

# The Politics of Representation in the Climate Movement

Article by Alast Najafi

July 17, 2020

For decades, the tireless work of activists around the world has advanced the climate agenda, raising public awareness and political ambition. Yet today, one Swedish activist's fame is next to none. Alast Najafi examines how the "Greta effect" is symptomatic of structural racial bias which determines whose voices are heard loudest. Mainstreaming an intersectional approach in the climate movement and environmental policymaking is essential to challenge the exclusion of people of colour and its damaging consequences on communities across the globe.

The story of Greta Thunberg is one of superlatives and surprises. In the first year after the schoolgirl with the signature blond braids emerged on the public radar, her fame rose to stratospheric heights. Known as the "Greta effect", her steadfast activism has galvanised millions across the globe to take part in climate demonstrations demanding that governments do their part in stopping climate change.

Since she started her school strike back in August 2018, Greta Thunberg has inspired numerous and extensive tributes. She has been called an idol and the icon the planet desperately needs. The Church of Sweden even went so far as to playfully name her the successor of Jesus Christ. These days, Greta Thunberg is being invited into the corridors of power, such as the United Nations and the World Economic Forum in Davos where global leaders and chief executives of international corporations listen to her important message.

Toward the end of 2019, her media exposure culminated in a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize and an extensively covered sail across the Atlantic with the aim of attending climate conferences in New York and Chile. Even if the prize eventually went to Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, the young climate activist has now been nominated for a second consecutive year and does not run short of awards and honours. Although only in her teens, Greta Thunberg joined the likes of Edward Snowden and Denis Mukwege as a laureate of the Right Livelihood Award and has been named Time's Person of the Year 2019 – a title she shares with heads of state such as Nelson Mandela and Angela Merkel.

The question arises how a once lone school striking 17-year-old could have garnered such extensive media coverage in such a short space of time.

The answer to this is multi-layered. Timing is, of course, one advantage. Greta Thunberg delivered a message at a time when people were ready to receive it, like a fruit ripe for picking. Over the past decade, climate issues have gradually occupied more and more space in the public discourse and have found their way into mainstream politics. Be it out of security concerns after the Fukushima nuclear disaster or for the alarming reports that have reached us from scientists or the United Nations, people listened and were already mobilising. Additionally, Greta Thunberg's inventive form of activism resonated with thousands across the globe, not to mention her intriguing persona. Personal characteristics like her Asperger's syndrome may have contributed to Greta's rapidly rising profile, though they have also been the subject of attacks from the likes of US President Donald Trump.

## **The unspoken r-word**

Trying to explain the phenomenon of Greta Thunberg without acknowledging the privileges of the world she was born into would miss out on an important aspect of her rapid rise to fame. Apart from being an impressive individual with a message that the world desperately needs to hear, she is also a middle-class white girl from the Global North. The social signifiers of race and class surely contributed to Greta Thunberg's easier access to the media, resources, and fora to speak up in. Greta Thunberg's first picture of school striking in front of the Swedish parliament was retweeted by her mother, a famous opera singer who at the time had over 40 000 followers.

Media coverage of the climate movement disproportionately leans towards white activists, therewith erasing the work of persons of colour. A staggering example is Associated Press' decision to crop Black Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate out of a photo in the wake of the 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos. The news agency was quick to explain that this was done "purely on composition grounds." But this statement was a euphemised way of saying that the Black body in the picture did not fit the narrative of a white-led climate movement. The four remaining persons in the picture, all of whom were white, did not seem to disturb the image's composition.

Are such instances which see the centring of white activists a coincidence? Certainly not. The work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall has analysed the representation of categories such as race and gender in mass media. He detected that media discourse does not mirror culture and society but rather reconstructs them by following an ideology that ensures power remains with the status quo.[1]

Racial bias in public discourse and mainstream media is undeniably a long-standing issue and a result of structural forms of discrimination within the industry. In a 2015 study on journalists in the UK, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism detected a "chronic failure to achieve even reasonable levels of ethnic diversity in journalism." Indeed, despite Black Britons making up 3 per cent of the British population, they represent only 0.2 per cent of British journalists, which makes them the most under-represented ethnic group in the industry. In an open letter, the Black Journalists Collective UK expressed the belief that "there is a direct correlation between the ethnic makeup of the staff in a newsroom and how issues are covered". The removal and erasure of Black Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate would have surely been less likely to happen in a diversified newsroom.

*When bodies of colour do appear in mass media, narratives about them rarely depart from racialised stereotypes; they are typically depicted as victims or, worse, as violent or dangerous.*

Under-representation and racial bias in mass media are by no means just a British phenomenon. In the United States, a 2017 survey by the American Society of News Editors found that only one in every six newsroom employees belonged to a racial minority. When bodies of colour do appear in mass media, narratives about them rarely depart from racialised stereotypes; they are typically depicted as victims or, worse, as violent or dangerous.

Thus, the disproportionate media focus on Greta Thunberg does not come as a surprise and is in part due to severe misrepresentation of people of colour. Its collateral damage is to render activists of colour invisible. Indeed, before Greta Thunberg even began her own creative protests, numerous other young indigenous climate activists or activists of colour had fought in similarly impressive ways. The perseverance of young Indian activist Aditya Mukarji has led to over 25 million plastic straws in New Delhi restaurants being replaced with paper alternatives. Another example is indigenous teen activist Helena Gualinga from the Sarayaku community in Ecuador, who is

fighting against the fossil fuel industry to preserve indigenous land rights.

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But as things currently stand, only Greta Thunberg's fame is second to none. Activists of colour are said to merely be following in her footsteps. Such categorisation deprives them of their agency and fails to acknowledge that their engagement often predated Greta Thunberg's. It should, however, be absolutely clear that in no way is Greta Thunberg herself to blame for today's warped politics of representation. Her unmatched fame should be recognised as a symptom of a system geared to protect and reproduce white privilege.

## **The white girl and the brown girl**

It is interesting to consider the current idealisation of Greta Thunberg alongside the story of another young female activist who rose to fame at a very young age: Pakistani activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. She became known to the world in late 2012 as the girl who was shot in the face by the Taliban for campaigning for girls' education. The award garnered huge amounts of media coverage, turning her into a globally influential figure with enhanced powers of persuasion. Similar to Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai was invited to numerous talk shows, wrote op-eds, and delivered a much-acclaimed speech at the United Nations.

What distinguishes the two tireless activists, however, is the difference in public image with which their respective careers kicked off. On the one hand, Greta Thunberg's image is that of a girl who felt deeply compelled to stage a school strike and thereafter became a climate activist. On the other is Malala Yousafzai's which is very much marked by the violent act that catapulted her into the spotlight. Her story, although powerfully overcome, was initially one of victimisation and trauma. The narrative built around her matched dominant preconceptions of women of colour as victims at the hands of brutal men of colour, thus feeding into existing stereotypes. Through her fearless activism, Malala Yousafzai has managed to shatter this image and to own her narrative.

*It should not be forgotten, however, that women of colour are often penalised for displaying feelings of anger or resentment. One need only recall the bigoted wave of criticism that hit Serena Williams after the 2019 US Open tennis tournament.*

Yet even today, these two activists' public images could not be more different. Greta Thunberg does not shy away from showing her emotions publicly. Her powerful *How Dare You* address at the United Nations in 2019 mesmerised the public with her anger, tears, and raw emotions. She openly criticises world leaders and politicians who in turn listen and admit feeling "great admiration, but also responsibility and guilt." Malala Yousafzai, on the other hand, impresses through her kindness, humility, and her astounding forgiveness towards her attacker. A public display of anger and resentment towards the person and system that ultimately put her into a six-day coma would have been a more than legitimate reaction. The difference in behaviour is certainly in large parts due to their

varying personalities. It should not be forgotten, however, that women of colour are often penalised for displaying feelings of anger or resentment. One need only recall the bigoted wave of criticism that hit [Serena Williams](#) after the 2019 US Open tennis tournament.

## **The in-and-out game of policymaking**

The issue at heart, however, is not about acquiring global acclaim or who won this or that award first. It is well known that countries from the Global South and people of colour are disproportionately affected by the effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events. Yet their seats at negotiation tables are occupied instead by people who at best speak on their behalf. Even when represented, the power imbalance is such that their voices are rarely heard.

When voices do not get the representation they deserve, the results are policies and projects that structurally exclude and discriminate. Nothing but this systematic exclusion and silencing of voices can explain how a large-scale climate mitigation project under the Kyoto Protocol such as the [Barro Blanco hydroelectric dam](#) on the Tabasara River in Panama could have been conceived so as to initially neglect its own devastating impact on the rights and livelihoods of local communities. Despite fierce opposition, the construction – if ever completed – would have led to the displacement of indigenous Ngäbe families and the flooding of their lands. The risks that the construction posed for the local population could have been easily assessed if there had been an inclusive human rights-based consultation prior to the approval of the project.

Mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination are not limited to the Global South. Communities of colour are often those in which environmentally harmful infrastructure such as power plants, airports, and busy roads are to be found. This ultimately renders the inhabitants – already weakened by historical class and race discrimination – even more vulnerable, and turns their livelihoods into “[dumping grounds for environmental hazards](#)”.

A 2019 Union of Concerned Scientists [analysis](#) found that communities of colour in the American North-East and mid-Atlantic are exposed to considerably [higher amounts of air pollution](#) than other demographic groups. On average, people of colour live with 66 per cent more air pollution, with Americans of Hispanic descent in the forefront with 75 per cent more exposure to tiny pollution particles. The same goes for densely populated neighbourhoods in Berlin with a high percentage of migrant communities, such as Neukölln and Kreuzberg, where air pollution is [considerably higher than in other districts](#). These findings are reproduced in the UK where, [according to Black Lives Matter UK](#), the London City airport is located in a community whose average income per year is six times lower than that of the passengers departing from it.

Such instances in which the lives and wellbeing of communities of colour are sidelined is possible because people of colour are underrepresented in environmental policymaking processes, and have less power to defend themselves and make their voices heard.

## **The power of an intersectional approach**

Climate change affects us all; it should not only be for the few to act on it. Yet in the current climate debate persons of colour, irrespective of whether they live in the Global South or North, tend to find themselves on the margins of power. How are we to hear the voices of activists of colour if they are being systematically deprived of spaces to speak up in?

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*starting point the fact that there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle.*

A way to comprehensively tackle imbalances in discourse, power, and representation is to introduce intersectionality to the prevailing climate debate. Intersectionality seeks to acknowledge simultaneous and inseparable experiences of marginalisation by taking as its starting point the fact that there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle. An intersectional approach to the prevailing climate debate acknowledges the challenges that present themselves when social categories such as race, religion, or class interact and enables an analysis of how these categories translate back into resources and power.

Intersectionality does not only offer a framework that helps to engage with issues around privilege and power, it also helps us to listen to others and to assess our own privileges. It allows us to accommodate marginalised voices of communities that are worst hit by climate change, and it allows these communities to own their narratives.

It should be noted that Greta Thunberg is perfectly aware of the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and the intersections of power. Accordingly, she tirelessly promotes other activists in her speeches and held a joint press conference with activists from South Africa, Uganda, and Kenya after a timely racism debate followed the cropping out of Vanessa Nakate. In one UN speech, Greta called herself “one of the lucky ones” and in a subsequent op-ed, she blamed “colonial, racist, and patriarchal systems” for how and with what speed the climate crisis evolved. It is about time the world listens to Greta Thunberg’s entire message: there are a myriad of other voices to be heard in the fight for a planet that is home to us all.

*The author of this piece would like to thank Anouchka Oler for her invaluable support.*

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#### Footnotes

[1] *Representation and the Media: a lecture with Stuart Hall*. 1997. Sut Jhally. Amherst: University of Massachusetts. (Introduced by Sut Jhally).

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Alast Najafi works closely with MEP Hannah Neumann in the European Parliament on human rights and foreign affairs, with a special focus on feminist foreign policy and the external dimension of climate change. She holds a master’s in human rights from the Université Saint Louis in Brussels and an LL.M in European Law from Leiden University.

Photo credit: Louise Schmidt

Published July 17, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-politics-of-representation-in-the-climate-movement/>

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