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# VOICES OF CLIMATE JUSTICE. ECOSOCIAL WORK AND THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

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## STEMMEN VAN KLIMAATRECHTVAARDIGHEID. ECOSOCIAAL WERK EN DE POLITIEK VAN ERKENNING

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### ABSTRACT

This essay aims to provide an overview of the guiding principles of an ecosocial approach to social work. It discusses this approach from an ethical-political perspective that considers the climate crisis as a multiplier of inequalities and injustice issues. It discusses the question of how the climate crisis affects our understanding of justice and the role social work should play in promoting justice. Apart from economic fair distribution, justice should also involve the recognition of voices that are not being heard. For that reason, the essay addresses the notions of recognition and epistemic justice more deeply.

### KEYWORDS

Ecosocial work, climate justice, ecosocial transition, recognition justice, epistemic justice

## **SAMENVATTING**

Dit essay beoogt een overzicht te geven van de leidende principes van een ecosociale benadering in het sociaal werk. Het bespreekt deze benadering vanuit een ethisch-politiek perspectief en in het licht van de klimaatcrisis. Het stelt de vraag hoe de klimaatcrisis ons begrip van rechtvaardigheid verandert en welke rol het sociaal werk zou moeten spelen in het bevorderen van klimaatrechtvaardigheid. Daarbij zou het zich niet alleen moeten richten op economische en sociale rechtvaardigheid, maar ook op erkenningsrechtvaardigheid en epistemische rechtvaardigheid.

## **TREFWOORDEN**

Ecosociaal werk, klimaatrechtvaardigheid, ecosociale transitie, erkenningsrechtvaardigheid, epistemische rechtvaardigheid

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, debates concerning the question of what role social work should play in relation to climate change, have intensified. Climate change is prominent in the agenda of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The IFSW has published several volumes about social work promoting community and environmental sustainability and considers this promotion to be the third pillar of the Global Agenda for Social Work (Jones, 2020). It has also been developing a Climate Justice Program, aiming to educate on how climate change creates more injustice within populations.

The attention paid by the IFSW to climate change is more than justified. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2023) has described how climate change acts as a multiplier of socioeconomic inequalities and involves social, cultural, and political exclusion. Therefore, it is better to speak of climate crisis than of climate change. The predominant idea that economic growth is an axiomatic necessity, has led to the exploitation of natural resources, acidification of the oceans, depletion of natural ecosystems, and loss of biodiversity (Hickel, 2021; Kallis, 2011). This ecological devastation causes global warming and climate change. The term 'climate crisis' refers to the disruptive social effects that extreme flooding, drought, and hurricanes have on our society. And because marginalised and disadvantaged groups suffer disproportionately from these negative effects, the climate crisis confronts us with major justice issues. For that reason, to achieve

a sustainable society that is also socially and ecologically just, reducing greenhouse emissions is simply not enough.

Accordingly, the transition to a sustainable society that is socially and ecologically just, poses major challenges for the social work profession. Generally speaking, an ecosocial approach to social work does not only aim to promote environmental sustainability, it also sets forward the premise of social and economic equality, while promoting the dignity and worth of all people and other non-human living beings (Dominelli, 2012; Matthies & Nāhri, 2017; Nāhri & Matthies, 2016; Rambaree et al., 2019). It addresses and challenges prevailing patterns in society that, on both a global and local scale, not only lead to socio-economic, cultural, and political disparities, but also to epistemological ones. The access of marginalised groups to justice, education and social care is hindered and prevents participating in processes that bring the voices of these groups to the forefront.

The aim of this essay is to discuss the ecosocial approach to social work with regard to climate justice, which has recently received a lot of attention and has been the main topic of discussion at the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference. In 2023, the Dutch Scientific Council of Government Policy (WRR) (2023) published a report in which it emphasises that, to gain public support for adaptation and mitigation measures, climate justice should be an integrated part of climate policy. Although this is encouraging, this integration appears to be primarily instrumental. Besides, the attention given to climate justice, is mainly limited to the economic and political dimension of justice; it focusses on the fair distribution of costs and on procedures that allow people to participate in decision-making processes. The cultural and epistemological dimensions regarding climate justice are hardly discussed. For example, the idea that modern scientific knowledge consolidates the supremacy of the Global North's economy and marginalises any alternative and indigenous worldviews or knowledge, has been completely ignored.

## **AN ECOSOCIAL TRANSITION**

On a global scale we have recently been confronted with several crises. The financial crisis, the economic crisis, the refugee crisis and the covid pandemic all had a disturbing impact on our societies. These crises have in common that they revealed not only the increasing economic and social inequality between the Global North and the Global South, but also between the privileged and underprivileged groups within countries of the Global North.

The way we have dealt with these crises also showed the hegemonic concept of modern scientific knowledge that “appears to be a civilizational paradigm encompassing all domains of life” (De Sousa Santos et al., 2007, p. ix). They are interrelated and must be considered as the symptoms of an underlying paradigmatic system and necessitate “an existential change in the way humankind lives in and interacts with its social and natural environment” (Huntjes, 2021, p. 172). This includes a change at the level of discourse (the values, ideas, ways of thinking, scientific paradigms, cultural patterns), structure (institutions, practices, organisations), and practice (rules, routines, the way we interact professionally as well as in daily life). Within and outside of the literature on ecosocial work, the word used for this existential or radical change is transition. This transition encompasses changes happening at all three levels and it challenges the underlying socioeconomic and political systems and ways of knowing that dominate and disseminate in all domains of society.

According to Matthies & Nāhri (2017), ecosocial transitions are mainly presented as ‘political and practical programmes’ to promote fundamental changes which aim to put our societies towards a sustainable direction. These transitions encompass ecological, economic, and social dimensions. The social dimension, however, is often considered to be the third wheel, as it is mainly seen as an instrumental precondition to gaining public support. Matthies and Nāhri argue on the other hand, that we should identify the deep social nature and social impact of both the ecological and economic transitions, and that we have to focus on the interdependencies between the three dimensions. With their knowledge of poverty, social security, community building and marginalisation, social workers could and should play a significant role in demonstrating the effects of the climate crisis as well as of the transition (Coates, 2003; Matthies & Nāhri, 2017; Rambaree et al., 2019).

## **TWO OBSTACLES FOR A REDEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK**

However, in practice, social workers hardly have time to engage in wider issues of sustainability and climate change. Until now, “their voice has been virtually absent in climate change discussions” (Dominelli, 2012, p. 2). Until recently, European social workers as well as teachers and students rarely grasped the connections between social work and ecological climate issues (Nāhri & Matthies, 2016). This also applies to the Dutch context. Social workers are increasingly working on the energy transition, yet a profound discussion about an ecosocial approach of social work, and what this involves, is almost absent.

If we look at it from a discursive point of view, we may discern two major reasons for this absence. The first reason is that, for the last three decades, in line with the neoliberal economic hegemony,

both social policy and social work have placed a strong emphasis on supporting the individual and promoting self-reliance and individual responsibility. Neither the field of social policy nor the field of social work has paid much attention to mechanisms of social exclusion, or to promoting social change, social justice, and emancipation, which set the Global Agenda for Social Work. There is a gap between the role assigned to social work by this Agenda, and the role social work has as social policy implementer. This is similar to arguments in favour of the politicisation of social work and the revaluation of social work as a profession that protects democracy, social justice, and human rights (Reynaert et al., 2023). In their view, social workers should not only focus on supporting disadvantaged individuals or marginalised groups. They should also denounce structural causes of exclusion and marginalisation and stand up for the rights of these groups and make their voices be heard.

A second reason is that the global ecological crisis “is also a crisis of the Western type of social work professionalism” (Nähri & Matthies, 2016, p. 494). This means that an ecosocial transition of our society necessarily implies a transformation of social work itself: “The profession of social work needs to redefine itself in light of this urgent ecological crisis” (Powers & Rinkel, 2018, p. 31). Rather than a specialty within social work, ecosocial work is considered to be a ‘new paradigm’ (Coates, 2003; Matthies & Nähri, 2017). Rambaree et al. (2019, p. 205) even go so far as to say that “all social work should be ecosocial work”. It is true that the crises we face are generally recognised as issues of public concern, but they are dealt with in a techno-managerial and consensual way that does not question the dominant social, ecological and political discourse (Swyngedouw, 2018). This discourse not only leaves little to no space for a profound debate about economic dogmas of growth and marketisation, but it also reduces justice to an economic and procedural dimension.

Hence, a redefinition of social work implies a transition at the level of discourse, structure, and practice. As such, ecosocial work does not only criticise the hegemony of the economic and modern scientific discourse that constitutes our modern society, values, and beliefs, it also challenges the instrumental rationality of the professional models within social policy and social work.

## **ECOSOCIAL WORK: A NEW PARADIGM**

Before taking up the question of justice, one should first consider what this new paradigm entails discursively, structurally and practically.

## **Criticism of modernity**

One of the first books that discusses the linkage between social work and the ecological crisis is John Coates' *Ecology and Social Work. Toward a New Paradigm* (2003). In this study the author criticises the assumptions, values, and beliefs that dominate not only our worldview but also the theoretical frameworks of social work. According to Coates (2003), the deeper cause of the climate crisis rests in modernity itself, with its supremacy of scientific knowledge, anthropocentric worldview, and idea of human progress. Being rational, modernity considers humans to be superior to other living creatures within the ecosystem. Due to their ratio, human beings are not only able to control their own lives and that of other living creatures; as autonomous and rational beings they are also morally obliged to do so. No doubt, modernity has brought progress, freedom, and well-being, as well as having laid the foundations of our democratic rule of law and welfare state. It has however also brought forth an economy with a blind obsession for growth and consumerism which is the cause of the current climate crisis, social disruption and inequality (Hickel, 2021; Kallis, 2011). According to John Coates, social work has to play a significant role in helping us "to recognize the need for a shift in consciousness" away from the centrality of economic growth (Coates, 2003, p. 76).

## **Eco-centric**

As long as we continue to see ourselves as a being outside of, and superior to, the natural environment, we cannot respond adequately to the climate crisis. That is the reason why a shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric understanding is needed (Besthorn, 2012; Boetto, 2017; Coates, 2003; Huntjes, 2021). Seen from an eco-centric perspective, humans are but one element of a much larger ecosystem that is made up of interconnectedness between human and non-human living beings. This paradigm shift is at the heart of ecosocial work and involves more than just adding the natural environment to the existing social work practice. It is not only necessary that we distance ourselves from the current ways in which we dominate and exploit nature, but we should also distance ourselves from the supremacy of modern scientific knowledge that ignores and suppresses other forms of knowledge or belief systems that inform other cultures. This criticism of modernity is partly reflected in the global definition of social work. In addition to theories of social work, humanities, and social sciences, indigenous knowledge is mentioned as a source of knowledge that underpins social work practices and engages people and structures to enhance well-being (IFSW, 2014). By valuing indigenous knowledge, ecosocial work challenges the predominance of scientific rationality and the present demand for evidence-based practice within social work and social policy.

### **An ecocritical approach of structural social work**

To clarify this paradigm shift, most authors refer to traditions of structural social work and its 'person-in-environment' approach (Nähri & Matthies, 2016). The physical and mental well-being of individuals and their resilience and capacity to change is considered to be related to their social environment. Structural social work focuses on how individuals and structures interact with each other. It also involves political issues, to the extent that it pays attention to how socio-cultural and economic-political structures increase inequality, and it seeks to promote social justice (Tirions et al., 2019). Structural social work produces knowledge about the living conditions of people, social structures that violate human rights and impede marginalised groups to participate on equal footing in policy decision-making processes. It also sheds light upon cultural and symbolic patterns that misrepresent, stereotype, and disrespect these groups for who they are. To overcome these barriers of misrepresentation, structural social work acts collectively to influence local or even national policy, to challenge cultural norms and values that exclude some from being recognised as political actors that can argue and speak for themselves. However, the concept of structural social work has been criticised for its exclusion of the natural environment. From an ecocritical perspective, the ability to extend structural social work to an interaction between humans and their natural environment is needed (Nähri & Matthies, 2016). This ecocritical approach of structural social work prioritises ecology over economy and criticises particularly the prevailing and axiomatic idea that an economy needs to grow. This point of view corresponds with criticisms made by economists who recently tried to conceptualise a de-growth or post-growth economy (Hickel, 2021; Jackson, 2021; Kallis, 2011).

It should be clear by now that ecosocial work includes more than just greening our economy or neighbourhood. It encompasses an ethical-political dimension to the extent that it addresses injustice issues and human rights, and challenges political-economic structures and sociocultural patterns that impede groups to participate and raise their voice. In this regard, ecosocial practices can be understood as a way of ecosocial development and empowerment. This includes all kinds of initiatives that combine ecological and social goals. For instance, think of organising a community of practices in which groups of people share and discuss ideas and values, and aim to learn from one another; building communities in which groups stand up for their right to a healthy and sustainable neighbourhood and support each other in their actions; creating community gardens, urban wildernesses and solar panel cooperations; empowering marginalised and disadvantaged groups to ensure that their voices are being heard, their needs are being met and their dignity is respected; organising social action and advocacy to preserve green spaces and promote ecological

sustainability; supporting education programs to raise awareness of the importance to sustain the ecosystem we are a part of (Boetto, 2017; Powers & Rinkel, 2018).

## CLIMATE INJUSTICE

Considering that our dominant conception of politics and ethics is based on the same modernist assumptions as social work, the question arises how this ecosocial paradigm affects our understanding of justice and the role social work should play in promoting justice.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) leaves no doubt that climate change is “human-induced” and that human activities “have unequivocally caused global warming” (IPCC, 2023). However, phrases like ‘climate change’, ‘human-induced’ and the ‘Anthropocene’ compose a narrative in which climate change is understood to be a threat to everyone. We are all in it together. The same discursive mechanism of equivalence we saw applied during the covid pandemic: the virus makes no difference between the rich and the poor, or between whether you live in Africa or Europe. Everyone runs the risk of being infected, of becoming seriously ill, or in the worst case, of dying. The narrative also shows an optimistic storyline that convinces us of our techno-scientific knowledge and skills with which we can stop global warming or defuse the virus in such a manner that, in the future, things can stay just the way they are. There is also a moral and cautionary tale included, which appeals to our responsibility to act in order to save the world and future for our children.

The way this narrative becomes a default way of speaking is a problem, as it marginalises the fact that, at this very moment, the climate crisis has already become a ‘catastrophe’ for hundreds of millions of people in the Global South (Swyngedouw, 2018) and conceals that the global responsibility of its devastating effects has not been equally shared (Williams, 2021). Calculated per capita, with only twenty percent of the world’s population, the Global North is responsible for ninety-two percent of the greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming. The Global South, with almost eighty percent of the world’s population, only emits eight percent of the total emission (Hickel, 2021). According to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, there is no misunderstanding that the consequences of the climate crisis are disproportionately and unfairly distributed:

Perversely, the richest, who have the greatest capacity to adapt and are responsible for and have benefitted from the vast majority of greenhouse gas emissions, will be the best placed to

cope with climate change, while the poorest, who have contributed the least to emissions and have the least capacity to react, will be the most harmed. (Human Rights Council, 2019, p. 6).

## RECOGNITION AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

Because the disruptive effects of the climate crisis are disproportionately borne by the Global South and by groups in the Global North facing discrimination, exclusion, and conditions of systemic inequality, the same council goes so far as to say that the global ecological crisis is simultaneously a racial justice crisis (Human Rights Council, 2022). This racism is structural in the sense that patterns of disadvantage emerge from the overall economic functioning and the cultural and epistemological order that the Global North has imposed on the Global South (De Sousa Santos et al., 2007; Williams, 2021). Climate injustice is not just limited to unfair socioeconomic distribution, which includes exploitation, unequal access to and distribution of income, property, education, or healthcare. It is also related to recognition and epistemic injustice.

The claim that climate change is racist recalls Nancy Fraser's thesis that the politics of redistribution is always imbricated with the politics of recognition. According to Fraser, recognition injustice occurs when cultural or collective patterns of interpretation, perception and communication exclude others from being heard and taken seriously (Fraser, 1997). This includes stereotypical representations that impair the credibility of a certain group or an individual. It is not wrong to protest climate change and injustice on behalf of future generations, but "if this becomes a central and dominant narrative, the voices that are pushed to the margins are the same ones that are always pushed away" (Williams, 2021, p. 122). This recognition justice is intertwined with different sorts of epistemic justice. Miranda Fricker speaks of testimonial injustice when a person is not acknowledged as someone who can know or argue, for instance, when a student criticises his professor. When a group of people have "an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (Fricker, 2007, p. 1), she speaks of hermeneutical injustice. This is the case when someone, for example, is unable to express and make intelligible what it means to be part of an extended family, because our western culture lacks this concept.

Fricker approaches the issue of epistemic justice from a feminist theoretical perspective and takes an ethical stand. Boaventura de Sousa Santos addresses the issues of epistemic justice from a political and postcolonial perspective. He claims that there cannot be "global social justice without global cognitive justice" (De Sousa Santos et al., 2007, p. vii; De Sousa Santos, 2016). For him,

the political and economic supremacy of the Global North is interrelated with the epistemological privilege of scientific knowledge, which defines what it means to know and what counts as valid knowledge. This privilege “was also instrumental in suppressing other, non-scientific forms of knowledges and, at the same time, the subaltern social groups whose social practices were informed by such knowledge” (De Sousa Santos et al., 2007, p. vii). Social practices involve knowledge and vice versa. So, to deny the validity of subaltern forms of knowledge involves the destruction of the social practices and traditional lifestyles, and the disqualification of the social agents that operate according to such knowledge (De Sousa Santos, 2016; Dominelli, 2012).

Except distributive justice, climate justice encompasses recognition as well as epistemic justice. An ecological approach of social work involves an “ecology of knowledges,” which entails “an invitation to the promotion of non-relativist dialogue among knowledges” (De Sousa Santos et al., 2007, p. xx). From a scientific point of view, it is nonsensical to claim that the voice of non-human beings should be taken seriously. Nonetheless, Nähri and Matthies (2016, p. 498) claim that “when people are seen as a part of nature, then also nature should be involved in all decision-making about our sustainable future”. Their statement implies the recognition of indigenous people and movements who demand the protection of their rights and forms of knowledge that inform their social practices and symbiotic relationship with nature (Dominelli, 2012). Think of the Whanganui River in New Zealand which the Māori regard as their ancestor and that, at last, has been recognised by the government as a legal person. The recognition of nature as a legal person reconfigures our understanding of the relation between human and non-human nature that makes it possible to think about ecological justice and to value non-human living entities with rights of their own. Similar initiatives have been taken in western countries.

## **CONCLUSION: WE HAVE TO CHANGE OUR WAY OF LISTENING**

What does all this have to do with social work? Nothing, if social work continues to follow the scientific form of knowledge. Everything, as long as it includes the cultural and epistemological dimension of justice. By recognising that people have different ways of knowing, which inform their social practices, it not only broadens the scope of social work, but even more important, it also creates the opportunity to give voice to experiences and enter in dialogue among different forms of knowledge. This also applies to medical models of the psychological frameworks which make it impossible to give meaning to experiences that do not fit into their conceptualisation (Johnstone, 2021). To give voice to disadvantaged groups, it is not enough to recognise their human and social rights. The challenge is to develop skills to engage in an ecology of knowledge

and face the dilemmas this ecology confronts us with. The point is not to give voice to groups we perceive as disadvantaged but change our way of listening and perceiving.

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