Exorbitant Responsibility: Geographies of Climate Justice

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Connecting with Climate Change

'If climate change makes our country uninhabitable, we will march with our wet feet into your living rooms'. With this impassioned intervention at a 1995 Berlin climate change forum, Bangladeshi representative Atiq Rahman vented his frustration with the stalling of international climate negotiations (cited in Roberts and Parks, 2007: 2). As burgeoning studies around the question of climate migration have since made clear, there is no simple, linear relation between vulnerability to extreme weather and the long distance mobilization of a caring and just response. But that most likely wasn't Rahman's point.

One of the great challenges of climate change is that the scientific evidence upon which issue formation depends `cuts against the grain of ordinary human experience' (Jasanoff, 2010: 237). Both its causes and effects seem too widely distributed in space and time for us to grasp palpably, immediately, personally, 'as a global phenomenon, climate change is often not locally observable or easy to reconcile with laypersons' local experiences, making its seriousness sometimes challenging to convey', Grasswick writes (2014: 542). What Rahman seems to be doing, in this regard, is trying to shift the issue of climate change away from planetary modelling and abstract knowledge. He reminds us that those on the sharp edge of climate change are flesh and blood people whose potential suffering ought to be felt closer to home.

This is the kind of work that critical human geographers take to be vital and urgent. As we will see, geographers specialize in tracing the complex patterns of interconnectivity

that implicate the lives of people `here' with others near or far. Though we go about this systematically - gathering as much evidence as we can - most of us take on such tasks because we care about the unequal and unjust ways that life chances are distributed in the contemporary world. But this is complicated work. Can we assume that the tracking and calculating of unfair exchanges is an effective way to make people care more about distant others? Is a calculus of trans-global gains and losses really the best means of encouraging compassion for lives very different from our own? And what about the challenges of care ethics, where a concern for others makes us vulnerable (van Dooren, 2014), not least because 'our recipients of care, can answer back.' (Puig, 2007: 209).

Increasingly, human geographers are interested not only in the social processes that render global `playing fields' uneven, but with the many nonhuman phenomena that help compose these bumpy, irregular realities. But things get even trickier when we factor in the workings of the earth itself. Global climate is an immensely complex system, with more connections, nodes and feedbacks than almost any known system. In such a world, no single climatic event can be unambiguously attributed to anthropogenic influences, let alone pinned to the actions of a single group or category of people. And even if we could somehow level the global socio-economic playing field, this is a planet whose ordinary, ongoing instability would still make social life – from time to time – immensely challenging.

If it's not easy to unequivocally map out chains of causality for climate change, so too is it difficult to predict how, and under what conditions, different collectivities will react to shifting or extreme climatic conditions. For example, we have indeed recently witnessed groups of South Asians, many of whom were of Bangladeshi heritage, marching wet-footed through the streets and living rooms of Lancashire, Cumbria and southern Scotland. They came not as displaced people, but as emergency relief squads responding to floods that accompanied December 2015's Storm Desmond. Muslim civil society

organisations in the north of England - experienced in responding to extreme events overseas - mobilised quickly to provide food, supplies and clean-up assistance to flood-struck communities (York, 2015).

It is unlikely that these people came to help out of a sense of causal connection or liability. These were also communities under pressure, facing stigmatisation at a time when Muslim collectivities were vilified in the media and by far-right groups as 'terrorists' and 'extremists' and during campaigning for a referendum to leave the European Union (in June 2016) that was characterised by racism and xenophobia. They may not have felt, in advance of the floods, particularly connected to the afflicted communities, though in the act of assuming responsibility, they certainly made new connections. It is also impossible to overlook the specific context of such giving; its adjacent and intimate entanglements with a possible resistance to stigmatisation. Indeed, some of these stories came to light because they were publicised on social media by the groups themselves, using hashtags such as #MuslimsForHumanity (York, 2015). To what extent then, are such circumscribed gestures – a reaching out by strangers to those in need – exceptional? Or is there something rather more ordinary about such a response? What if a `geographical' imagining of justice and responsibility in a time of climate change were to set out from such situated overtures? Where might we end up? On what kind of journey might it take us?

Mapping Climate Injustice

In the earlier days of concern over climate change, climatologists seemed to work under the assumption that providing relevant data would be enough to spur decision-makers to deal with the problem. When evidence of present and predicted climate change – even potentially catastrophic shifts – proved insufficient to spark the necessary policy responses, it became apparent that there was more at stake than `a deficit of

understanding' (Clark, 2015: 160). Attracted to the irrupting debate, critical social thinkers and activists set out to show how existing patterns of energy use were bound up with powerful vested interests. They also assembled evidence that demonstrated how vulnerability to climate change mapped uncannily onto existing disadvantages associated with the vast socio-structural inequalities rifting the global economy. Already underprivileged regions are disproportionately susceptible to changing climate, especially with regard to projected agricultural outputs. Research also suggests they would find themselves under-resourced when it came to adapting to changing conditions and further disadvantaged in their efforts to maintain a strong presence in global climate negotiations (Newell, 2005; Clark *et al.*, 2013).

There is a deep-seated moral-political dimension to this sort of articulation of global climate injustice. Like Rahman's outcry, such interventions not only seek to expose the inequity structured into global social orders, but attempt to bring climate change controversies back to the scale and experiences of daily life (Niemanis and Lowen Walker, 2014). In this way, critical social researchers hope to add a vital charge of care and compassion to the too often self-serving and conditional world of international climate negotiation – to help jolt it out of its costly stalemates, delays and deferrals (Roberts and Parks 2007, 221–226).

It is here that critical human geographers like to feel that our spatial imaginations and skills are especially valuable, for we see ourselves as geared up to map out the routes, vectors and networks through which everyday lives `here' connect with lives elsewhere and to show how these pathways serve as the very medium through which unfairness is perpetuated. In this way, geographers reveal how it is that those of us living in more privileged places benefit from unequal spatial relations – in quite mundane ways. Whether it is by using oil extracted from distant lands, consuming cheap calories others have grown, or adding disproportionately to greenhouse gas emissions, our stories

indicate, those of us enjoying relatively high standards of living are implicated in the underprivilege, expropriation and suffering that is happening `elsewhere' - beyond our usual sightlines.

The assumption underlying such accounts is that by attending closely to the ways that our lives are entangled with other lives, human and nonhuman, we will feel obliged to take greater responsibility for our daily deeds and for the very organization of our interchanges with others. But lately, geographers have begun to ask themselves some tough questions about this supposed passage from recognizing causal links between `our' actions and `their' predicaments to the emergence of more caring and compassionate ways of relating. For just as overcoming `deficits' of scientific understanding about climate change does not automatically produce effective policy, neither does it appear that exposing deficits of political understanding, feeling or of moral sensibility leads straightforwardly to appropriately virtuous dispositions or measures.

As Clive Barnett and David Land put it: `the mere fact of being bound into relationships with distant others does not actually provide any compelling reason that could account for or motivate relationships of care, concern, or obligation' (2007: 1069). Climate change is a good example. Given that anyone's personal contribution to greenhouse gas build-up will rebound through the unfathomably complex interconnectivities of the entire earth system - this would seem a rather convoluted way to come to care passionately about actual, flesh and blood people. For sure, having a reasonable sense of the mutual implication between places near and far does no harm, and indeed has become a significant part of global climate negotiation. But some critical spatial thinkers are asking whether there might not be better ways of understanding - and encouraging – the emergence of responsible and caring dispositions towards `others'.

For a start, whatever news media tell us, kindness and generosity are not necessarily in short supply. As ethical thinkers point out, while they may not get the credit they deserve in competitive economies or bureaucratic systems, such virtues are the ordinary and ubiquitous `load-bearing structures of society' (Vaughan, 2002: 98). Mostly murmuring away in innumerable uncelebrated acts, caring and generous overtures often flare into visibility in times of crisis, such as during Storm Desmond, Hurricane Katrina or any number of well-documented calamities (Clark, 2011: Ch 3). While help from those in the vicinity may be most urgently needed, there is plentiful evidence – embodied in donations, volunteering, professional organizations and social movements – that caring gestures reach far across the planet. Moreover, such outpourings of empathy, support and assistance in the face of extremity suggest that compassion does not wait for the revealing of causal connections or culpability.

But what happens when climate change arrives not in calamitous, rapid onset events, but in the `slower violence' of chronic environmental change or ever more routinized conditions of extremity? There has recently been growing attention to the way urban populations are responding to climate stress, especially in cities where infrastructure cannot be relied upon to cope with escalating pressure. In Mumbai, monsoonal flooding is now considered 'normal', while parts of Jakarta were inundated five times in 2015. In these `ordinary cities' of the Global South, numerous forms of improvised response to enhanced climatic variability can be observed, ranging from architectural innovations including green shading to reduce heat stress and the elevation of furniture or housing (Banks et al 2011), through to new social media platforms such as Jakarta's real-time flood mapping application that enables citizens to collaborate in the management of flooded cityscapes (Holderness and Turpin, 2016).

Here too, on the frontline of global climate change, the question of care, compassion and generosity as everyday social `load-bearing structures' calls for special consideration.

In cities of the South, associations of neighbours, relatives and friends provide vital support for weathering extreme events - in the form of provisions, temporary shelter, information and financial assistance (Roy and Hulme 2013; Jabeen *et al.*, 2010). While most researchers stress the gradual, mutual building of trust in such informal networks, some have also noted how spontaneous offerings of assistance often precede – or exceed – any reciprocal arrangement. Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria (2006), for example, provides a moving account of responses to Mumbai's exceptionally severe flooding of 2005 in which some of the city's poorest and most marginalised people effectively self-organised to help stranded strangers.

Just as we should not presume that those with relatively fewer resources will be slow to make generous offerings, neither should we assume such openings are restricted to the local scale. When super-typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) struck the Philippines in 2013, there were once again many ground-level `stories of hope, courage, creativity, and empowerment' as low-income, under-resourced people came together to endure catastrophic conditions (Valerio, 2014: 156). A great many of those who rallied to raise funds for relief and reconstruction were transnational workers. As Cleovi Mosuela and Denise Matias observe: `cross-border migrants … constitute an international network of Filipinos who are instrumental not only in keeping the Philippine economy afloat but also in constituting a network that may serve as a response to major environmental disasters in the Philippines' (2014: 8).

Rather than supposing that we need to begin with carefully computed geographies of who owes what to whom, then, a case might be made for setting out from the mundane reality of people reaching out to each other in times of stress and need – and working up from there. If justice is going to work, to push through the barriers that are endlessly thrown up in its path, we must truly, deeply desire that others be relieved of their suffering and deprivation. But while justice may need care and compassion, these virtues

themselves tend not to await a calculus of costs, debts, liabilities. They seem most often to emerge from actual encounters with others (which does mean that they have to be direct or unmediated) (see Barnett and Land, 2007). As we suggest in the final section, a consideration of these at once ordinary and extraordinary acts of care and compassion might help us come to terms with living on an inherently changeable planet. Though if we wish to respond both fairly and effectively to climate change, this by no means absolves us from doing the most exacting calculations.

Exorbitant Responsibility

To pursue climate justice is to ask what kind of social world we inhabit – to probe its ruptures, imbalances, clashes. While we have been suggesting that tallying gains and losses might not be the only or best starting point for responding care-fully to climate change, it is also vital to recognize that any acknowledgement of widespread capacities for self-help or self-organization in a profoundly uneven world runs the risk of abetting those who would leave the poor, marginalized and vulnerable to their own devices in times of extremity. More disturbingly, it could play into recent policy moves to encourage the selective uptake of the most flexible and resourceful disadvantaged people on the frontline of climate change into global economies – in a kind of `positive' climate migration that leaves the most vulnerable behind and takes away those who might have been best able to care for them (Bettini, 2014).

In short, if we are to care more - and if we wish to help others in their own caring practices - then we also need to keep a close eye on the deeply, cruelly imbalanced forms of calculation that are already at work in the world. And this in turn is part of a more general lesson – which is that if genuine offers of assistance are to be truly effective – however much they precede or break out of economies where values are known in advance – it is necessary to intervene as knowledgeably and judiciously as we possibly can.

As philosopher Jacques Derrida asserts, 'one can't make a responsible decision …without knowing what one is doing, for what reasons, in view of what and under what conditions' (1995: 24). This means that whenever we make a gift or add our weight to a political conflict, we should also accept that our offerings are quite likely to fall short or miss the mark. To recognise, therefore, that overtures of care or struggles for justice are inevitably learning processes in which we find ourselves interrogated, provoked, inspired by the singularity and specific needs of those to whom we attend (Gunaratnam 2013: 47-50).

In the case of climate change, such attempts to figure out `what we are doing' not only means that we ask what kind of *social* world we live in, but *what kind of planet* we inhabit. Over the last fifty years, western science has offered ever more evidence of the inherent dynamism of the earth – conveyed most dramatically in theories of abrupt climate change and the Anthropocene thesis. As geoscientists insist: `detailed paleo-records show that the Earth is never static… variability abounds at nearly all spatial and temporal scales' (Steffen *et al.*, 2004: 295). For many peoples whose cultural memories and earth stories cover long periods, however, such scientific revelations are unlikely to come as a surprise. Here, ecological, geophysical and indigenous knowledge is often bound up with practices, values and ways of relating that are deeply oriented to the varying demands of a profoundly changeable world.

In this sense, a crucial aspect of pursuing and enacting climate justice would be, acknowledging, learning from, `doing justice' to, the hard-won achievements of living with earthly variability – as it is engrained in many different cultures and ways of life. For all of us, in our own ways, are living beings whose very existence bears witness to the ability of a long line of ancestors to endure whatever the earth has thrown at them over the long march of human history and prehistory (Gunaratnam and Clark, 2012).

Such an approach opens up possibilities of thinking about justice in ways that hinge not only on measurable gains and losses but on gifts or inheritances that are resoundingly incalculable. We dwell in landscapes whose rough edges have been smoothed by past inhabitants, we inherit durable material and symbolic cultures. And we are all living beings whose bodily capacities come to us, 'weathered' and 'worlded' (Neimanis and Loewen Walker, 2014) through the chains of bodies that precede us. In these ways, we are all recipients of 'the gift of possibility of a common world' (Diprose, 2002: 141), every one us of owing a vast, immeasurable and irrecompensable debt to all those predecessors who have made our lives possible (Clark, 2010).

But such gifts come down to us deeply inscribed with inequality, the offering of some properly acknowledged while the graft and sacrifice of others is overlooked, undervalued or just plain appropriated (Diprose, 2002: 9). So once again we find ourselves drawn into a world of relations that exceed calculation, only to find ourselves obliged to do a searching and exacting accounting. For even if we are – every one of us – in debt from the very beginning, some of us are more in debt than others. Or in the words of philosopher Alphonso Lingis: 'To be responsible is always to have to answer for a situation that was in place before I came on the scene' (1998: xx).

What might it mean, then, to confront climate change in terms of a responsibility not only for what I have done – or whatever actions can be pinned on me – but for what or who I am? While not directly related to climate, Peter van Wyck's (2010) account of the Dene people of Canada's Great Bear Lake region offers an example of such a responsibility. The Dene's own storying of the land, recounts van Wyck in a phrase borrowed from Walter Benjamin, moves `in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries' (2010: 178). The tribe, who had an ancient intuition that something dangerous lay beneath their

soil, were inadvertently drawn into the nuclear age when uranium mined from their tribal lands was used in the atomic bombs detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In spite of the Dene's ignorance of the wartime use of `their' uranium, the tribe assumed a certain responsibility for these events – and eventually elected to send a delegation to Japan to apologize for their implication in the first aggressive nuclear detonation (2010: 45).

We refer to this as exorbitant responsibility not only because it breaks out of the closed circuit of calculable exchange, but also because it responds to an earth that no longer seems to spin in predictable orbits - a planet whose very multiplicity and changeability breaks with earlier ideas of a unified `whole earth' (Clark, 2016). With its demands to attend both to the rumblings of a dynamic earth and to the complex temporalities of inheritance – cultural, corporeal, ecological – it seems to us, the exploring or tracing of exorbitant responsibility potentially digs deep into the disciplinary repertoires of geographers and fellow spatio-temporal thinkers.

Exorbitant responsibility is endlessly demanding. It calls for constant attentiveness to the appeals of others and to the inevitable inadequacies of all acts of assistance. It requires calculations of which biologist-turned-climate change commentator Tim Flannery has observed: `(n)ever in the history of humanity has there been a cost-benefit analysis that demands greater scrutiny' (2005: 170). It takes off from a sense of unrepayable indebtedness that stretches back through an untraceable lineage of bodies into turbulent earth history.

But in the process of reaching into the receding depths of bodies, cultures, past climates and previous phases of the earth system, exorbitant responsibility also offers drama, enchantment, inspiration. It dreams of opening the cold hard world of climate negotiation into an earth/human adventure story of unfathomable intrigue, while also recognising that the time and energy to mobilize against injustice and to care are

11

themselves unevenly distributed political resources (Oka, 2016: 54). Excessive forms of climate justice and care, we have been suggesting, set out from a commonplace, everyday reluctance to see the suffering of others go unattended. But for many peoples, in many places, that very sense of having something to offer others is quite mundanely linked to offerings of communities past and present, of ancestors both human and more than human, of a earth enlivened by many lifeforms. In other words, it arises out of `a bond between my present and what came to pass before it' (Lingis, 1998: xx), in ways that are, for many, the very stuff of daily existence.

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