

Reclaim the Climate – *Episode 0*

In this episode, Julie Lebrun welcomes Ruth Paluku-Atoka and Julien Didier for the launch of our podcast Reclaim the Climate which was recorded at the Brussels Podcast Festival in March 2020. In the first part, we talk about our project, and then we present ourselves and our path to activism. Then, we talk about what we mean by climate justice, and we try to discuss preconceived ideas that are prevalent in the Belgian climate movement. We end up presenting principles and practices that have been central in our project.

1. What is the Climate Justice Camp and Reclaim the Climate? (00 :48 ▶ 06 :00)

The Climate Justice Camp is a group of mainly grassroots activists that has been created to organize a climate camp in Belgium. A climate camp looks like a field where we meet for a few days and where we build different spaces to live together for a few days. It's a space where we live according to self-management, which means that everyone participates in the life of the camp. It's a space and a moment where we try to think about strategies for fighting climate, ecological, environmental and social issues. The objective is to organize moments of meetings, debates and reflections around climate and social justice issues. It is also a space where we take the time to be together, to meet each other, to celebrate and perhaps create new links that are not usually made. The idea of this camp is also to move back frontline communities at the centre of climate narratives.

Reclaim the Climate is this, it's a podcast! In the Climate Justice Camp, we've always strived to create outside of a simple camp. The idea behind Reclaim the Climate was to pass on all the knowledge, all the exchanges that we were able to have, with our voices and those of other speakers. We had also in mind all those people, whom, for many reasons, may not come to the camp, and yet we think it is important that they participate in the reflection. Because, and even though one of our goals is to make this camp as inclusive as possible to all kinds of people and groups, we know that this is an unattainable goal and that podcasting may be a way to reach other people. A camp in the fields is not always accessible to all people, especially for people with less physical capacities. There are so many things that come into play when it comes down to inclusiveness that we thought we needed to multiply the mediums.

2. Who are you and why did you start campaigning? [06 :00 ▶ 15 :30]

Ruth is a black woman from Brussels, who comes from a Congolese family (from North Kivu), and who tried the university adventure. She comes from a very precarious background, and she is now employed in the Brussels LGBT sphere. Ruth started activism four or five years ago, on the issues of accessibility to higher education. When she returned to Brussels, she became progressively involved in civil disobedient and direct actions, and various forms of activism. Ruth was introduced to climate and ecological issues a little later but quickly felt exhausted for several reasons: there were discourses she didn't necessarily identify with and she was often the only black person in the activist spaces she was involved in. When she tried to understand why, she quickly realized that some messages were problematic, such as those around over-consumption: over-consumption does not affect precarious people at all, who rather tend to under-consume everything, be it energy, heating or even food. There were a lot of things that really needed to be discussed, whether gender or race-related, with questions such as: "how do we talk about the environment from an urban perspective in Brussels? How do we experience access to a healthy environment in an urban

environment when we live in so-called 'popular' neighbourhoods?".

As for Julien, he navigates the world as a cisgender man, gay, white, from a rural background and with an academic background. Julien has always been sensitive to ecological issues and especially since university, when he became familiar with degrowth and the impossibility of reconciling capitalist growth and ecological balance. But there were things that made him question himself, such as often being the only "queer" person or the lack of care in many activist groups, which might be weird since all these movements are supposed to fight for progressive visions of society. So he got closer to LGBT struggles, and this made him realize that, in environmentalist activist spheres, we never talk about what it means to fight against something that is a priori very big and important such as climate change, while fighting every day for your own safety or your own feeling of shame, or of not having any personal value in the face of homophobia for example. It is also true for women who must fight on a daily basis for their physical safety in many places or even just to have a voice. Or for racialized people, in order to just exist in the media or in society in general, or to survive in the face of institutional violence. And it has created a feeling like that of distance and a desire to get away. And that's when, a year ago, people came to him because they wanted to organize something to explore the links between these issues, to find out how you fight for climate justice when you're a queer person, a woman, a racialized person?

3. What is climate justice ? [15 :30 ► 22 :04]

It's departing from the idea that climate change is both the consequence and the source of injustice and systemic domination. Climate justice is about trying to fight in a political and just way against climate change by crossing all perspectives of domination and injustice at all times.

First, climate change is the consequence of domination, exploitation and oppression systems, such as capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. To say that there are no disasters that are only natural is to say that climate disruptions are brought through social systems that have functioned for hundreds of years. In environmental movements, we often speak of capitalism as a system that, through its race for profits, not only depletes so-called "natural" resources but also exploits people and drag us into a spiral of growth and overexploitation that brings us to this point. But there is much less talk about colonialism as a system of exploitation and oppression, and how it is at the source of the installation of cultures and exploitation, both at the level of the land and of human populations. Sometimes there is also this naive belief that colonialism might be over because there are no longer any official colonies in the world: this is not the case, and we can see how this system leaves very strong stigmas on territories, on people, and also in our imaginations. The third major system which is often named in this case is patriarchy, that is to say the instituted domination of one gender (thus the men) over the dominated gender "women", but also all identities, gender expressions, and sexualities seen as diverging from the binary, heterosexual, cisgender norm... There is also a growing understanding of the way patriarchy is also at the centre of a vision of exploitation, and perhaps in particular of objectification, of both women and of what is seen as natural.

So, this is the idea that climate change stems from systems of oppression, but climate change can also create new inequalities and injustices. An example would be Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, flooding many neighbourhoods there. But, of course, it was not just any neighbourhood, since these were the lowest neighbourhoods in the city and were, not surprisingly, mostly populated by poor and black populations. There was an injustice in who was impacted by the first violence of this hurricane, the floods, and the fact that thousands of people died and were displaced. But even afterwards, in the response that society gave to this, there was a great deal of injustice, since we could see how the administration did not react at all as it should have done to this disaster, since there was an extremely long reaction time, a level of reaction that was far too low in relation to the disaster, and in relation to what one could have imagined if the

predominantly white states in the north of the United States had been affected. And finally, afterwards, we could also see how this catastrophe was an opportunity for the US capitalist system to take over this city: that is, under the pretext of rebuilding New Orleans, Bush and the Louisiana state government passed laws to deregulate wage standards and lower taxes to create an Economic Opportunity Zone - that was the name that was chosen - to give companies close to the administration the opportunity to come and rebuild and make huge profits there. It was also an opportunity to gentrify the city, to replace these very black and very poor neighbourhoods by "more socially mixed" neighbourhoods (they must have found a good term like that). This is a very concrete example that shows all the climate injustices that can and will happen as more and more catastrophes take place.

4. Discussing some misconceptions in the climate movement [22:04 ► 34:00]

Misconception n°1: "The climate affects everyone, we're all in the same boat."

In activist spheres, the climate issue is often approached with the idea that we are all in the same boat, that this problem should affect everyone, because the goal is that one day we will all be able to hold hands and breathe fresh air. But let's get back to reality: we live in rural or urban areas, in different places, so the environment we're going to have access to is already going to be very different. These things separate the way we experience climate and environmental issues in general. When you look at it on a global scale, with continents that have histories marked by colonization that erased survival practices from the earth, that precipitated the genocide of entire communities, you see that these exploitations have also created climate disruption. To say that we are all in the same boat is to forget how we are exploiting the land and exploiting each other. We have to get rid of the idea that we are just here to breathe the same air, but that we are here to ensure that, no matter where we live, we live well, and that we can survive potential disasters. And for us, knowing that we are not in the same boat also allows us to know who we should talk to, for example, black people, to find out how it can impact them, because race issues are clearly linked to climate issues. So, we must get rid of this idea that we are all in the same boat in order to create solidarities, links and a more effective discourse.

Misconception n°2: "There is a climate emergency, it's now or never that we must act in order to avoid crossing the red line".

This is a speech that we heard a lot last year, and which is also linked to the IPCC report and to the fact that we have begun to see the first concrete impacts of climate change in Belgium, with two summers in a row of fairly significant temperature extremes. And suddenly there was an awakening, with this idea of not crossing the red line, as if it was okay so far. What's problematic about that is that it tends to deny that this has already happened to millions of people elsewhere in the world, who have had their living environment destroyed. If we can say this, it's because we've benefited from the system: if we have the experience of a man, of a white person in a privileged economic condition, then we can say "oh yes, now we're starting to risk something". This is a bit of a wake-up call for the white and European middle and upper classes, who suddenly feel that now there is a risk. And in that case, no problem (and let's make sure that there is a politicization starting from that). What becomes dangerous is when these people come and pretend to explain to other people, and in particular to those people who are already marginalized, that this is now and that this is the fight they should pick, by using this notion of urgency as an imperative, that they should stop everything to fight for the climate because it is THE absolute priority. For many people, there are hundreds of absolute priorities every day. And when you're in a situation where you have to find a solution to feed your child, the urgency is not necessarily what will happen in five or ten years. When you have experiences that are shaped by multiple relationships of domination, emergencies are always multiple. We need a discourse that integrates these multiple realities so that people who feel bad about not being able to demonstrate or participate can feel that they are represented. Because

having so many people marching for their line that is theirs and not yours is just appalling.

Misconception No. 3: "Fighting for the climate is already complicated, so if we also have to deal with social issues, or even racism or gender, we'll never succeed".




Often, it seems that talking about climate and social struggles is too scattered and too difficult. We must also realize the violence of these discourses. There is something very inhuman in this type of discourse, because it really denies the fact that whole communities are actually doing it every day. But when it's not centred on your privileged person, it becomes somehow scattered and problematic. There is a real need to shift and refocus the discourse on the people who are impacted by climate issues, who live these issues daily, in their urban or rural environment. We need to put them back at the centre so that they can create the solutions that are needed to address current or future problems.

5. How can we refocus the narrative around the people involved and try to be more inclusive? [34 :00]

Last year we organized a series of events called "Shape the Camp", which were moments of co-construction of the camp, before the climate camp took shape. Each time, there was an angle of struggle that was chosen, whether it was feminist struggles, anti-racist struggles, queer struggles, etc. Each time, there were two big questions, which were: 1) do you feel today as being part of the environmental or climate justice movement, or not? Being there, or not being there, what do you feel, do you feel welcomed? 2) What does it mean to talk about climate justice from your perspective? And that's what we tried to follow as a guideline for building the camp, both to make it more inclusive than what we could have done without these meetings (even if it's an illusion to think that we're going to be able to make something completely inclusive) and to talk about things that concern different people in order to multiply voices. This led us to include in the program not only moments of discussion on climate issues, but also workshops that, a priori, had "nothing to do with it", such as a workshop on legislation or abortion practices in Belgium, an introductory workshop on transidentities, or a workshop on white privilege. For us, it was very important to show the crossover already in this program and to have workshops not open to all so that some groups could develop their own vision.

One of the ways we chose to make the camp more respectful of everyone was to co-construct a Charter with rules and practices that would be needed so that, in fact, everyone would feel that they were being respected. We felt it was necessary to shed light on several practices that are not always considered disrespectful, and that are linked to a position of domination. It also led us to think about the issue of toilets, the alcohol policy, the way in which people could be addressed... Even if this charter was an essential tool, we accompanied it with a practice that exists in other protest camps elsewhere, which is that of creating a team that we called "awareness team". This team, which was made up of people with different backgrounds and social situations, had the mission of bringing this reflection to life starting from the things that were happening in the camp, especially aggressions or micro-aggressions, in order to bring a general awareness on this. But it's a work in progress, we know it won't be done like that all at once.

6. And we conclude with recommendations. [39:31 ► 46:45]

-  [Le triangle et l'hexagone, réflexions sur une identité noire](#) (by Maboula Soumahoro)
-  [Une écologie décoloniale, penser l'écologie depuis le monde caribéen](#) (by Malcolm Ferdinand)
-  [We have always been here, a queer muslim memoir](#) (by Samra Habib)