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Acknowledging the historic presence of justice in climate research

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In a recent Perspective[1], Zimm et al. argued that "there is no consistent approach to comprehensively incorporate and examine justice considerations" in climate research. While we welcome the attention of the authors and the journal to climate justice, we find that Zimm et al. replicate a number of forms and practices of injustice and fail to recognize and include the history and breadth of environmental and climate justice scholarship. In other words, the paradox of the paper by Zimm et al. is that it unwittingly contributes to the very problem it wants to address.

Zimm et al. suggest that the "absence of a broad shared understanding of justice" stems from a lack of clarity and consistency, requiring cross-disciplinary translation and a novel framework. In reality, existing scholarship on environmental justice[2] and climate justice[3] has examined the intersection of climate change and social inequality for many decades. This literature emerged from both social and scholarly movements producing a wealth of cross-disciplinary frameworks, principles and concepts that are clear and consistent. By failing to engage with the existing work on climate justice, Zimm et al. miss important historical and contemporary insights on the intersecting crises of climate change and social injustice, and how to study it.

Among those missing insights is how colonialism emerges as a key driver of climate injustice; an argument that has long been made by scholars from the global south[4], by Indigenous scholars in the global north[5] and included in the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC in 2022. Failing to account for the centrality of colonialism risks mischaracterizing the political contexts that produce climate injustices[6]. Environmental justice research has long shown how environmental racism cannot be tackled by "more and broader stakeholder involvement" alone and needs to engage with enduring racial capitalism and its violence[7].

From a procedural standpoint, racialized and Indigenous groups not only have less access and power in climate politics, but also their knowledge, values and needs are often marginalized and invisibilized, including in, for example, understanding the impacts of mitigation scenarios. The 'forms of justice' Zimm et al. identify in their paper (distributive, procedural, recognition, corrective and transitional justice) have been part and parcel of an established body of literature[8]. This same literature, moreover, has a longstanding tradition of conducting interdisciplinary science and drawing on community knowledge[9]. The paper, while claiming to "bridge disciplinary boundaries," in fact omits many disciplines, particularly in the social science and humanities, that have co-shaped the climate justice literature over time.

The paper is illustrative of a broader trend — often in the energy and climate justice literature being produced out of Europe — that tends to gloss over or obscure the origins of environmental justice[10]. In doing so, this trend not only produces forms of epistemic injustice by excluding a range of diverse knowledge and knowledge holders in the field but also runs the risk of producing ineffective climate policy. The climate justice literature is teeming with examples of policy that has failed because it misunderstood the larger grievances at play. Urban mitigation scenarios, for example, such as traffic-calming areas, can displace more marginalized residents through processes of environmental gentrification[11]. Similarly, unfairness introduced by carbon taxes and regulation can lead to insufficient acceptance and trigger justice barriers to environmental policy[12].

Beyond offering a misrepresentation of the field, papers like the one by Zimm et al. raise deeper questions about the epistemology of climate justice, about research ethics and power relations in climate research, and about whose knowledge counts in policy discussions on climate change[13]. It is ironic, to say the least, that one of the takeaways from Zimm et al. is to "draw on literature, with attention paid, if possible, to those affected". The authors seem to reduce climate justice to a metaphor, while focusing narrowly on measuring and explaining inequity or policy design. Recognizing the history of climate justice, respecting the experience of those exposed, critically engaging with the processes of knowledge production, as well as acknowledging the existing academic and grassroots contributions for climate research are the first steps towards achieving justice in mitigation.

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