The critical intersection of environmental and social justice: a commentary

Leslie Solomonian and Erica Di Ruggiero

Abstract

The global crises of ecological degradation and social injustice are mutually reinforcing products of the same flawed systems. Dominant human culture is morally obliged to challenge and reconstruct these systems in order to mitigate future planetary harm. In this commentary, we argue that doing so requires a critical examination of the values and narratives which underlie systems of oppression and power. We argue for the moral necessity of a socially just approach to the ecological crisis.

Keywords: Ethics, Global justice, Ecological collapse, Social justice, Environmental health

Background

The combined collective experience of COVID-19 and amplified conversation about white supremacy have thrust the complexity of the twin crises of global ecological decline and social injustice into vivid relief. The forces that have contributed to and continue to perpetuate the devastation of the biosphere are the very ones that have caused deep harm to and stark inequities among humans. These crises are mutually reinforcing consequences of the same flawed systems. As Rauf and Wainwright and others have compellingly laid out, in order to effectively mitigate future planetary harm, it is necessary to challenge systems of oppression and power; and justly distribute rights, duties, and responsibilities; drawing on diverse epistemologies to do so [1]. The purpose of this commentary is to argue for a socially just approach to the ecological crisis and suggest principles for future research and action.

Creation of the crises

Dominant current culture is the result of a long history of the narrative that natural and human resources exist for exploitation, commodification and control, and to fuel economic growth [2]. This story is underpinned by values of competition, privatization, consumption, anthropocentrism, and dominance of Eurocentric technoscientific epistemology [3]. These values and narratives have been perpetuated and enacted by the global elite (economic, political, social) to concentrate power and wealth, which necessarily requires oppression of the masses and the marginalized [1, 4]. Entire groups of people are deliberately framed as having less worth by and to the benefit of those with power, embodied in a litany of genocides, enslavement, and systematic oppression. Imperial and colonial practices continue to exploit land and people for material gain. Theft and privatization of commonly-shared resources allows for exploitation and oppression of populations who can no longer afford to access that which has been commodified [2].

The tremendous technoscientific “progress” of the twentieth century has improved health, longevity, and quality of life for an estimated 20–30% of the global population at the systematic expense of the rest [2]. It also comes at a devastating cost of resource extraction, toxic waste generation, and uncompensated carbon emissions. The Great Acceleration and neoliberal capitalism have exponentially amplified harm to humans, other beings, and the biosphere itself [2]. This ecological
catastrophe compounds social injustice [1, 5]. Those that are disproportionately affected by climate change (through consequences such as floods, droughts, fires, and conflict) are the same who have been exploited, displaced, marginalized, and murdered to concentrate wealth for the elite, whose actions have further driven the degradation of the environment [6, 7]. Privatization, commodification and destruction of natural and social resources denies access to resources required for basic subsistence [2]. Even proposed technoscientific “solutions” to the climate crisis are commodified and profitable, further marginalizing those without capital.

The values that underscore dominant social, political and economic systems have become so deeply ingrained into our collective subconscious that they can be nearly impossible to see, much less critique. While these systems were deliberately designed to concentrate wealth, many who benefit remain ignorant of the consequences of exponentially-increasing human activity in the name of improving longevity and quality of life [8]. For some time, the social and ecological consequences have been distant (geographically and chronologically), deliberately kept invisible from those who benefit from these systems [1]. Propaganda machines perpetuate myths of infinite growth, “sustainable” development, consumerism and technoscientific progress as an avenue to happiness and evidence of success. However, using gross domestic product and wealth accumulation to measure success will always come at the expense of the planet and other humans Transgenerational privilege and transnational exploitation will always result in inequitable capacity to “succeed.” And while the growing middle class holds an equal right to the standard of living and quality of life enjoyed by those situated in wealthier positions [7], this aspiration reinforces the cycle of extraction and waste generation [6]. Entitling all current and future inhabitants of Earth to the same standard of living as the currently most privileged is fundamentally unsustainable [2, 8].

Perceiving possibilities

That powerful human groups have collectively allowed planetary conditions to deteriorate to this degree has been framed as an ethical failure; those groups carry a geographic and chronologic debt for which amends appropriately need to be made [2]. The language of “failure,” however, is fraught with shame, which tends to be totalizing, finalizing and deserving of retribution. This can induce paralysis, particularly for those who have been ignorantly complicit. In contrast, corrective and preventative justice frameworks speak more to the concept of guilt, which is often described as a feeling of responsibility which can motivate action [4, 7]. This perspective also speaks to the importance of moving toward what Albrecht coined as the Symbiocene [9]; to collectively cultivate systems that promote social and ecological homeostasis.

Utilitarianism theory would suggest that the desired goal is to promote the common good, or happiness [7, 8]. Given that it is unsustainable to aim to elevate the standard of living of the majority of the world to meet that which is enjoyed by a few, systems must be designed to ensure all have access to the necessities for at least a minimum standard of well-being and avoidance of suffering [5, 7]. There are many technoscientific strategies that are intended to do this, and are promoted from a utilitarian perspective. However, intentions are irrelevant if the consequences are harmful, which can be difficult to predict and measure, especially in a complex global system [2]. Herein lies a key limitation of utilitarian theory: multiple outcomes can result from a well-intended action which do not necessarily align with maximizing overall good. If the intent, for example, of genetically modifying foods is to increase productivity but the consequences are the loss of soil health and of food sovereignty by small, local farmers, it is problematic. If the intent is to preserve “wild” spaces, but the consequences are the removal of populations from their traditional lands and practices, it is culturally genocidal.

A utilitarian approach is also limited in that it would be difficult to convince those with privilege (at an individual or societal level) to willingly cede it for the betterment of the whole, particularly in a culture underpinned by values of individualism and meritocracy, and in which harmful consequences of individual actions are often indirect. This also raises the challenge of how much capacity an individual in a higher-income setting has to opt out of a system that encourages behaviours that may increase happiness for some at the expense of others. Being from a utilitarian framework requires adoption of a value system that considers the suffering of others, both proximal and distal to ourselves, and an honest reflection on what is truly necessary for our own happiness. Given that those with privilege have been indoctrinated with the idea that wealth concentration and consumption is the key to happiness, despite ample evidence to the contrary, this may be a hard concept to sell.

However, the planetary health crises will not be mitigated by the same faulty systems that created them. Young offers a model of responsibility that considers the role and responsibility of both individuals and systems; one that holds responsible both knowing perpetrators of ecocide and those naively complicit in the systems that cause ecocide [10]. This model can provide a scaffolding to theorize ways in which structures themselves can be critically held liable for global injustice. Ultimately, however, the process of creating more equitable and sustainable systems must begin with collectively and
transparency in redefining values and narratives in order to
determine what the utilitarian baseline of “happiness” is
[8, 11]. This requires deliberate integration of diverse
epistemologies and priorities (in contrast to clinging to a
rigid Eurocentric model of capitalistic and technoscientif-
ic solutions) [4, 7, 11]. Mechanisms must be in place
to mitigate and dismantle global hegemonic structures in
order to limit the influence of those with power seeking
to preserve the status quo [5]. Procedural mechanisms
should be designed in all sectors (scholarship, healthcare,
commerce, policy, etc.) to ensure that those with power
are critically interrogating whose interests and voices are
represented or lacking. Implementation of models that
equitably distribute decision-making power can center
marginalized voices [12].

All stakeholders must be represented in this process,
which also include other beings and the Earth herself [2,
7, 11]. While it may be impossible for humans to ever
adequately represent others (human or otherwise), it is
exciting to see progressive actions that advocate for uni-
versal rights of all species and ecosystems, such as the
granting of legal rights to rivers and forests in New Zea-
land, and recent lawsuits by youth against countries for
inadequate movement on the climate crisis. In their re-
cent dissertation, Rodeiro makes an in-depth argument
for environmental transformative justice; a lens that “of-
ers an opening for (re)examining and (re)conceptualiz-
ing our practices, habits, values, norms, and priorities
toward nature; in that reparative and reconciliatory ac-
tivities represent an opportunity for progressively
departing from current destructive and exploitative
strategies of shifting collective narratives and values. It is
equally critical to continue to build and disseminate the
evidence for the harmful impacts of inaction on these
fronts. Recent global events such as the reverberations of
COVID-19, and the surge of awareness of and resistance
to white supremacy provide a window of opportunity to
reimagine our future, as well as evidence that global,
radical, rapid cooperation is possible. Narratives rooted
in values of universalism and solidarity are being propa-
gated in the form of Building Back Better and Just Re-
covery for All. These narratives, consistent with long-
pressed pre-colonial values [15], can form the founda-
tion for collective action toward a more just and sustain-
able global community. As the late Maya Angelou gently
reminded us, “when you know better, do better.”

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to acknowledge the guidance and pioneering work
of Dr. Solomon (Solly) Benatar, MBChB, DSc (Med).

Authors’ contributions
LS conceived of the concept for the article and generated the initial draft;
EDR provided critical review and supervision; both authors read and
approved the final manuscript.

Authors’ information
LS is the co-founder and chair of Naturopathic Doctors for Environmental
and Social Trust, and is a member of Clinicians for Planetary Health.
EDR is Director of the Centre for Global Health at the University of Toronto.

Availability of data and materials
Not applicable.

Declarations
Ethics approval and consent to participate
Not applicable.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Competing interests
N/A

Author details
1 Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine, 1255 Sheppard Avenue East,
Toronto, Ontario M4S 1R6, Canada. 2 Dalla Lana School of Public Health,
University of Toronto, 155 College Street, Room 408, Toronto, ON M5T 3M7,
Canada.
References
1. Rouf K, Wainwright T. Linking health justice, social justice, and climate justice. Lancet Planet Health. 2020;4(4):e131–e132.
2. Benatar S, Upshur R, Gill S. Understanding the relationship between ethics, neoliberalism and power as a step towards improving the health of people and our planet. Anthropocene Rev. 2018;5(2):155–76.
3. Kendal D, Raymond CM. Understanding pathways to shifting people’s values over time in the context of social–ecological systems. Sustain Sci. 2018;14(5):1333–42.
4. Klinsky S, Roberts T, Huq S, Okereke C, Newell P, Dauvergne P, et al. Why equity is fundamental in climate change policy research. Glob Environ Chang. 2017;44:170–3.
5. Shue H. The unavoidability of justice. In: Hurrell A, Kingsbury B, editors. The international politics of the environment: actors, interests, and institutions. Oxford: Clarendon Press; 1992. p. 373–97.
6. Folke C, Jansson A, Rockström J, Olsson P, Carpenter SR, Chapin FS, et al. Reconnecting to the Biosphere. Ambio. 2011;40(7):719–38.
7. Ikeme J. Equity, environmental justice and sustainability: incomplete approaches in climate change politics. Glob Environ Chang. 2003;13(3):195–206.
8. Stern N. Equity, the economics of climate change paper 2: economics and politics. Econ Philos. 2014;30(3):445–501.
9. Albrecht GA. Exiting the anthropocene and entering the symbiocene. Minding Nat. 2016;9(2):12–6.
10. Young I. (2006). Responsibility and global justice: a social connection model. Soc Philos Policy. 2006;23(1):102–30.
11. Forsyth T. Climate justice is not just ice. Geoforum. 2014;54:280–2.
12. Pratt B. Inclusion of marginalized groups and communities in Global Health research priority-setting. J Empir Res Human Res Ethics. 2019;14(2):169–81.
13. Rodeiro METJ. Responding to ecocide [dissertation]. New York: City University of new York; 2020.
14. Foster A, Cole J, Farlow A, Petrikova I. Planetary health ethics: beyond first principles. Challenges. 2019(10):14.
15. Clarkson L, Morrissette V, Regallet G. Our responsibility to the seventh generation. Winnipeg: International Institute for Sustainable Development; 1992.

Publisher’s Note
Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.