

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Teaching and Practicing Climate Politics at College of the Atlantic: Student-inspired, Student-driven

by Doreen Stabinsky



PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH IN NYC, SEPTEMBER 21, 2014  
PHOTO: LEONARD VOGT

College of the Atlantic (COA) is a small, alternative liberal arts college located on Mount Desert Island in Maine. The flexibility of our curriculum, a student-centered philosophy, and an emphasis on practical engagement provide the conditions for a unique learning laboratory for students seeking to practice climate politics.

Founded in 1969, COA admitted its first class in 1972 with a focus on active learning and the relationships between humans and the environment. All students follow a single major, Human Ecology, taking courses in our broad curricular areas of Arts and Design, Environmental Sciences, and Human Studies. There are few required courses, meaning that students in effect create their own interdisciplinary trajectory through the curriculum, and earn an interdisciplinary degree tailored through their interests and passions.

Our students are from across the United States and from around the world. A unique scholarship program from the Shelby Davis Foundation for students graduating with an international baccalaureate from United World Colleges contributes to COA having one of the highest proportions of international students of any small college in the United States. Many of our international students are very interested in global environmental politics. The 13-person COA delegation to the last climate conference in Lima, Peru, had students from Bolivia (2), Chile, Colombia (2), Ecuador, Guatemala, India, Mexico, Switzerland, the US (2), and the UK.

Active and activist students are attracted to COA and many will have already been involved in some form of politics: recent U.S. students have come to us with experience from participating in model United Nations at their high school, Occupy, and the Sierra Student Coalition. Our students want to change the world.

## Students Take on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

In 2005, a small group of COA students decided to attend the 10<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, held in Montréal, Canada.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is the global treaty that governs climate change action by all the 194 countries that are members of the treaty—technically called Parties. Parties meet annually at COPs to discuss, debate, and decide on means to implement the provisions of the convention.

This initial engagement of COA students, facilitated by the U.S. youth organization SustainUS, sowed the seeds for a whole range of courses in global environmental diplomacy at COA. The majority of the course offerings combine theory and practice, preparing students for and enabling their participation in global multilateral environmental negotiations, principally but not exclusively the UNFCCC.

The following year, 2006, a group of students decided they would return to the UNFCCC in December for COP11 in Nairobi. Students were enrolled in my course, Global Environmental Politics, which provided some foundational knowledge about the climate regime through a term-long role-play on the negotiations of the Kyoto Protocol.

In addition, the delegation attending COP11 developed a “group study” on the negotiations. Group studies are unique elements of COA course options, where a group of 5 to 8 students can decide to teach themselves material not covered in other COA courses. Group studies must be approved by the Academic Affairs Committee, and have a faculty sponsor and a means for evaluation of each member of the group by the group. The students attending the Nairobi COP focused their group study on the main issues under negotiation for this particular COP, reading, among other texts, the tome of official preparatory documents and country position statements.

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It was in the lead-up to COP11 that the student organization Earth in Brackets, or [earth], was conceived ([www.earthinbrackets.org](http://www.earthinbrackets.org)). The students going to Nairobi worked together with other students in SustainUS, as well as a handful of other youth organizations around the world, to prepare to engage as a youth constituency at the COP. As part of their contribution, COA students designed a t-shirt with a logo that has stood the test of time: a picture of the earth, enclosed in a pair of brackets. In UN negotiations, brackets symbolize text that is disputed, that is not yet agreed. As the students say on their website, the idea of the logo is to reflect the fact that the future of the planet is contested.

## Climate Justice and the UNFCCC

That contestation is profound within the UNFCCC. The Convention was negotiated in the lead-up to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. At that time, the level of multilateral cooperation on the environment was much greater than today. Important provisions of the agreement recognize both the historical responsibility of developed countries for atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide and their responsibility to lead in addressing the problem. For example, in the preamble, the Parties note that “the largest share of historical and current global emissions has originated in developed countries, that per capita emissions

in developing countries are still relatively low and that the share of global emissions originating in developing countries will grow to meet their social and development needs." A fundamental principle of the Convention is that "developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof."

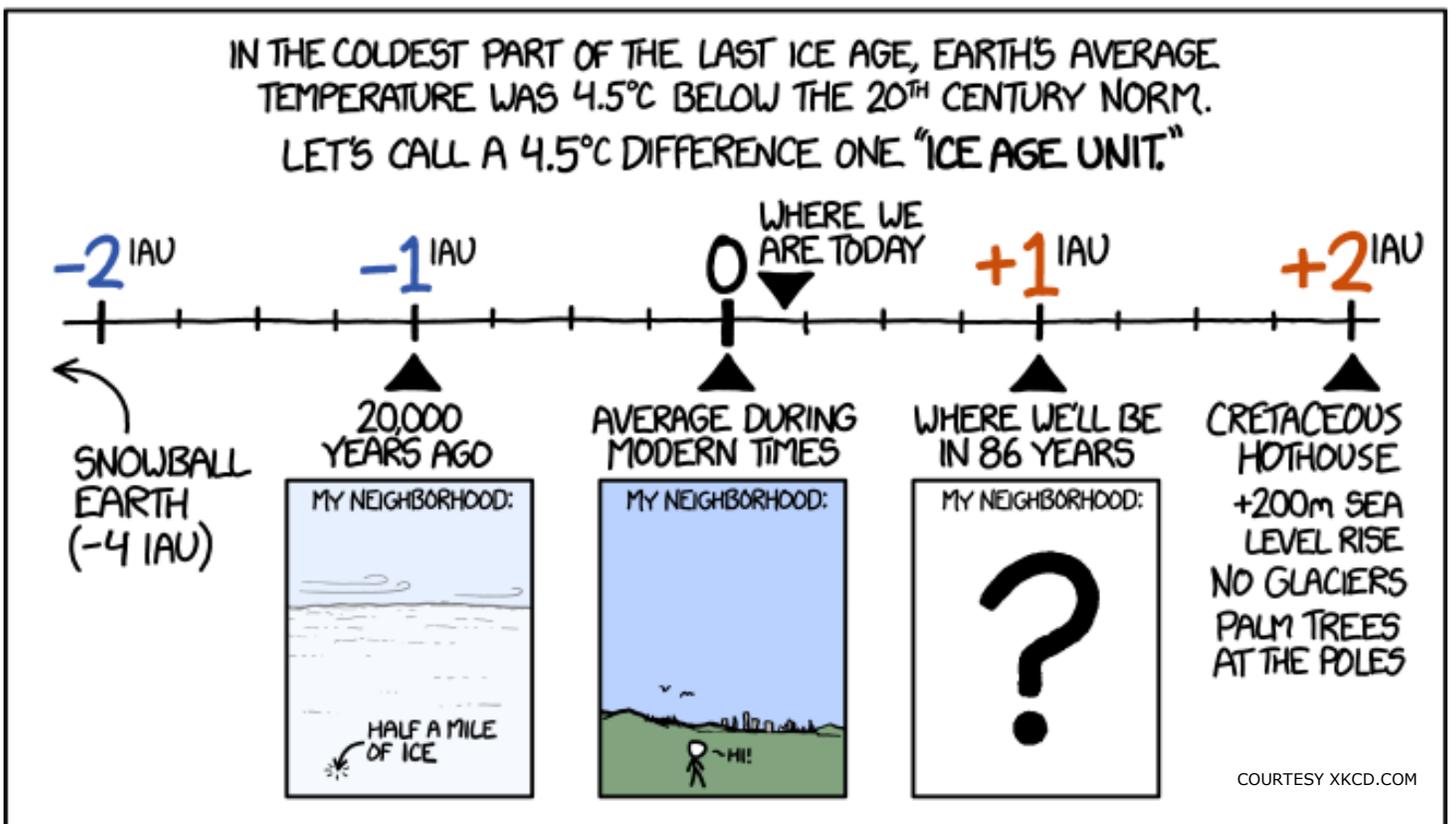
Unfortunately, there has been little leadership by developed countries over the intervening 20+ years, leading to our current situation: global CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations past 400 ppm, with estimates of warming this century, above pre-industrial levels, expected between 4-6°C at our current levels of emission reduction ambition from both developed and developing countries. How big a change is 4°C? Look at <https://xkcd.com/1379/> for a humorous graphic interpretation.

emitted by rich countries. Alongside the question of how to divide up the remaining atmospheric space is one of financing developing country efforts—or as some might term it, paying off developed country "climate debt."<sup>1</sup>

## Atmospheric Space, Climate Debt, and Climate Justice

A climate justice analysis puts front and center consideration of those who are most responsible for the climate problem (historically the developed countries) and those who will bear the brunt of climate impacts (developing countries and the poor in developed countries—those least able to bear the impacts). It considers the historical responsibility of developed

WITHOUT PROMPT, AGGRESSIVE LIMITS ON CO<sub>2</sub> EMISSIONS, THE EARTH WILL LIKELY WARM BY AN AVERAGE OF 4°-5°C BY THE CENTURY'S END.  
**HOW BIG A CHANGE IS THAT?**



The central struggle in current climate negotiations is how to divide up the remaining "atmospheric space" for gases that cause global warming— settling the question of who gets to emit how much more while we collectively aim to keep warming below 2°C. Unfortunately for all of us, what matters is the cumulative emissions over time of carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for hundreds to thousands of years, and much of the carbon we can emit and still stay below 2°C has already been

emitted by rich countries for current levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the differential capacities of developed and developing countries to undertake necessary transformations in energy production to decarbonize their economies, the development legacies of colonialism, and continuing economic and social inequities across the world.

Climate "fair shares" (climatefairshares.org) are a way to think about how to apportion the remaining limited atmospheric space – taking into account historical responsibility, current level of development, and ability to

take on investments in the transformation of energy systems. A climate justice or “fair shares” analysis shows what must happen globally in order over the next century to reduce carbon emissions equitably.

While rooted in the language of the Convention, climate justice sits outside the current dominant frame of negotiations, where developed countries and mainstream Northern environmental organizations promote a narrative that obscures developed country responsibility for current greenhouse gas concentrations by shifting focus and blame towards developing country economic competitors, such as China, India, and Brazil. Instead of a frame that acknowledges how full of carbon dioxide the atmosphere is already, and why, this narrative just looks at current contributions. To be very clear, limits on atmospheric space are limits on development space, recognized in the preamble to the Convention. The current dominant, ahistorical frame is very much understood by developing countries, large and small, as a means to constrain their development.

## Wicked Politics of the UNFCCC: No Winners on the Road to Paris

As noted, the UNFCCC space is highly contested, and North-South economic proxy wars will continue to be fought in the halls of the climate negotiations. Indeed, action on climate change that is adequate to prevent dangerous levels of warming will require deep and rapid decarbonization of economies, changes at a level that *no* country in the negotiations is yet willing to undertake. Although a climate justice analysis lays much of the responsibility for action at the feet of developed countries, the fact is that most countries will bear some burden, and most are unwilling at present to take on their fair share, particularly in the context of a legal international regime. Indeed, only Bolivia continues to argue for a fair shares approach; the rest of the countries in the negotiations are happy for an outcome which binds them to as little emissions reduction as possible, and greater relative reductions for their economic competitors.

Countries are now in the final round of negotiations towards a new climate agreement under the Convention, which is set to end in Paris in December 2015. Unfortunately the Paris outcome is unlikely to bind countries to collective actions that are fairly apportioned, nor indeed to actions that will limit warming to below 2°C. Instead of a rational and fair division of remaining atmospheric space, countries are voluntarily pledging actions they are willing to take. Together those actions add up to a pathway towards 4-6°C warming in this century. “[B]ased on many (and ongoing) discussions with climate change colleagues,” says Kevin Anderson, Deputy Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change research, “there is a widespread view that a 4°C future is incompatible with any reasonable characterisation of an organised, equitable, and civilized global community.”<sup>2</sup>

So no fair shares and no commitment to action that will save people and the planet. How to give students tools

with which to understand, challenge, and change this outcome?

## Teaching Climate Activists

Since 2009, I have developed a series of courses, taught each fall, that are designed to prepare students to participate on the COA delegation to UNFCCC COPs, which typically take place every December. The courses have varied in level and content, depending on the cohort of students that will attend and their previous preparation and participation in multilateral negotiations. Each course has been a little different, but the core intent the same: to give students a solid grounding in the content and politics of the most important issues that will be addressed during the COP.

For example, in the fall of 2013, in preparation for COP19 in Warsaw, students focused on a set of the most prominent and difficult issues that would be addressed at that meeting: carbon markets, loss and damage, and fair shares. Students also learned about the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as the first element of the Fifth Assessment Report was published during the term. Students read the book *Climate Capitalism*, and learned about cap-and-trade systems, the Clean Development Mechanism, carbon markets, and the limitations of market-based approaches to reducing emissions.

During the group study in the fall of 2014, students divided into three working teams, each focusing on one topic to delve into more deeply, with the task of leading learning on those topics for the rest of the class. The three broad topic areas were: climate finance and markets; land use and forests; and the negotiations towards the 2015 agreement.

This fall my course is entitled Practicing Climate Politics. Students will have weekly Skype meetings with me and close colleagues of mine who work within the UNFCCC space — leading climate justice activists from around the world— to discuss the main issues in the negotiations, positions and politics of various blocs, and expected results. We will also participate in an 8-week MOOC offered by the FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany, titled “Climate Change: a question of justice?” which will feature lectures from justice-oriented academics and activists on key questions— climate science, climate governance, carbon markets, north-south relations and eco-colonialism, climate refugees, climate wars and geopolitics— and on solutions: unburnable carbon, renewable energies, and degrowth. Students will attend the Paris summit and then proceed to Uppsala, Sweden for a week of conversation, debriefing and answering for themselves the question: *what next?*

I add a special component to their coursework: direct interaction with some of the major figures struggling for climate justice within the UNFCCC. I work with a small network of climate experts from around the world, the Equity and Ambition Group (EAG), with an express focus on a justice framing of the fights within the UNFCCC. These colleagues in the EAG developed the idea of climate fair shares. The group works strategically with social movements and climate justice organizations outside the

UNFCCC space, through the Global Campaign to Demand Climate Justice, as well as governments with a strong justice orientation within the UNFCCC negotiations, such as Bolivia. Through my courses and other modes of interaction with members of EAG, such as internships, students have direct exposure to key climate justice actors in the negotiations.

I am explicit in my objectives for student preparation through coursework with me: COA students should be the most knowledgeable undergraduates in attendance at the COPs. They develop a good foundation in the principles of climate justice, and I ensure they have as much technical background as possible to be able to understand, interpret, and explain the politics behind particular positions countries have taken. The rigorous introduction to the main negotiating issues enables our students to assume leadership and spokesperson roles in the youth climate justice movement.

My students' preparation to attend the COPs benefits significantly from the concurrent preparatory work students do as members of [earth]. Often students devote two courses of their three-course term to climate politics, creating a group study alongside my course. In this case, students use the group study to prepare themselves to work together as the [earth] delegation, with emphasis on coordinating blog posts and other social media; liaising with other youth and climate justice organizations; developing deeper content expertise in smaller groups; and all the logistical details of their participation. In fact, I do not stay with the students at the COP – the delegation is almost completely autonomous, although we attempt daily delegation debriefs and special sessions with my colleagues.

## Earth in Brackets at the UNFCCC

Students in the organization [earth] represent the diversity of students at the college. As noted, we have many international students, and delegations are often multinational. Our 13-person delegation to Lima for the last COP included students from 11 different countries, many of whom spoke Spanish as their first language.

By the time students arrive at a COP, they have been introduced to key players in the climate justice movement, have had strategic and tactical conversations with my colleagues and their colleagues in the youth climate justice movement, and have identified multiple avenues for their work at a COP. Since my own input into their preparation is primarily content— an intensive background in issues under negotiations and the politics behind those issues— my colleagues provide a direct means of active participation in the politics within the negotiations. Many of our graduates have gone on to become leaders in their own right of the radical wing of the climate justice youth movement, which is another primary avenue for their activity at the COP. One college alumnus is currently a lead negotiator for the G77 and China.

The [earth] delegation participates in the official youth (YOUNGO) constituency, as well as both parts of the ENGO (environmental NGOs) constituency: Climate Action

Network and Climate Justice Now! Earth in Brackets has significant name recognition within the UNFCCC space as one of the most prominent, active, and informed youth organizations. As is evident on their website, during a COP they are active bloggers as well as organizers of, and participants in, press conferences, side events, and actions. It is not just coincidence that [earth] t-shirts are often seen in photos from climate actions, such as a photo from the Lima COP that was used by Al Jazeera alongside a recent article on climate politics.

## On the Road to Paris and Beyond: Active Participation in the Struggle for Climate Justice

When students begin participating and trying to make change in the UNFCCC they are forced to face two crucial aspects of that work: first, that the UNFCCC is absolutely a contested space, riven with struggles over apportioning responsibility for action on climate change, not least among non-governmental environmental organizations; and linked to that, second, that contestation constrains what effective action can come from within the legal regime at this point. Indeed, many radical civil society organizations and social movements contend that the space is dead and should be abandoned for action outside the rarified negotiating halls.

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Students want to make a difference and in this situation they are challenged to examine their own theories of change: who are the actors that can bring it about, and how does it happen. With a climate justice frame, their work with social movements and grassroots organizations outside the UNFCCC provides a vantage point to consider how work on the outside can be used to generate power to move government positions inside the negotiations, to recognize links between the inside and the outside with a potential to change power dynamics in both spaces.

Work on the outside also helps them recognize the clear and profound limitations of working only at the intergovernmental level. The international diplomatic space can be very alluring and seductive— exotic people, negotiating in many languages in exciting locations all around the globe. The need for urgent action to address

climate change, and the very evident lack of that action from the intergovernmental space, is grounding that helps students realize that change within the UNFCCC at this point in time is very slow to non-existent, inside politics are dictated by entrenched power, and you cannot leave change up to climate negotiators. Therefore, if they are seriously committed to stopping climate change, they must also engage their efforts in other spaces. For at least some COA students, this has meant doing work such as connecting with organizations across Maine working to stop a new pipeline from Canada to Portland, or interning with the Philippines Movement for Climate Justice in their work to stop extractive mining and coal-fired power plants or the International Forum on Globalization in their high-profile challenging of the Koch brothers.

I expect profound disappointment after the Paris COP. There is much hype about the summit as the last chance to turn around a planet hurtling towards 4-6°C of warming.



PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH BY LEONARD VOGT

And we already know, given current geopolitics, political will, and pledges on the table, that the outcome of the summit will not deliver what is needed. Hence the week-long debrief of my course this fall: to answer the question "What next?" and to explore alternatives as the limitations of multilateral negotiation and intergovernmental cooperation become clear.

One of the best textbooks I have found to guide students intellectually through these thought processes is *Global Environmental Politics: Power, Perspectives, and Practice*, by Ronnie Lipschutz. The book uses a three-part

analytical framework— historical materialism, ontology, and power— to understand why environmental problems exist and what means we have to address them. Its focus on power, and specifically on the power of acting in the political space— Hannah Arendt's "space of appearance"— gives us an opportunity to theorize what they are indeed doing— to consider the praxis of action and the power of mobilization of people who care about their communities and the planet.

## Conclusion

Global environmental politics at COA has been transformed over the past ten years, principally due to the climate activism of our students. The biggest celebrity moment, manifesting both their academic and activist preparations, came in 2011 when COA student Anjali Appadurai addressed COP17 in Durban, South Africa, and told negotiators, "You have been negotiating all my life." She wrote her speech with four other youth, including two other COA students. The YouTube video of the speech went viral; Anjali and the speech get special mention in the introduction to *This Changes Everything*, by Naomi Klein.<sup>3</sup>

The climate impacts that we anticipate in the years and decades ahead will be profoundly disruptive and deadly. The struggle to justly transform energy systems and decarbonize our economies as quickly as possible to prevent the worst of these impacts will be the fight of their lives for these young climate justice activists. It has been, and continues to be, incredibly rewarding work to build the capacity of students who are on the frontlines of these climate change struggles, inside and outside the halls of the UNFCCC negotiations.

## NOTES

1What Next Volume III: Climate, Development, and Equity, published by the What Next Forum, provides a broad range of articles on questions of equity and climate justice in the context of the UNFCCC negotiations.

[http://www.whatnext.org/Publications/Volume\\_3/Volume\\_3\\_main.htm](http://www.whatnext.org/Publications/Volume_3/Volume_3_main.htm)

2 [http://www.whatnext.org/resources/Publications/Volume-III/Single-articles/wnv3\\_andersson\\_144.pdf](http://www.whatnext.org/resources/Publications/Volume-III/Single-articles/wnv3_andersson_144.pdf).

3 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko3e6G\\_7GY4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko3e6G_7GY4)



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