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# Confronting Institutional Violence in the Context of Climate Justice Politics

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David N. Pellow 

## Abstract

Over the last decade, I have been drawn toward the study of how climate change and other socioecological threats have intersected with the criminal legal system. In this essay, I consider how one case offers important challenges and possibilities for communicating dreams of radical environmental and climate justice in the context of the criminal legal system. Moreover, I reflect on my own direct involvement in these movements and struggles as an activist-scholar and how that form of praxis is always an opportunity to consider more effective ways of writing, speaking, sharing, and communicating the urgency of intersecting crises.

## Keywords

climate justice, eco-terrorism, abolition, policing

## Introduction

Climate injustice is a multifaceted, complex challenge facing humanity and the planet. When communities in Global South nations like Pakistan contribute relatively few greenhouse gas emissions and yet bear the disproportionate burden of climate change, such as the massive flooding that occurred there in the summer and fall of 2022, we can see clearly the essence of climate injustice. As Robert Bullard, Distinguished Professor of Urban Planning and Environmental Policy at Texas Southern University, who is known as the father of environmental justice, puts it, “The most peculiar aspect of climate change is that the populations that contribute least to the problem of climate change are most likely to feel its impacts. Such disproportionality makes it a serious social justice issue” (Bullard et al, 2016). Climate injustice is a term that reflects the view that addressing the global climate crisis requires centering the needs and voices of marginalized communities (Whyte, 2017). That is a challenging agenda because powerful forces have a vested interest in maintaining the current political-economic system, and their efforts are evident in well-funded campaigns to manufacture doubt, cover up corruption, and undermine those fighting for justice (Brulle, 2019; Dunlap & Brulle, 2020; Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

As a sociologist, I have focused on how climate change and other socioecological threats intersect with the criminal legal system, which offers a window into a distinct dimension of climate injustice since the majority of incarcerated

persons are from marginalized communities. For example, one study found that mass incarceration contributes significant greenhouse gas emissions through (1) prison construction and maintenance; (2) the production of goods and materials by incarcerated persons employed inside prisons; and (3) the use of imprisoned persons as low-wage labor outside of prisons, which facilitates the expansion of economic growth more broadly (McGee et al., 2020). Compounding these realities, the very populations that are facing climate injustice—Black Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), and low-income folks experiencing greater impacts associated with climate change—are overrepresented in carceral systems, so they are impacted by climate injustice on both sides of the prison walls (Betasamosake-Simpson, 2021; Dwyer, 2019; Whyte, 2017). And while I first approached this topic as primarily one of material conflicts between multiple stakeholders, I have come to understand it in large part as an issue of communication. The capacity to shape the public’s common sense in ways that either embrace or reject the science of climate change, or the goals of the carceral system versus abolition, is reflected in how well opposing sides are able to craft and share their messages.

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## The Power of Ecoterrorism as a Label and Communication Strategy

The “Green Scare” is a 21st century reference to the Red Scares of the early and mid-20th century, when US government agents and elected officials sought to root out, vilify, and imprison anyone thought to be a communist or of a left-leaning politically radical persuasion. The Green Scare began in the early 2000s and involves government agents and politicians declaring that radical environmentalists and animal rights activists are “ecoterrorists” who pose threats to national security, the equivalent of being deemed an enemy of the state (Potter, 2011).

It has been extremely effective at demobilizing radical environmentalists around the United States, with tactics that include the use of law enforcement raids on the homes of activists, issuing grand jury subpoenas, the confiscation of personal property, and incarceration (Pellow, 2014). But perhaps the most effective tool wielded by Green Scare operatives is the communication strategy that labels peaceful activists as “terrorists.” This method of weaponizing language casts as threats to public safety nonviolent activists who are protesting institutionalized violence against people and ecosystems. Moreover, it opens the door for activists to be charged with “domestic terrorism,” a crime with a potentially lengthy prison sentence.

Grassroots activists have a monumentally difficult task before them: to convince mainstream news media outlets and publics that climate justice and abolition are laudable goals. Thus, the ecoterrorist label is a powerful example of the challenge of communication for grassroots activists since the fossil fuel industry and the state have thus far succeeded in controlling and weaponizing that language. Perhaps the most high-profile recent example of the wielding of the ecoterrorist label to undermine activists is law enforcement efforts to stop activists mobilizing against Cop City, a \$90 million and 85-acre police training complex designed to ramp up militarized policing and surveillance in Atlanta, a majority Black and brown metropolis.

## The Battle Over Cop City

Since late 2022, a grassroots movement of progressive activists, Defend the Atlanta Forest/Stop Cop City, has been repeatedly targeted by police and other law enforcement agencies for trying to stop the construction of the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, dubbed “Cop City.” In addition to concerns about intensifying the militarization of policing against working class communities of color, there is considerable anxiety over how the facility will negatively impact the Atlanta/Weelaunee Forest and the nearby South River, an endangered habitat (Adams, 2023).

The grassroots mobilization against Cop City is indeed a multi-issue movement focused on the intersections of institutional violence through policing, white supremacy, and

climate change, which is, in many ways, the future of climate and environmental justice politics (Gribble & Pellow, 2022).

The Cop City conflict emerges at a time when many communities across the United States are considering racial justice activists’ proposals for reallocating significant portions of municipal budgets away from policing toward supporting mental health services, education, and health care—all of which took center stage in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 and a national and global resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests. A common counternarrative promoted by the mainstream media since that time is that police departments are experiencing mass resignations and difficulties recruiting new officers during a national crime wave, which has provided a framework that supports greater police presence in cities across the nation (Smith, 2022; Young & Sayers, 2022). Toward that end, the police actions directed at the Defend the Atlanta Forest protesters have included intimidation with repeated shows of force, including the murder of a protester—Manuel “Tortuguita” Terán—in January 2023.

This violence against those assembled to protest is motivated by a well-funded commitment to protecting not just this site of police power, but more importantly, existing structures of power, including the fossil fuel industry. The Atlanta Police Foundation (APF) is the primary source of financial support behind the Cop City proposal, and like most other police foundations, the APF relies largely on private sector donations and has strong support from major corporations. In the case of APF, these financial backers include Georgia Power, a major utility firm whose parent company, Southern Company, spent tens of millions of dollars to support the dissemination of misinformation about climate change (Jones, 2022). They also include Bank of America, Wells Fargo, and J.P. Morgan, all of which are leading financiers of fossil fuel companies and either have direct representation on the APF Board or have provided donations (Armstrong & Seidman, 2020; Rainforest Action Network, 2020).

This constellation of support for Cop City from some of the world’s largest and most powerful corporations presents a formidable challenge for grassroots activists who have relatively scarce resources to mobilize public opinion and advocacy for climate justice and abolition. It mirrors a worldwide phenomenon in which layers of cooperation among some of the world’s largest fossil corporations, banks, and policing institutions underscore unsettling ways in which powerful organizations collaborate while ecosystems, the climate, and people suffer (Rainforest Action Network, 2022).

These corporations have a clear strategic incentive for supporting policing institutions because the latter primarily function to “serve and protect” the interests of capital and the state, particularly when grassroots movements challenge their dominance. The common cause of police and the fossil fuel industry underscores the need for movements for environmental and racial justice to work together.

## Resistance

Despite the vast inequities of power between the activists and institutional forces supporting Cop City, there is some cause for hope. Atlanta Forest Defenders have successfully garnered media coverage that addresses the issues and aims of the movement.<sup>1</sup> And they have mobilized a sizable number of people who are willing to take to the streets in nonviolent protests in the United States and around the world to plead their case. This is a welcome change from earlier days of the Green Scare when activists, legitimately wary of government infiltrators posing as supporters, sometimes made it difficult to enlist large groups of allies.

Sympathetic issue-driven media coverage and a robust solidarity network can be attributed to the sophistication of the communication tactics and strategies used by the Atlanta Forest Defenders and their allies. Natasha Lennard (2023a) of *The Intercept* described the Atlanta Forest Defenders as “extraordinarily successful” because of the vast spectrum of tactical maneuvers they have deployed, including “encampments, tree-sits, peaceful protest marches, carefully targeted property damage, local community events, investigative research, and, at times, direct confrontation with police forces attempting to evict protesters from the forest.”

Activists have spread their messages on a number of grassroots social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and various internet sites, including the Atlanta Press Collective—an anonymous group of activists who have monitored and reported on the conflict (see [atlprescollective.com](http://atlprescollective.com)). Grassroots supporters have also created a Wikipedia page titled “Stop Cop City” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop\\_Cop\\_City](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop_Cop_City)).

Threaded throughout the activists’ messaging is an emphasis on the deeper, historical layers of institutional violence that have laid the foundation for Cop City, including the fact that the proposed facility is slated to be built on land stolen from the Muscogee (Creek) Indigenous people, and the site was also where a prison farm operated during much of the 20th century. Their website reads:

The Atlanta Police Department currently uses this hallowed ground as a firing range . . . The destruction of forests affects all of us. So do the gentrification and police violence that the bulldozing of Weelaunee Forest would facilitate . . . It is up to us to create a peaceful society that does not treat human life as expendable. The forest defenders are trying to create a better world for all of us. (<https://defendtheatlantaforest.org>)

Activists’ emphasis on multiple concerns—policing, racial justice, climate justice, forest protection, and river conservation—has garnered support from across the political spectrum. Advocates from the political center, as well as liberal-progressives, and the far left have communicated their views in the streets, at public hearings, on social media, and in mainstream news outlets. Mobilizations and support continue to grow as faculty and students at nearby

universities—including the historically Black institution Morehouse College and Emory University—and members of the clergy joined efforts to halt the construction of Cop City. In the end, Cop City may indeed be built, but the once separate movements for climate justice, racial justice, and abolition have achieved a major victory if only because they have seamlessly linked their aims and actions, against the odds.

On 5 March 2023, 23 protestors were arrested at Cop City and charged with domestic terrorism, which can carry a prison sentence of up to 35 years in the state of Georgia (Lennard, 2023b). These activists are doing important work to challenge environmentally and socially destructive policies, but the legal repression associated with the domestic terrorism label elevates the risks they face to a degree that would dissuade most people from participating in such actions. I have spent my career working with and in support of environmental and climate justice movements. More recently, I have collaborated with movements embracing prison and police abolition, in large part because those criminal legal institutions consistently perpetrate human rights abuses and environmental and climate injustices, as noted above. And while I have occasionally faced pressures to either cease such activities or to betray my activist colleagues and friends, most of the time I have enjoyed the protections and privileges associated with being a tenured professor in an elite Global North academic context. And it is precisely that vantage point that I feel obligates me to continue advocating for these vital social change efforts through public speaking and the publication of research findings—both key elements for the effective use of media and communication platforms. My activities in this vein include publishing an annual report that details the horrors and hopes experienced by incarcerated persons facing climate and environmental injustices in prisons and jails around the world (Pellow et al., 2022). And as institutional violence directed at social movements and our planet’s climate continues unabated, principled commitments to activist-scholarship, including critiques of structures that support climate and racial injustice, become more important than ever before. Whether it is flooding in Pakistan or the degradation of the Atlanta/Weelaunee forest, the *real* threat to public safety is powerful forces determined to undermine efforts at justice. We should take note of how Defend the Atlanta Forest/Stop Cop City and other movements on the frontlines of struggles for social justice are making strides by tailoring their efforts to both win battles on the street and in the media. Despite the risks and fears associated with the state’s media strategy around the language and prosecution of “domestic terrorism,” the activists’ media work and messaging have been surprisingly effective at mobilizing support for their cause.

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## Note

1. See for example: progressive media coverage of the Cop City conflict includes stories published by Mother Jones, The Intercept, Democracy Now!, and The Guardian of London (Goodman, 2022; Lennard, 2023a; Whalen, 2023).

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## Author Biography

David N. Pellow is the Dehlsen Chair and Distinguished Professor of Environmental Studies and Director of the Global Environmental Justice Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara where he teaches courses on social change movements, environmental justice, human–animal conflicts, sustainability, and social inequality. He has published a number of works on environmental justice issues in communities of color in the United States and globally. His books include: *Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (co-editor, with Beth Caniglia, Andrew Jorgenson, Stephanie Malin, Lori Peek, and Xiaorui Huang, Springer 2021); *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Polity Press, 2017); *Keywords for Environmental Studies* (editor, with Joni Adamson and William Gleason, New York University Press, 2016); *Total Liberation: The Power and Promise of Animal Rights and the Radical Earth Movement* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); *The Slums of Aspen:*

*Immigrants vs. the Environment in America's Eden* (with Lisa Sun-Hee Park, New York University Press, 2011); *The Treadmill of Production: Injustice and Unsustainability in the Global Economy* (with Kenneth Gould and Allan Schnaiberg, Paradigm Press, 2008); *Resisting Global Toxics: Transnational Movements for Environmental Justice* (MIT Press, 2007); *The Silicon Valley of Dreams: Environmental Injustice, Immigrant Workers, and the High-Tech Global Economy* (with Lisa Sun-Hee Park, New York University Press, 2002); *Garbage Wars: The Struggle for Environmental Justice in Chicago* (MIT Press, 2002); *Urban Recycling and the Search for Sustainable Community Development* (with Adam Weinberg and Allan Schnaiberg, Princeton University Press, 2000); *Power, Justice, and the Environment: A Critical Appraisal of the Environmental Justice Movement* (editor, with Robert J. Brulle, MIT Press, 2005); and *Challenging the Chip: Labor Rights and Environmental Justice*

*in the Global Electronics Industry* (co-editor, with Ted Smith, David Sonnenfeld, and Leslie Byster, Temple University Press, 2006). His work has been reviewed, referenced, or quoted in the *L.A. Times*, the *New York Times*, *NPR*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Denver Post*, and *Mother Jones*. He has consulted for and served on the Boards of Directors of several community-based, national, and international organizations that are dedicated to improving the living and working environments for people of color, immigrants, Indigenous peoples, and working class communities, including the Central Coast Climate Justice Network, Community Environmental Council, Global Action Research Center, the Center for Urban Transformation, Greenpeace USA, International Rivers, the Fund for Santa Barbara, the Prison Ecology Project. He earned his B.A. in Sociology and Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 1992. He earned his M.A. and PhD in Sociology from Northwestern University in 1998.