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Climate Change and the Color Line

Michael Murphy
Brown University, mwm@brown.edu

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Climate Change and the Color Line

Abstract

Climate change is estimated to be responsible for 400,000 deaths per year, mostly because of hunger and communicable diseases affecting children in the Global South. Using the sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois, I attempt to demonstrate how and why climate change occurs along the color line. I conclude by arguing why it is important to think about climate change as a human rights issue.

Keywords

Climate Change, Race, Color Line, Du Bois, Sociology

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Climate Change and the Color Line

Melting arctic ice, sea level rise, increased severity of inclement weather events and ascending global temperatures are all signs of global climate change. The current climatic trends are most likely anthropogenic and are proceeding at an unprecedented rate (Pachauri 2007). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of 1,300 independent scientific experts from countries all over the world under the auspices of the United Nations, concluded in its Fourth Assessment Report that there is a more than 90 percent probability that human activities have warmed our planet over the past 20 years (Pachauri 2007). The burning of fossil fuels, along with the clearing of land for agriculture (deforestation), increased carbon intensive industry, rampant material consumption, and other human activities have contributed to the earth's atmospheric trapping of solar energy (known as the greenhouse effect).

Climate change is undoubtedly a human rights issue. Everyday 1,000 children die due to climate change, and if left unchecked, the estimated total death toll will rise to 700,000 per year by 2030. Despite the many dangers and risks that climate change poses to humanity, especially for the world's most vulnerable, there has been little to no action on the part of the United States government or any other advanced western nation to combat this human rights issue. The sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most important but overlooked scholars of the 20th Century, can help us understand why.

Prior to the mega-storm event "Hurricane Sandy", most climate change-related disasters had only affected the Third World. In *A Climate of Injustice: Global Inequality, North-South Politics, and Climate Policy*, J. Timmons Roberts and Bradley Parks point out that "although industrialized countries are responsible for 60 percent of the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change, developing countries suffer the 'worst and first' effects of climate-related disasters, including droughts, floods, and storms, because of their geographical locations"

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(Roberts and Parks 2007). Climate change is estimated to be responsible for 400,000 deaths per year, most of which are “due to hunger and communicable diseases that affect above all children in developing countries” (DARA 2012).

If the people of developing nations are most vulnerable to climate change, as Roberts and Parks (2007) assert, then this necessarily means that globally people of color are the most vulnerable to climate change related disasters as well as the economic and political instability that climate change entails. For example when agricultural productivity is negatively influenced by climate related events such as drought, there are always dire consequences for people of the Third World. When the price of a loaf of bread goes from fifty cents to seventy-five cents and you live on less than a dollar a day, the real impact of climate change is felt. If bread prices rose by that same margin in the United States, it would not have the same serious consequences for most us. Without external support, many Third World nations will suffer from the inability to provide food domestically, for economic and/or environmental reasons.

In *The African Roots of War*, Du Bois (1915) argues that with increasing social, political, and economic democracy in the United States and Europe, capitalists had to look abroad for people to exploit. Du Bois (1915) writes, “Thus, the world began to invest in color prejudice. The ‘Color Line’ began to pay dividends.” Here Du Bois is pointing out the material underpinnings of the color line. He goes on to write, “Whence comes this new wealth and on what does its accumulation depend? It comes primarily from the darker nations of the world – Asia and Africa, South and Central America, the West Indies and the islands of the South Seas”(Du Bois 1915). Thinking about global climate change today and its related effect on certain human beings over others, it is no stretch to extend Du Bois’ materialist basis for thinking about the color line to thinking about the profitability of climate change. Naomi Klein points out

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in her book *The Shock Doctrine* that neo-liberal capitalists seek to take advantage of disasters for the accumulation of profit. She gives the example of New Orleans and the various neo-liberal policies that were enacted post Hurricane Katrina making reconstruction efforts profitable for a very select few. For example, instead of reinstating traditional public schools and funding them accordingly, new charter schools that were publically funded but privately operated were opened, thereby leaving room for profit. There is no reason for us to believe that climate related natural disasters would not be used as an opportunity to further the neo-liberal political-economic agenda of creating free markets in which private property and profit are not regulated.

When it comes to climate change, the color line still belts the world. It comes as little surprise then that there is little governmental and political action in the United States when it comes to climate change. On one hand, the majority of people in the United States do not feel the impact of climate change, but on the other there is potential profit along the color line.

W. E. B. Du Bois was not just a scholar of race, capitalism, and society; he was also an early leader in the civil rights movement, which was at its core a struggle for human rights as outlined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Du Bois understood that America was not living up to its full potential by symbolically and structurally oppressing and neglecting people of color domestically and abroad. Today, we must ask ourselves if climate change is a human rights issue just like the issues of racial inequality before, as they are inextricably linked. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states, “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (United Nations 1948). Anthropogenic climate change violates this article of the declaration and many others, because despite the globalized nature of climate change and environmental degradation, the social, political, and economic effects that both have created are starkly uneven. Additionally, while we in the Global North are historically most responsible for

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these global environmental changes, developing countries suffer the “worst and first” effects of climate-related disasters because of their geographical locations and their differential levels of socio-economic development and status in the world economy. Therefore, inequality is deeply embedded within these global environmental changes, and also in how they manifest within local contexts.

Any action on the part of the government to address climate change is going to have to overcome our penchant for protecting private property, profit, and individual liberty at all costs. This entails a fundamental rethinking of what is most important. It is always possible that we might one day hold our commons as sacred instead of our personal belongings. We might come to value public affluence over private wealth. Moreover, for climate change to become a politicized issue that needs immediate action, I believe that effects are going to have to be felt by more Americans. Already, we have seen this manifest after the effect that Hurricane Sandy had on the people living on the Atlantic coast. Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, formally endorsed Obama stating, “Our climate is changing. And while the increase in extreme weather we have experienced in New York City and around the world may or may not be the result of it, the risk that might be – given this week’s devastation – should compel all elected leaders to take immediate action” (Bloomberg 2012). Furthermore, we must start to think of climate change as fundamentally a human rights issue, which requires us to acknowledge that there is a link between our actions here in the United States and Global North at large and the detrimental effects of climate change abroad. Framing climate change as a human rights issue has the potential to establish accountability in the global picture by focusing on the causes and perpetrators of violations, as well as the sense of justice necessary to correct the ills of climate change. One thing is certain: if the governments of nations in the Global North, like the United

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States, do not take immediate action to address climate change, the world's black, brown and yellow people will have to deal with the consequences of inaction the most.

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