilling their climate-related duties (p. 197).

Acknowledging that the Paris Agreement signed in 2015 at the COP 21 conference represents progress, but remains far from sufficient to bring about the changes required to bring about climate justice; M. Bourban suggests reforming the UN system of climate governance. Two proposals are particularly noteworthy. The first consists in institutionalising the use of tools to monitor the Nationally Determined Contributions made by states. This would ensure they actually respect their commitments, but also that each state makes a fair contribution to the global effort (p. 233). The second is to abandon the concept of 'climate debt', considered too divisive and responsible for the paralysis of international negotiations on the issue of burden-sharing, and replacing it with the idea of a 'carbon budget'. The author believes this will satisfy the requirements of justice, while gaining the support of developed and emerging countries (p. 213).

The work also differs from the classical theories of justice in the area of motivation. Recognizing that the duty to fight injustice has so far been insufficient to encourage states to act, M. Bourban suggests distinguishing moral justification from motivation. He thus identifies prudential or amoral motivations that could motivate states to act, while pursuing their own interests. The vision of catastrophic climate change, beyond certain tipping points, and the related global systemic risks, like armed conflict, terrorism or even uncontrolled migration, should prompt even the least vulnerable states and those with the highest emissions to implement ambitious climate policies (p. 241).

Putting a Price on Carbon

In an even more policy-oriented approach, the author disqualifies some climate policies and seeks to justify others. He rules out geo-engineering, or the intentional manipulation of climate to curb global warming, as a false, dangerous solution. In addition to the risks these practices could represent for humanity, geo-engineering raises major problems of international governance and fairness, as it could be implemented unilaterally to benefit specific populations to the detriment of others (p. 258). This is a welcome analysis as the matter is attracting increasing interest amongst political decision-makers and entrepreneurs, but remains unfamiliar to a wider audience.

On the contrary, M. Bourban argues in favour of a 'hybrid market mechanism', a combination of a global cap-and-trade scheme for heavy industries and a carbon tax for more scattered carbon emissions. He thus considers it necessary to put a price on carbon to bring about a global energy transition (p. 284-7). Serving both as an indicator and an incentive, this could encourage economic actors to transform their activities. Such a mechanism would be a means of reflecting the demands of justice through quota allocation and differentiated taxation between states. Along with this proposal, the author suggests a necessary repeal of the vast subsidies for fossil fuels that exist all over the world.

To go along with these reforms, the author believes it is also necessary to draw support from civil society, in which he places great hope. An international social movement to support climate justice has progressively developed around NGOs like

350.org and initiatives like Blockadia or Alternatiba. The author sees these initiatives as capable of creating change and ending the current political inertia.

A Controversial Framework

While M. Bourban's moral diagnosis is overall convincing, we can express some reservations regarding the relevance of his practical proposals. To start with, the convergence between the demands of climate justice and the prudential motivations he puts forward as a means of implementing them is questionable. Is it really judicious to use emotions of this type of (fear of migration or terrorism that has no precise causal link with climate change) to encourage actions that promote climate justice? Here, the hypothesis of a convergence between amoral motivations and justice may well be shattered. After all, human rights stipulate, for example, that climate exiles should be welcomed, and the author in fact defends their interests (p. 83).

The relevance of a global carbon price also provokes scepticism. While this is a very attractive solution in theory, as it seeks to change everyone's behaviour on the basis of a unique indicator, is it not, in reality, too simple and impractical? After the failure of the Kyoto Protocol mechanisms and the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme (p. 308-14), should we really invest our hopes in in this type of system? Given the state of international climate negotiations, the ability of the states to agree on a reformed global emissions market, quota allocation and a global carbon tax seems debatable. Some think the obsession with a global carbon price is a pipe dream that maintains the status quo of climate politics.² Would it not be more useful to invest time and energy in promoting theoretically less perfect but actually more realistic policies such as sectorial policies encouraging the development of renewable energy, low-carbon mobility and reduced meat consumption?

Lastly, the focus on a state-centric and international approach to climate justice in the book is somewhat regrettable. Quite rightly, M. Bourban considers that states are the most capable of addressing the urgent task of taking collective responsibility for climate change (p. 93) and that global governance is a necessity (p. 347). However, the weakness of the Paris Agreement and Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from it illustrate the importance of second-order responsibilities of other collective entities

² Antonin Pottier, *Comment les économistes réchauffent la planète*, Paris, Seuil, 2016, pp.212, 236.

(regions, cities, companies) and individuals in the struggle for climate justice. Today, these types of actors often pave the way for the states that refuse to actively address the climate issue.

Conclusion

While M. Bourban's moral diagnosis is convincing and welcome, his political suggestions can be seen as disappointing. The focus chosen by the author is debatable and prevents him from paying greater attention to the responsibilities of non-state actors, which is detrimental to the viability of the suggested solutions. An approach concerned with political feasibility should also have looked more closely at the different scales of climate justice, from the local to the global scale.

Reviewed: Michel Bourban, *Penser la justice climatique*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2018, 429 pp., 25 €.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 20 December 2018.

Translated from the French by Renuka George.

Published in booksandideas.net, 1 April 2019.