

Research brief: Setting a climate justice and equity research agenda

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By framing climate change as the quintessential ‘tragedy of the commons’—where each actor rationally pursue its own self-interest to the detriment of everyone—scholars working within a rationalist tradition have missed out on crucial socio-political dynamics stemming from gross inequities in the global system. Moreover, while it is widely acknowledged that keeping the rise of global temperatures within the threshold agreed in Paris would require drastic emission cuts in the very short term, an ubiquitous gradualist mind-set has led to the mainstreaming of climate change solutions that assume a reliance on negative emissions in the later part of the century to balance the commitment to incremental mitigation pathways in the coming decades.¹

While these extreme bets on the availability and deployment of providential technological fixes have been incorporated into the IPCC canon, little research has been done on the more immediate avenues for emission cuts that may lie in the unpacking of the equity dimension of climate change. Indeed, Chancel and Piketty pointed out, almost half of global emissions can be attributed to the consumption habits of the richest 10 percent of the global population.² While climate policies taken at the global level are made to shelter that minority group of high-emitters from too sudden lifestyle changes, the burden of action (and the environmental risk) is imposed on the poorest lot (who, incidentally, have contributed next to nothing to the problem).

A research agenda for climate justice should not only focus on the dynamics in the global South, frontline communities and other oppressed groups whose grounds for struggle intersect with climate change, but should aim to better understand the characteristics of high-emitters. As such, it should provide a picture of who they are, of what the defining practices of their lifestyle are, of how they benefit from the maintenance of the status quo and of how their power is being wielded. The purpose of such focus would be two-fold:

- For researchers working in a ‘problem-solving’ mode and hoping to improve policy by contributing solid evidence of a pragmatic way to undergo emission cuts sharp enough to stay within the 2°C (1.5°C?) carbon budget, then tackling the lifestyle of high-emitters may just remain one of the last areas of possibilities.
- For those who come from a more critical perspective and who see a focus on counter-hegemonic movement-building as key to challenge the structures responsible for climate change, then a focus on high-emitters has a role to play in the formulation of common demands of a broad climate justice coalition. (see Laclau and Mouffe on the role of antagonistic figures in the identity construction of political movements)³

¹ Kevin Anderson, ‘Duality in Climate Science’, *Nature Geoscience* 8, no. 12 (December 2015): 898–900

² Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty, ‘Carbon and Inequality: From Kyoto to Paris’, *Paris School of Economics* (November 2015): 31.

³ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Verso, 2001).

Theoretical and empirical rationales aside, a focus on high-emitters in climate justice research also appears more practically relevant, given the elite status of science as an institution. The potential for scientific analysis to be impactful may be stronger if it relates to a reality that is familiar to its users. As such, calling attention to the equity implications of the practices of high emitters—within a typical community of high emitters—could arguably be one of the most relevant contributions that social science can make to the struggle for climate justice.

Annex: The martini glass of climate inequity (Source: Oxfam)

