

To Confront Climate Change, We Need An Ecological Democracy



Dr Marit Hammond

Climate change represents the biggest existential crisis that has ever faced the human race. However, we have yet to come to terms with the moral, political and economic dimensions of the climate crisis. As we confront climate change, we must ask: What would real climate justice look like? And what is the connection between the pursuit of true democracy and the battle to stave off a climatic change catastrophe? Marit Hammond, a lecturer in environmental politics at Keele University in the U.K., advocates for the necessity of an “ecological democracy” in order to meet the climate emergency urgently and sustainably. In this interview, Hammond offers insights on what this new form of democracy would look like and how we can get there.

C.J. Polychroniou: The challenge of climate change has been confronted so far on both political and economic grounds. Yet fewer people are engaging in conversations about the moral element of climate change. Isn't global warming, first and foremost, a moral issue?

Marit Hammond: It is. However, it is important to stress that this moral dimension is not separate from, but rather stretches into the political and economic dimensions — for it is not just about private individuals' moral behavior. Climate change is a moral issue insofar as it is knowingly caused by human actions, and in turn causes significant, existential harm — avoidable harm — to humans, other species, precious cultures and ecosystems. As is widely known,

threats such as crop failures, weather extremes and sea level rise threaten the quality of life, if not life itself, particularly of those who already have the least resources to draw on to manage their lives. It is those who cannot afford to protect themselves against heat waves that die or suffer severe health problems; those already living in precarious, [severe] weather-prone regions are forced to migrate elsewhere and make themselves economically vulnerable in the process. Although climate change is a complex phenomenon at the planetary level, it is causing suffering in the lives of concrete individuals — as well as the irreversible loss of countless species and unique ecosystems.

If there were a more direct cause-effect relationship, it would go without saying that causing such harm would be immoral. The only difference with climate change is that the actions that cause it are only indirectly related to the suffering it causes, and distributed amongst the global population — everyone who lives in an industrial society contributes to climate change. Thus, it is more difficult to determine intentionality and agency. Moral blame applies where harm is caused intentionally or through negligence — where there is agency to either cause or avoid [dealing with] it. In the case of climate change, this is the clear case, where people intentionally and knowingly lead high-emission lifestyles, such as driving, flying, or otherwise consuming more, or in more highly emitting ways, than they need.

Yet to a significant extent, individuals in industrialized societies actually have very little agency over their lives in these regards. Even those who want to be morally responsible, who have every intention to stop climate change and avert the suffering it causes, are forced to live the kinds of life the socio-economic system around them expects and demands; they inevitably rely on the agricultural, industrial and energy systems that are much more to blame. To make a living, they mostly have no choice but to contribute to a [growth-oriented economy](#), whose ideology of exploitation (of people and nature alike) is the real underlying cause of climate change.

Thus it is important to remind ourselves of the moral dimension of climate change so that people don't just see it as a managerial challenge to embrace — like another phase of modernization, which the growth economy has to adapt to but can ultimately benefit from — but as a prompt to get very angry about this wider system we are forced to live in. As concern about climate change is now growing amongst Western populations, it has become fashionable to consume 'greener'

products and to object to the use of plastics, for example. These responses fit into a picture of embracing the need for societies to overhaul themselves, to become better by becoming greener — the spirit of ecological modernization. They do *not*, however, challenge consumerism per se, accept the need for general restraint and degrowth, or push for radical change at the level of the socio-economic system and its exploitative ideology. If it is at that level that climate change is caused, this is where the moral outrage people feel needs to be directed at. Now that we know about climate change, we have a moral responsibility not just to drive less and carry a reusable coffee mug, but to condemn the political and economic structures that are the real driver of the problem.

What exactly is climate justice and its connection to preventing climate catastrophe?

The connection between [climate justice](#) and preventing a climate catastrophe is twofold. On the one hand, the climate justice discourse sheds light on injustice as one of the underlying causes of climate change: Catastrophic anthropogenic climate change is not a coincidence; it has resulted from an economic system that is based on the deliberate exploitation and marginalization of those with a weaker voice, such as people living in precarious conditions, and on the continued prioritization of economic profits over justice and well-being. On the other hand, as a norm, climate justice is what fills this political challenge — to move away from an unsustainable system — with concrete meaning; what would a normatively desirable, more holistically prosperous society look like in the context of climate change?

In the past, justice has often been narrowly understood as ‘distributive justice’ — a just distribution of economic resources. In this context, many understand climate justice to be about how the necessary emissions reductions should be shared internationally, and whether compensation is due across societies or generations. But this narrow understanding only reinforces the way in which economic resources define and drive our societal life at present.

In my view, knowing about climate change adds a much broader context and many new layers to our understanding of justice: It is about rethinking what matters in society and how we should live, and this discussion must include all voices equally and fairly. When understood in this way, climate justice is the political vision of a society that has undertaken the structural change to respond

to climate change in a way that is just. Firstly, this highlights the need to respond to climate change in the first place, as climate change is inherently a justice issue itself: caused by (and to the benefit of) the privileged, disproportionately suffered by the marginalized. Secondly, without such a vision, responses to climate change can themselves reinforce structural inequalities and prolong suffering — for example by banking on technological fixes that concentrate power in the hands of a few, or favoring [adaptation](#) over prevention, which then only the privileged can access and afford. In order for our political responses to climate change not to further worsen the inequality and harm caused by climate change itself, concern for justice must be at the forefront of the debate.

In your work, you are arguing for a cultural shift toward an “ecological democracy” as the only way to lay the foundations for sustainable prosperity and tackle climate change. What exactly is ecological democracy, and can it co-exist with capitalism?

Democracy comes into the picture for the same reason that responding to climate change is not only — or even primarily — a technical-managerial challenge, but an inherently political matter. Because of the roles of exploitation and marginalisation in how climate change has been both driven and responded to, sustainability can only be achieved once these underlying power dimensions are addressed. Democracy is what challenges and counteracts unequal power relations. For the response to climate change to reach the structural (not just superficial) level, and to not produce new injustice in the process, there first needs to be a shift in *who gets a say* in this discussion — whose voices are heard. Otherwise marginalization will only worsen.

Thus, I understand ecological democracy as a normative vision of an ecologically sustainable as well as democratically legitimate society; and the basis for it is the fact that neither is possible without the other. Without ecological sustainability, there either won't be any society left at some point, or there will be a struggle for mere survival — as opposed to sustainability as a vision of *prosperous* societies, with prosperity implying space for normative aspirations such as legitimacy, freedom and democracy. But likewise, without democratic legitimacy, I argue in my work, there cannot be sustainability, because this very vision can only emerge out of an open, inclusive societal discussion. Unless everyone has equal say in this discussion, without the distortions that result from deception and abuses of power, the vision of sustainability that results stands no chance of actually

achieving societal prosperity — let alone a lasting political basis at such a time of radical, unprecedented transformation.

The problem is that democracy is defined and institutionalized in all manner of ways. The political structures commonly associated with the term “democracy” today — that is, liberal democracy — have themselves evolved so as to serve the capitalist economy and to effectively temper critical political discourses that would challenge this. Hence, insofar as ecological sustainability is not compatible with capitalism, neither is ecological democracy, and so democracy takes on a much deeper meaning in this context. In my work, I call for a form of deliberative democracy: a political culture (that is, *not* just artificially designed institutional innovations such as citizen assemblies) in which there is such a level of critical, inclusive discourse in the public sphere that the unjustified, unequal power relations, the strategic manipulation of discourses, and the bypassing of democracy in areas of economic decision-making characteristic of the current liberal democracies are no longer possible. Only then can a fairer, more genuine and more engaged public discussion about sustainability emerge instead.

Politically and pedagogically speaking, what do you consider to be the best methods or strategies for mobilizing social action to build a movement geared toward ecological democracy?

The first step is information: People need to be well informed about ecological issues such as climate change and their underlying systemic causes. Pedagogically speaking, this is where a culture of critical thinking is vital, as information and public discourses are themselves tied in with the dominant ideology, which warps them in its favor. To escape this, we need political movements — such as [Fridays for Future](#) or [Extinction Rebellion](#) — that not only bring the topic as such to widespread attention, but importantly also provide spaces in which the structural and systemic causes of unsustainability can be critically discussed, and the necessary *anger* at these [causes] thus arises, fueling more radical demands for change. Lastly, we need imagination, creativity and diversity; anything that helps us question the taken-for-granted and think in new ways.

All of these spaces need to be inclusive; social divisions and fear only play into the hands of those with the power to manipulate, and inhibit a hopeful search for new future directions for the society. As I argue in my work on ecological democracy,

sustainability in the face of the current threats requires a fundamental *cultural* transformation: not just new policies or technologies, but a shift change in the meanings people attach to the future and to notions such as prosperity — a fundamental new orientation toward what matters, and also what it means to be a citizen in such a world. This can only come from everyone’s active engagement, from people’s own epiphanies, slow realizations, being confronted with what is going on in the world at large. Deep cultural change can’t be forced. Rather than in leadership by the current elites, I put my hope in the new generation, growing up with a new awareness. In a way, what is needed is a radicalization of the entire public discussion on sustainability — so much critical engagement, within all sorts of inclusive spaces and meeting everyone where they happen to be at the start, that the collective outlook organically shifts over time from a narrower, status quo-compatible activism toward a richness of entirely new perspectives that think beyond the all-encompassing capitalist ideology, to first imagine and then build something altogether new.

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