

# Unequal Environments

---

**The two most urgent problems facing humanity are economic inequality and environmental destruction. Lucas Chancel argues these two are deeply intertwined. Solutions to one must necessarily involve the other.**

---

About: Lucas Chancel, *Unsustainable Inequalities. Social Justice and the Environment*, Harvard University Press, 2020, 184 pp., \$29.95/£23.95.

Who is responsible for climate change? Typical answers range from “everyone” to the slightly more specific “everyone in the global north” (and perhaps recently China). However, for the French economist, Lucas Chancel, in *Unsustainable Inequalities*, neither of these answers are helpful or particularly accurate. Chancel, a co-director at the Paris School of Economics’ World Inequality Lab, argues we have to shift our attention to the distribution of income. The rise in economic inequality over the past several decades is connected to ecological and climate harm. Not only this, inequality is a powerful framework for understanding and addressing environmental problems. Those who contribute the least to environmental destruction are also the most vulnerable to it.

With so much written about the environmental crisis and inequality in recent years, this should be self-evident. Chancel baits readers at the beginning of the book by asking, “isn’t all this well-known and documented?” Not really. The standard story in both popular and academic discourse is something more like this: As economies develop and individuals earn a higher income, they can afford to adopt “post-material” values like environmental concern. Hence, the urbanized “bourgeois bohemians,” or “bobos,” as they are called in France, can shop at farmer’s markets,

buy electric cars, and comfortably support carbon taxes. Chancel turns this idea on its head. The richer one is, the higher their environmental footprint. Conversely, “disadvantaged populations stand to benefit the most from environmental protections” (p. 3). The implications of *Unsustainable Inequalities* are clear: we have to address climate and ecological problems while simultaneously addressing economic inequality.

## **Bridging Inequality with the Environment**

*Unsustainable Inequalities* is a short book. In three parts, however, it covers a lot of ground. Chancel’s goal is to establish growing inequality (Part One), make the connection between environmental harm and inequality (Part Two), and then propose solutions based on what was previously established (Part Three).

Chancel spends time in Part One discussing drivers of inequality in social scientific literature. While most of these drivers are not directly related to environmental matters (with the minor exception of energy prices), the discussion bolsters Chancel’s plans for mitigating inequality and environment damage. In his view, common explanations of inequality like technological change, higher earnings and demand for educated workers, and, to a lesser extent, “globalization” do not explain much. After all, countries like Sweden and the United States have similar technologies, education levels, and exposure to globalization and yet, inequality in the United States is vastly higher. The “decisive factor” (p. 53) is the weakening of the “social state” through welfare reductions, tax cuts, languishing minimum wages as well as declines in unionization and labor protections. Chancel is on firm empirical ground here and this has important implications. The state can lower inequality by reversing these trends via “green” ends and become what Éloi Laurent calls the “social-ecological state.”

The worsening of inequality means that “we do not all have the same access to natural resources, any more than we are all equally exposed to environmental risk” (p. 65). This certainly includes well-known cross-national inequalities by development levels, but also finer-grained differences by income. The richest 10% in France, for example, consume 3.6 times more energy as the bottom decile. In India, this disparity is even more extreme. Chancel also reminds us that energy consumption enjoyed by the rich, in France, India, and elsewhere happens by harming and displacing

populations elsewhere. Modern-day enclosures in the global south evict people from their land to extract more natural resources and make room for industrial agriculture.

High consumption has grim consequences for those living in what some radical environmentalists call “sacrifice zones” scattered throughout urban slums, poor suburbs, and the world’s peripheralized hinterlands. Following the literature on “environmental racism,”<sup>1</sup> Chancel discusses how the “dirtiest” economic facilities are placed near nonwhite populations due to the cheap land value and cheap “social worth” of adjacent residents. In the United States, for example, “76 percent of those who live next to the twelve most polluting plants are nonwhite” (p. 84). Poor and racialized groups will also be on the frontlines of climate disasters. Chancel’s poignant discussion on New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina gives us a dystopian view into the future when the increased frequency and severity of storms will wreak havoc on the world’s dispossessed. Knowing who is contributing most to climate change is therefore an urgent question.

## Unequal Emissions: Evidence and Solutions

The United Nation’s (UN) Kyoto Protocol in 1997 directly dealt with unequal development between countries by enshrining a “common but differentiated responsibilities” framework. Ahead of the UN’s Climate Change Conference on Parties (COP21) in Paris in 2015, Chancel and Thomas Piketty wrote a major research paper on unequal emissions to push the climate conversation towards responsibility of the very rich rather than just the (still important) role of rich countries. The issue is empirical as much as it is moral. Between 1998 and 2013, emissions inequalities decreased between countries but have increased *within* them (p. 104).

Unfortunately, the Paris conference sidelined inequality issues but they remain relevant. Since COP21, climate discussions are increasingly framed around the “Anthropocene.” The term refers to both a proposed geological periodization for our human dominated epoch but is also a byword for *collective* human responsibility. The kind of climate justice frame Chancel is advancing, however, casts doubt on how

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert D. Bullard. *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, Cambridge, MA, South End Press, 1993. Jeremy Pais, Kyle Crowder, and Liam Downey, “Unequal Trajectories: Racial and Class Differences in Residential Exposure to Industrial Hazard”, *Social Forces*, vol. 92 n° 3, 2014, pp. 1189-1215.

“collective” ecological harm really is. For example, Americans on average emit twenty-three metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (CO<sub>2e</sub>) per year. This is a lot, but when broken down by income shares, the differences are stark. Chancel reports “the poorest 50 percent emit about thirteen metric tons of CO<sub>2e</sub> per year and the wealthiest 1 percent emit at least 150 metric tons” (p. 96).

Responsibility is really a function of class. Since the poor and working classes contribute the least and are the most environmentally vulnerable, the logical conclusion of environmental justice means the rich should shoulder more responsibility for a sustainable future. That most importantly means tax increases which would simultaneously lower inequality and fund “Green New Deal” (GND) style investment. Chancel has several ideas here. States can invest heavily in retrofitting buildings, asserting public control over utilities (if not already), expand public transportation, and build grid systems to deliver renewable energy. Some things will also go a long way towards addressing other social issues, in addition to inequality. Energy cooperatives, like those in Germany, promote civic participation while public “green” jobs could create more dignified work to anyone who wants it.

Of course, such ambitious plans can only be realized *if* there is political will to fight for them. Given the level of resources at stake—something clear from Chancel’s figures on top income shares—this is no small task. In fact, the future could see politicians giving “green” justifications to preserve the unequal status quo. Chancel tells us this is precisely what happened in his native France. Early in his term, President Macron ended the wealth tax and raised carbon taxes to help pay for it without any compensatory programs (as his Ecological Minister had suggested) to the burdened working classes. This perceived unfairness was the catalyst for the anti-government *gilets jaunes* movement and should “serve as a case study of how not to reform taxation in the twenty-first century” (p. 129).

## Growing Tensions

The contribution of *Unsustainable Inequalities* is not only that it conceptually links economic inequality with environmental degradation but squares a tension between the two. He begins the book by noting the common assumption that you can only solve one at another’s expense. This idea is put to rest once we consider 1/ the

outsized role of the rich in environmental harm and that 2/ pro-environmental programs funded by tax increases benefit the poor and working classes.

An important issue that he sidesteps in squaring this tension, however, is economic growth. To be fair, bracketing growth allows Chancel to more directly advance the case for inequality. This is significant because related socio-economic discussion on the environmental crisis like recent debates between “green growth” versus “de-growth” (i.e. radically scaling back output) often overlook inequality. Yet, the prominence of these debates equally draws us to the “growth question” –doubly so because growth is connected to inequality

As Chancel’s colleague, Thomas Piketty, famously argues, inequality increases when the rate of return on capital exceeds that of growth. A slow rate of growth therefore threatens to raise inequality. It also lowers the amount of tax revenue the state has to finance green investment. Higher rates of growth might address these problems but simultaneously demand more material resource use—something the degrowth camp never tires of pointing out. This is not to suggest we’re doomed from the start. But we should not be naïve to the kinds of constraints capitalism imposes in a finite world. Navigating this terrain will mean imagining new economic futures for tomorrow and building up organized movements today. For that, an inequality and justice lens will be an integral starting point.

Published in *booksandideas.net*, 25 January 2020.