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## **“Not yet the end of the world”: Political cultures of opposition and creation in the Global youth climate justice movement**

**John Foran, Summer Gray, and Corrie Grosse**

### **Abstract**

*Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with two dozen young climate justice activists at the U.N. climate summit COP19 in Warsaw, Poland, in November 2013, this research uses the concepts of “political cultures of opposition and of creation” to analyze the political orientations, discourse, and actions of global climate justice activists attempting to impact the negotiation of a universal climate treaty. Capturing relationships among experience, emotions, ideology, idioms, and organization, the concepts of political cultures of opposition and of creation shed light on the ability of these actors to fashion social movements of their own making. Through an analysis of actions in which youth delegates from divergent political cultures within the global climate justice movement worked collectively to realize a common vision, the formation and frictions of the larger global climate movement is made more legible to observers.*

**Keywords:** Global climate justice movement, youth, COP19, UN climate summit, political cultures of opposition and creation, revolution vs. reform

Sam Smith encourages each of us to find a way to contribute to our transformation to a just society, to find our path and walk it. He writes:

Above all, we must understand that in leaving the toxic ways of the present we are healing ourselves, our places, and our planet. We must rebel not as a last act of desperation but as a first act of creation.

And that is what we mean when we say, “Stop the machine and create a new world.”

– Margaret Flowers and Kevin Zeese (2015), quoting Sam Smith (2015)

The world today is beset by massive social problems – the obscene poverty and inequality that neoliberal capitalist globalization has wreaked on at least two-thirds of humanity, the cowardice and immobility of the political elite almost everywhere (and of course, the massive disruptions caused by the Trump

administration in the United States), and cultures of violence that poison our lives, from the most intimate relations to the mass murder of the world's wars.

And now, climate change. Or better, climate disruption, climate chaos, climate crisis. It feels like we are facing a perfect storm, a very wicked, intersecting zone of suffering. In fact, given the timeline that climate science has given us, we confront a crisis of humanity that will be resolved for better or worse by those living on this precarious planet today.

Yet history (and sociology) remind us that where there is crisis, there will likely, perhaps always, be opposition to the forces that have set it in motion. The global climate justice movement that has emerged in the past decade is one sign of the times. Working to ensure that social justice is at the center of how society addresses climate change, in contrast to the larger climate movement, the climate justice movement represents one of the leading edges of a wave of movements for radical social change that have been challenging the terms of neoliberalism's victory since the ragtag Zapatista army of the poor and indigenous, led by women as well as men, rose up on January 1, 1994 at the *precise moment* that the NAFTA free trade treaty was being inaugurated over our heads by the leaders of Mexico, Canada, and the United States. A new high point was reached in the streets of Seattle in the last month of the millennium, when an extraordinary alliance of labor, students, environmentalists, indigenous peoples, parents, and other concerned Earth citizens halted the progress of the World Trade Organization, and in the first years of the twenty-first century when left-leaning governments started taking power through elections across Latin America. 2011 brought us the Arab Spring and Occupy, 2013 Black Lives Matter in the US, 2014 the rise of Podemos in Spain, and 2016 Standing Rock, again in the US, making us wonder, what will the next five years bring?

These are hopeful signs in dark times. In this article, we try to illuminate a small corner of the emergent global climate justice movement's contribution to this history in the making. This movement is not about taking state power; it is something more modest yet less limited. We hope to make sense of the discourses and experiences of a group of young climate justice activists, and suggest that the strategies and visions of these young activists may contain valuable practical lessons for ways forward for the larger global climate justice movement. Along the way, we propose a new way to study movements for radical social change by building on the concept of "political cultures of opposition" and broadening it to enable the detection of "political cultures of creation." For that is what the present moment is about: resistance and creation.

## **Radical social movements and their political cultures**

Jean-Pierre Reed and John Foran's concept of political cultures of opposition and resistance (Reed and Foran 2002) explores how people make political sense of the social settings that constrict and enable their lives, in ways that can sometimes lead to the formation of strong social movements. In doing so, their work brings together a number of the themes of the U.S. and European social movements literature of the last two decades, including valuable work on political processes and opportunity structures (McAdam, Tilly, and Tarrow 2001), collective frames, discourses, and identities (Cress and Snow 2010; Snow, Tan, and Owens 2013), and the roles of culture, emotion, and agency (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001).

The origins of such political cultures start with the experiences of people, in the ill treatment they endure and the emotional and political responses they articulate, using every available cultural tool and historical memory they possess. For example, when collective discourses like environmentalism or feminism are available in the form of consciously articulated ideologies, would-be social actors take them up and put them to work locally, and in this way, they tend to diffuse through activist groups into local settings and circulate among social movements. Perhaps more importantly, popular idioms or folk understandings – what might be called “rich stories” (Selbin 2010) or cross-generational political imaginaries (Widick 2009) – are also available for use, providing new social actors as well as seasoned activists with locally understood, everyday terms such as fairness, justice, or democracy. In the case of climate activism, this might include justice, resilience, historical responsibility, or intergenerational equity. When these take hold in a large enough social group or wider society, often through the work of some type of radical/progressive organization or network, a social movement can gain enough committed followers to take decisive action. The forging of a strong and vibrant political culture of opposition is thus a collective accomplishment, carried through by the actions of many people.

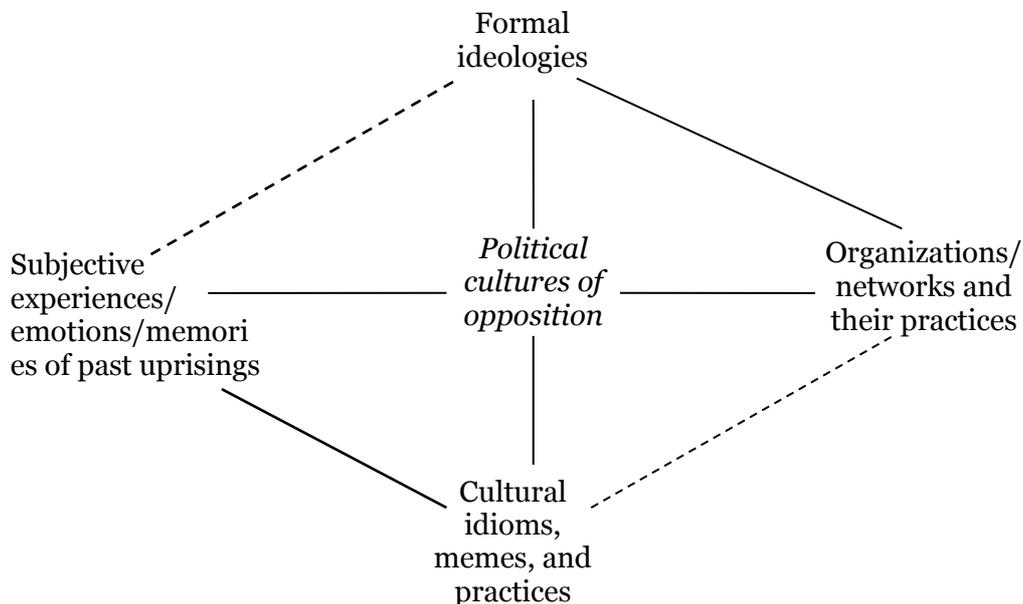
In any given society, there usually exist multiple political cultures of opposition, for people do not necessarily share the same experiences, speak similar idioms, or respond as one to the call of formal ideologies. The most effective social movements find ways of bridging the differences through the skillful creation of a common goal, such as the concise demand for “System change, not climate change!” raised at the United Nations climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009. When this happens, a movement's chances of growth and success are considerably increased.

Thus, at the center of movements for radical social change we find the elaboration of effective and powerful political cultures of opposition and resistance (PCOs) taking hold across a broad array of actors. The term refers to

the process by which both ordinary citizens and revolutionary leaderships come to perceive the economic and political realities of their societies, articulate understandings that simultaneously make sense of those conditions and give voice to their grievances, and communicate discourses capable of enjoining others to act with them in the attempt to remake their society.

**Figure 1 The making of political cultures of opposition (dotted lines indicate relationships that are more loosely connected).**

**Source: Reed and Foran 2002.**



What we might term the old or classical cultures of revolution typically featured armed insurgents who directly engaged the state and its military, though these were aided in all cases by non-armed groups, organizations, and courageous individuals who engaged in support activities of many kinds. A common thread across cases is the hierarchical structure of the movements, with well-identified individuals at their head – Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa in Mexico, Lenin and Trotsky in Russia, Mao Tse-Tung in China, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara in Cuba, Khomeini in Iran, and the Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua under the Ortega brothers. The hierarchical nature of guerrilla militaries, socialist parties, and of religious leadership meant that influential figures – always male, and often privileged in background – would lead *in the name of* the people. No revolutionary movement of the twentieth century came close to delivering on

the common dreams of so many of its makers: a more inclusive, participatory form of political rule; a more egalitarian, humane economic system; and a cultural atmosphere where individuals and local communities may not only reach full self-creative expression but thereby contribute unexpected solutions to the dilemmas faced by society. The past, however, may hold other messages for the future, if we know how to read them.

In the twenty-first century, the nature of movements for what we might now call radical social change (a broader concept than revolution) has itself changed, as activists, reformers, dreamers, and revolutionaries globally have pursued nonviolent paths to a better world, intending to live and act as they would like that world to be. That is, the ends of justice are no longer held to justify the means of violence, but the means of non-violent resistance reflect and guarantee the ends that they seek. In this, they embody and illustrate the virtues of “prefigurative politics” (Polletta 2002) and in particular, horizontalist ways of realizing them (Sitrin 2006, 2012; Zibechi 2010).

Foran (2014) calls these positive, alternative visions “political cultures of creation” (or PCOCs, which he notes may be conveniently read out loud as “peacocks”!). Movements become even stronger when to a widely felt culture of opposition and resistance they add a positive vision of a better world, an alternative to strive for that might improve or replace what exists. As David Pellow has put it: “Many movements begin with a grievance or a critique, but what sustains them and pushes people out into the streets (or underground) is often a vision, a dream of something better” (2014: 1). Viewed from this angle, some of the differences between old and new movements for radical social change seem to include the attempt to get away from the hierarchical organizations that made the great revolutions and move in the direction of more horizontal, deeply democratic relations among participants; the expressive power of using popular idioms more than ideological discourses; the growing use of nonviolence; and the salience of political cultures of creation alongside political cultures of opposition and resistance.

Rather than thinking of PCOs and PCOCs as mutually exclusive categories, the complexities of our interviewees’ words suggest that the concepts are best seen as blending and blurring into each other. This not only better honors the richness of actors’ viewpoints, it removes the need for analysts to continually classify which one a given statement exemplifies and reduces the temptation to divide into two those views which rely on both cultures.

Worldwide, these new political cultures of opposition and creation have so far taken two distinct and rather different paths to change that have been pitted against each other by scholars and activists, and practiced by participants on the ground. One of these is the coming to power of progressive governments through elections, as in the elected left-of-center governments of Kerala, India,



The Arab Spring opened up a third path, starting with massive non-violent direct action and following up with a protracted struggle for new democratic institutions, now maintained only in Tunisia. And there may well be other pathways. What's interesting is that all of these paths can be distinguished from their twentieth-century predecessors (though we can see precursors in May 1968 in France, Allende's Chile, and indeed, the Iranian Revolution), and not least in the new political cultures that have attracted people to them.

By looking at these diverse new radical political cultures and strategies around the issue of taking state power or not, scholars and activists can ask questions such as: What are the strengths and limitations of the Latin American Pink Tide's electoral path to "twenty-first century socialism" in Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia or of Syriza's ill-fated electoral victory in Greece versus the strengths and weaknesses of the more horizontally organized attempts to radically change the world by the Zapatistas, the global justice movement, and the Occupy movements? What are the lessons (positive *and* negative) of each of these experiments in radical social change? What potential exists for such movements – including the global climate justice movement – to work together in various ways as parts of a larger, emergent global project? Finally, do these diverse phenomena foreshadow new paths to radical social transformation in the future? In other words, is there some way to win the centuries-old struggle for political and economic equality?

In the following section, we use the concept of "political cultures of creation" to analyze the political orientations, discourse, and actions of global climate justice activists attempting to impact the outcome of a universal climate treaty negotiation from within. Our analysis shows youth from competing political cultures within the global climate justice movement coming together to challenge delegates to take decisive action to end climate change and mitigate its impacts.

The basis for this essay is a set of twenty-six videotaped interviews conducted in 2013 with youth activists in Warsaw, Poland at the 19<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (196 countries) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, COP19.<sup>1</sup> In the style of "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess 2002 [1984]; Bhavnani 1991), the interviews were free flowing, covering young people's activism at the COP and in their home countries, the pathways they advocate for addressing the climate crisis, and their journeys into activism. They varied in length from fifteen to 90 minutes, with a median length of forty-three minutes. We have published a compilation of these interviews where they can be seen whole and in context (Ellis, Foran, and Gray 2014). Rich video and

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<sup>1</sup> The designation of "youth" at the UN climate talks is a broadly conceived and includes young adults under the age of thirty-five.

photographic data was also collected as well as data from short interviews conducted during protests, some of which we will draw upon to show these emergent political cultures in action.

### **Radical content and revolutionary context**

Both our readers for *Interface* raised questions about how “revolutionary” the part of the global youth climate justice movement we will call “the radicals” below actually is. And rightly so. As Nonty Ntoko Charity Sabic put it late in 2017 at COP 23 in Bonn: “I don’t feel that COP23 brings together all the stakeholders in a fair way, there is a lack of inclusivity and respect when it comes to the people who are directly affected in their lives by climate change, for example people who already live in the areas of fracking and mining in the North and people from the Global South” (quoted in Maschowski 2017).

For how can we compare a handful of mostly Northern, well-educated (i.e. upper-middle class), predominantly white activists in their late teens and twenties with the social forces that made the Arab Spring, let alone the great social revolutions of the twentieth century which overthrew dictators, monarchs, generals, and colonial powers? This question could be addressed on so many levels and in enough depth to constitute an essay of its own. Here we will direct our readers with a few observations which may put the question in a clearer context.

We have already distinguished the movements for radical social transformation of this century from those for revolutionary state power-taking of the twentieth, and the broad global climate justice movement is in the right company alongside the territorial scope of the global justice movement and the non-violence of the Occupy and the Arab Spring movements. Indeed, on its face it seems at least as heterogeneous and intersectional as any of the twenty-first century movements so far: its political scope and sweep make it – arguably, and in potential only, to be sure – a candidate to become one of the biggest, broadest social movements in the history of the world, as one of its senior strategists, Bill McKibben (2012), has called on it to be.

If this premise is granted – and we understand that not all will do so – the question remains: how can the actions of a motley association of youth groups, fledgling civil society organizations, think tanks, and groups of individuals numbering no more than several thousand individuals, who gather for two weeks a year at considerable expense, be compared with the struggles of front-line communities like those of the peasants of the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, the Zapatista villages and hamlets, the encampments at Standing Rock, and so many other local, regional, and national-level movements for climate and related forms of social justice?

The answer to this question lies embedded in the nature of the global climate justice movement itself, which is strictly speaking no more than a network of movements dispersed across the world. For there is no doubt overlap, perhaps substantial, between the frontline communities and actions of blockadia and the duly registered civil society activists inside a COP: when the latter make their ways home, many resume work in frontline fights for climate justice at every level and on all continents, in leftwing and ecological parties and organizations, in labor movements, student movements, women's movements, and movements for the rights and dignity of indigenous and other communities of color, among many others. Theirs is a multi-issue activism where each level informs the others, and where their very participation across levels enriches analysis and action.

If this is conceded, or at least entertained, we may still ask: Why youth activists at the COP, and not others? Are the youth with whom we spoke the most radical actors at the COP? Not necessarily, no, but neither are they the least radical ones. As a group, they stand in a particular relationship to the issue of intergenerational justice which lies at the heart of the climate crisis, and the irony of older, wealthier, more privileged negotiators and UN bureaucrats making decisions for the rest of the world is not lost on them, nor is the responsibility they feel they owe everyone who is excluded from the halls of the COP. Coming from social movements as well as NGOs, they are lumped together by the UN at the COP as YOUNGO, the "youth NGOs."

Thus the question of how radical our subjects are opens onto some of the key debates and daunting unanswered questions we may ask of all radical social movements today: Who will change a world in the midst of the steady erosion of its economic, political, cultural, and ecological systems toward breakdown? How will this global revolution be accomplished? And, above all, for present purposes, what cultures of opposition and creation might inform it, and under what conditions might they ally?

These questions resist easy answers, and all answers are inevitably partial and situated. Humility, openness, and collaboration suggest themselves as indispensable to the methods of scholars and activists today. We're all in this together, or else none of us are likely to get out alive. Meanwhile, the clock continues to tick.

## **Political cultures of opposition and creation at the COP<sup>2</sup>**

### **A brief history of the global climate treaty negotiations**

The Conference of the Parties (COP) has its origins in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], founded just before the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and has been taking place annually for two weeks in different cities around the world since COP1 in Berlin in 1995 (as did COP 23 in 2017). At COP3 in Japan in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol was negotiated, a binding climate treaty which required greenhouse gas emission reductions from the global North. In Copenhagen at COP15 in 2009, the world's expectations for Kyoto's successor were dashed in a spectacular failure to agree between the global North and South on the terms of the treaty. Following that debacle, parties agreed in Durban in 2011 to complete negotiations for a universal climate treaty to apply to all nations by COP 21 in Paris, scheduled for December 2015. Our study of youth activists at the COP comes toward the end of this sequence, when COP 19 took place in Warsaw, Poland, between November 11 and 23, 2013. Two years later, at COP 21 in Paris, 195 nations would negotiate the Paris Agreement (not a binding treaty, but a set of national pledges, which even if all met, would still take the world well into extremely dangerous warming by the middle of this century.

In the most emotional moment of COP17 in Durban, South Africa in 2011, Anjali Appadurai, the very last speaker at the very last open session of the meetings, walked onto the main stage to represent the voices of youth activists worldwide. Dead serious and dressed in a white t-shirt with an image of Earth in large black brackets,<sup>3</sup> she looked across the podium and delivered a speech that stung the ears of everyone in the auditorium. "Where is the courage in these rooms?" she demanded, looking directly at the delegates in front of her. "Now is not the time for incremental action," she continued, pointing to the preponderance of missed targets and broken promises that had emerged from the decades-long negotiation process. "In the long run, these will be seen as the defining moments of an era in which narrow self-interest prevailed over science, reason and common compassion" (Democracy Now 2011). Anjali's words rattled the

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all interviews quoted were collected by the authors while at COP19 in Warsaw, Poland.

<sup>3</sup> Earth in Brackets emerged serendipitously after several students at the College of the Atlantic in Maine, USA, created an image to illustrate their frustration at the negotiation process. Brackets commonly appear throughout proposals for climate treaties put forward by different countries at COPs; those containing more radical statements are inevitably dropped at some point. For the group, the climate crisis is such that the future of the planet is now in brackets and thus in danger of being deleted from the global climate treaty. As their website puts it: "[Earth in Brackets] as a concept highlights the fact that government negotiators have essentially put the entire planet onto the negotiating table."

room enough for one moderator to admit that youth ought to be heard first, not last, at the negotiation table. In many ways, this was a defining moment for the youth climate justice movement, systematically silenced by those in positions of power. The speech constituted a collective scream of resistance to the exclusivities and biases of the process as well as its ineffectiveness in bringing about meaningful change.

When we spoke to Anjali at COP19, she informed us that the global youth climate justice movement was “on the cusp of an important moment,” but complicated by political cultural divisions. She spoke of a split between “people who are focused on justice and equity,” and “people who [are] more in the politically possible realm.” This divide, between groups and individuals focused on issues of justice and historical responsibility – encapsulated in the concept of climate justice – and groups emphasizing what seem to be more practical and politically feasible solutions, captures an important friction within the global climate youth movement.

As we will show below, while these divides are significant, they are not insurmountable. Rather, the convergence of these political cultures of opposition around climate action at the COP is helping to shape a vision of the future in which people from all walks of life rise up against the forces of global environmental destruction, utilizing a broad set of strategic approaches – emergent political cultures of creation – to transition to a just and sustainable future.

### **Youth political cultures in action at COP19**

During the two weeks of negotiations that took place at COP19, housed within Warsaw’s labyrinthine National Stadium, we witnessed a range of creative actions shaped by diverse political cultures of opposition associated with the global youth climate justice movement. Their efforts culminated with widespread youth participation in a collective action involving many civil society organizations who came together within the conference space to bridge – at least temporarily – their differences around the urgency of climate action.

On one side of the global youth climate justice movement are those who oppose the systemic forces of capitalism and corporatization. This radical, and in some cases anti- or post-capitalist perspective is characterized by a concern with historical responsibility for the climate crisis, the failure of the COP to deliver a meaningful global treaty, and issues of climate and social justice. Jamie Peters and Louisa Casson, both with the United Kingdom Youth Climate Coalition (UKYCC), exemplify these views. In an interview at COP19, Jamie observed that the youth climate justice movement is “becoming less of a ‘climate movement’, and more of a collection of groups demanding what is right and just in a lot of

different areas of society.” He continued, “We are sick of corporations carrying out abuses at all levels, tired of politicians, and tired of a system that is failing us.” Louisa, also at COP19, added, “climate justice is trying to rebalance this kind of historical responsibility that developed countries have for massively contributing to climate change through their industrial revolutions.”

The daily actions of this group emphasized the hypocrisies of the COP process and were delivered in a fashion that drew upon irony and satire. For example, youth set up a mock Lemonade Stand to raise money for the Adaptation Fund, showcasing the paltry contributions made so far by developed countries. Ben Liddie, from California, showed his contempt for the selfishness of the wealthy nations by putting in a half dollar – literally, a dollar bill ripped in two.



**Photo 1: Lemonade stand to raise money for the Adaptation Fund (photo by John Foran)**



**Photo 2: A dollar bill for the Green Climate Fund ripped in two by a young activist (photo by John Foran)**

To further protest the corporate presence at the COP, youth arranged a mock auction of the climate to the highest bidder. Poised atop a makeshift soap box and looking elegant in a black suit, youth activist Pascoe Sabido of the Corporate Europe Observatory played the part of auctioneer. In attendance were activists playing corporate representatives from IKEA, BMW, ArcelorMittal (the world's leading steel and mining company, according to their website), and LOTOS (a Polish oil and gas exploration company who sponsored the COP by showering delegates with embroidered LOTOS satchels). Opposite these corporate bidders stood youth activists holding signs that read, "STOP corporate capture of climate talks" and a banner "Reclaim the COP." Onlookers wore WTF "Where's the Finance?" pins, playing on the common social media tag for "What the Fuck?"



**Photo 3: The climate auction for corporations (photo by John Foran)**



**Photo 4: "What the fuck?" (photo by John Foran)**

Some also took to the internet. Marco Cadena, a movement coordinator with Young Friends of the Earth Europe and Reclaim Power, created a Yes Men-style twitter page, doctored to look like the official twitter feed of COP19. He used this to post both wishful and satirical tweets during the two weeks of climate negotiations in Warsaw. Marco explained that the creative energy of youth is key to an integrated radical movement in the face of the “democracy deficit,” the feelings of many people that neither their governments nor any of the existing parties credibly represent their desires.

Silje Lundberg, a longtime environmental activist and Chair of Young Friends of the Earth Norway, who had been to every COP since Copenhagen in 2009, characterized COP19 as “the most corporate COP that I’ve seen.” This was a consistent point of critique among youth activists and civil society more broadly. The rejection of the overwhelming corporate presence and effective political capture of the COP expressed in these words and actions point to a radical, even “post-capitalist” political culture of opposition. In a protest away from the conference activist youth presented a skit with some playing lobbyists and others doctors and health practitioners in front of the building that was hosting the World Coal Association’s International Coal and Climate Summit across town. A giant pink blow-up lung ultimately rose above the “lobbyists,” who, at the event’s conclusion, lay on the ground, amidst paper flakes of coal dust and beside a banner demanding “People Before Coal.”



**Photo 5: At the World Coal Summit: Greenpeace banner (photo by John Foran)**

The outrage felt when UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres agreed to speak at the Coal Summit was such that her invitation to speak at the three-day Conference of Youth (COY) that preceded COP19 was revoked. Some activists used the second week of the negotiations to stage actions that blended irony with their demand for increased representation, protesting the use of carbon credits to finance mega-projects for dams and coal, and insisting that negotiators not discount their future, either economically or morally.

On the other side of the global youth climate justice movement are those who focus on the inequity and inefficiency that characterizes the COP process itself. This “reformist” perspective works to build a COP re-structured so that participation and representation are ensured and countries cooperate and make compromises for the good of the international community. This translated into appealing to arguments based on economics, incentives, technology, and the power of individual actions. Reformists want countries to be accountable to the international process that is the COP – they want to fix the COP. For example, Tim Damon, a self-described “policy wonk” and member of SustainUS (U.S. Youth for Sustainable Development) from rural Ohio, argues that “this is the only process we have and I think it’s actually all the more reason that we need to be here, we need to be vocal.” Tim emphasized the importance of having a seat at the table and representing youth at the negotiations. Reem al-Mealla, a member of the then year-old Arab Youth Climate Movement, and one of just a handful of Bahraini women biologists, agreed with this view and was frustrated with the lack of opportunities for participation in the COP: “The thing is this year has been a bit frustrating because every time we go somewhere the meetings are closed.” Antoine Ebel, a French leader of CliMates, a group that runs model COPs for youth around the world, shares the desire to make meetings more open so that youth can have a voice. Antoine emphasized the need for countries to change their behavior to enhance cooperation. “If here in the climate talks, there was at least some empathy and respect and trust between the delegates, more compromises could probably be found.”

Youth who came to COP19 with the goal of reforming the process utilized actions aimed at increasing representation, emphasizing the importance and promise of individual actions and technological innovations for addressing climate change. For example, the group Connected Voices brought viewpoints of Pacific Island youth to the conference halls in the form of posters. Standing in a line along the path that negotiators use to enter their closed sessions, youth held placards with photos of young activists who were unable to afford to attend COP19, each of whom in turn was pictured holding their messages as written signs. At the front of the line of posters was a world map reading “WE ARE

HERE/WE ARE NOT,” indicating that youth from the Global South were absent from the COP19.



**Photo 6: World map reading “WE ARE HERE/WE ARE NOT” (photo by John Foran)**

Reflecting on the previous year’s Connected Voices action at COP18 in Doha, Qatar, David Gawith, a New Zealander pursuing his master’s research on climate change adaptation in the Himalayas, explained that he received positive feedback from negotiators: “It felt like something that was really practical and worthwhile, and I guess that’s all I’ve really wanted.... I’m hoping for a really good response again this year.” For David, negotiator acceptance and praise made the action practical, and therefore, useful, building bridges from the youth movement with the negotiating process itself.

In another action, Tim Damon and a team of youth activists proposed the concept of Intergenerational Equity to correct for the practice of economic discounting, where present costs take priority over future benefits. As Tim explained, in order to get powerful countries to respond to the climate crisis, youth would need to convince them of “the economic necessity of taking action

on climate change.” This, Tim argued, could be “a new way to get everyone focused on the ambition.” Through youth efforts, Intergenerational Equity was inserted into the text for the Ad-hoc Working Group for the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP) up to the 2015 climate agreement negotiations (in brackets, of course), and it was indeed referenced in the 2015 Paris Agreement, along with “the importance for some of the concept of climate justice” – both relegated to the less prominent “Preamble” (UNFCCC 2015). At COP19, based on the concept of Intergenerational Equity, youth held an action where they kneeled with tape on their mouths and held signs reading “born in May 2050,” and other dates far into the future, demonstrating the lack of voice that as-yet unborn generations have in the climate talks.

Reformists emphasized effective actions, using language about efficiency when describing how they and their organizations organize. If industrial and technical inventions had created climate change in the first place, these youth felt that they could yet be turned around and used for a sustainable future. As Antoine Ebel, explained: “When I look at an offshore oil platform, I’m both horrified and pretty amazed at the kind of technology and savvy that people are deploying to get that stuff out of the ground. If we manage to put the same kind of ingenuity and resources to keeping it there, then everything is possible.” Radicals, on the other hand, tend to turn this logic around, maintaining that confidence in some future techno-fix deters action now.

These ideological divides can run deep and become very personal, coming out clearly in activists’ views of each other and debates over how, or even whether, to take part in events organized by controversial institutions such as the World Bank. For example, Nathan Thanki, a member of the group Earth in Brackets, would like to see more radical youth involved, youth who are “more extreme than any of the parties [i.e. national delegations] ... more extreme than any of the brand NGOs.” He describes the COP negotiations as a corporate-driven process that should be resisted and in some cases boycotted. In an interview at COP19, he expressed his frustration with youth delegates who adhered to a position of advocating for politically feasible solutions, preventing youth from holding strong positions within the COP process.

I call them “baby bureaucrats.” They water down a lot of things, and it makes it really difficult for us to come to any sort of strong statement on anything. We just end up following the lowest common denominator all the time, and getting wrapped up in these very, very tiring, energy-sucking conversations, and bickering, but very politely, in the face of the sort of to-ing and fro-ing about nonsense.... It’s not just about getting youth into the text; it’s not even really all about just the text and the words on the paper. It’s more [about] setting a precedent and drawing our red lines really clearly in terms of demands.

Reformist youth activists were similarly frustrated with their anti-capitalist counterparts. For example, David Gawith voiced his concerns that youth delegates who adhered to radical positions did so for selfish reasons.

While I have been inspired by the work of many young people in the movement, I have also seen fairly extreme narcissism among some who seem closely tied to their own activist image and persona and appear more concerned about being completely correct and true to their activist philosophies than being effective. I think these people should consider what young people in areas that stand to lose the most from climate change may think of their conduct. I think they would say, “We don’t have time to parade around on our philosophical high horses; try to make progress NOW even if it means departing from the steadfast images you have of yourselves.” We simply don’t have time to be totally correct or totally ethical about everything.

These frustrations boiled over into arguments during youth delegate meetings at COP19. This included disagreements over wording on signs and others messages, taking precious meeting time to adjudicate, not even always successfully. As Canadian activist Leehi Yona noted: “[People] can be divided into camps, they can have disputes, like you say, sometimes even personal, and the disputes can really leave a sour taste for a lot of people.” By the end of the first week, youth felt a need to hash these problems out, and an unprecedented meeting was held that by some accounts lasted seven hours on the “day off,” Sunday, when the negotiations are closed. Even with this, some participants told us, no one really changed their views.

Differences between these two political cultures stem in part from the types of activism youth engage with at home. Those in the radical camp tend to support the efforts of grassroots and frontline groups while those in the reformist camp typically work within local or international NGOs and policy groups. However, this distinction can be complicated. Anjali Appadurai, who is also a member of Reclaim Power, an organization dedicated to building a vision for creating multilayered, non-hierarchical, almost “placeless” connections among global youth, elaborates on what she sees for the future of the global climate movement:

It’s really interesting because a lot of us in this movement are fluid across borders. I am not based anywhere; I live in Vancouver, Canada but I am not like “that girl from Canada,” and I think a lot of us are like that in this

movement, and it's only going to grow, this generation of people who just don't really identify with place-based activism.... Each of us in this alliance has our own network, our own community and our own activism back home, and we are trying to link those in really powerful ways. And the beauty of it is that it's all online. It's a purely leaderless, hierarchy-less, placeless movement – it's non-place-based activism and I think we need this type of cross-border movement to work alongside community struggles.

Interestingly, the need for both sides of the global climate youth movement to come together to make a difference *was* felt across the spectrum at COP19. As Anjali Appadurai noted, this divide is a common characteristic of progressive activism, and needs to be broken down for each “side” to recognize the value of the other's contributions:

We need people doing policy stuff. We need people at the UNFCCC – it's dead space, but it's still a space, it's still happening, there are still millions of dollars going into these convergences and policy coming out. And we need the grassroots because you can't fight a struggle without communities' needs being amplified to an international level.... We connect in different ways.

Leehi Yona, a Canadian activist attending Dartmouth College in the United States, articulates the potential of deeply shared common convictions to unite people:

My sense of how the global youth justice movement works is that it is a mosaic of different ideals, hopes, and beliefs. It is a community comprised of many smaller communities around the world who, despite sharing different political opinions on various issues, come together for a common goal: a real, ambitious, fair solution to the climate crisis. It is a community whose members recognize that we are all inextricably bound together by our presence on this planet, by our identities as global citizens, by our acknowledgement of the immense challenge we face – and by the deep hope we hold for the future, for humanity to rise to the occasion.

As we shall see, this potential was realized on two occasions at COP19, with very effective results: youth, and the global climate justice movement more broadly, came together in solidarity with the victims of Typhoon Haiyan and in a walkout to protest the failure of the negotiations.

### **Coming together: the two cultures united in action**

In the opening week of COP19, youth activists became very involved in solidarity with the Philippines, hit by Typhoon Haiyan on November 8, 2013, just three days before the COP began, holding signs, “Honor Haiyan, Honor Climate Promise” and red dots, “#westandwithyou” (red dots had been used by activists at COP18 in Doha the year before when, incredibly, the Philippines was hit by another superstorm, typhoon Bopha, on the middle weekend of the two-week COP). After an emotional seventeen-minute speech describing the “madness” of climate change, Yeb Saño, the head of the Filipino delegation, left the room escorted by three youth activists with an unpermitted banner that read “2012, Bopha, 1,067; 2013, Haiyan, 10,000-plus? How many more have to die?” These activists were unceremoniously kicked out of the conference and harshly banned for a period of five years to life. Anjali Appadurai saw this “embarrassing reaction on behalf of the Secretariat” as an unprecedented moment for youth at the COP.

The overreaction united youth from both political cultures against a clear target, the unacceptably punitive crackdown on anything (i.e. posters and protests) that is not “permitted” and approved in advance by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In a wider act of solidarity, activists from both political cultures joined Saño’s hunger strike, starting on the first day of the COP and pledging to continue it until a significant step was taken to address the problem of devastating extreme weather events.

This initial coming together set the stage for another action – the political climax of COP19 – in which youth activists organized a nearly complete walkout of civil society on Thursday, November 21, the day before the negotiations were scheduled to finish. Seeing no meaningful progress in the talks, finding themselves excluded from the process on many levels, and witnessing the blatant corporate presence – even sponsorship – at the COP, hundreds of activists staged a walkout from the National Stadium, most of them vowing not to return for the final day of negotiations.

We witnessed some of the preparations for this the day before both inside the National Stadium and at the Convergence Space, an old two-story building with rooms for the movement to use during COP19. The walkout was conceived and planned by the more radical of the young activists and youth organizations, but it came to enjoy broad appeal (it had a predecessor in the mass walkout of civil society at the Rio+20 meetings in Brazil in June 2012). In addition, veteran organizers from Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, ActionAid, the Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, the Bolivian Platform on Climate Change, LDC (Least Developed Countries) Watch, the International Trade Union Confederation, the Philippines Movement on Climate Change, and the more conservative World Wildlife Fund, among others, lent the names of their organizations to the action,

and Kumi Naidoo, the executive director of Greenpeace, turned up to deliver the principal remarks at the press conference that preceded the walkout.

Moments before the walkout, groups of activists met up in many corners of the National Stadium to pass out white shirts smuggled into the heavily securitized conference by youth organizers. At precisely 2 p.m., the walkout commenced, converging on the ground level of the building which led to the exits. We filmed civil society delegates and youth activists as they streamed by, in the hundreds. The mood was defiant; the white shirts read “Polluters talk, we walk!” and on their backs, “Volveremos!” (“We will be back,” a reference to their plans for the 2014 COP in Lima, Peru). The messages were clear, passing judgment on the complete inability of the UNFCCC to advance the treaty process at COP19, and signaling that this walkout was the beginning of a collective movement that would return, with renewed force, to future COPs.

California student Ben Liddie, a radical, described the feeling of that moment as “fucking magical. It’s awesome to see so many people out here; I would not expect to see so many people from different groups out here.” Ashok Chandwaney (a more reformist presence at COP19) of the Sierra Student Coalition (US) commented: “I would describe it as unprecedented. I don’t think that the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) and Greenpeace have gotten together on something, like, since I was born” (both of these remarks were made on a video of the action shot by Summer Gray 2013). Reem Al-Mealla, introduced earlier as reform-minded, summed up its political significance for the movement and for the individuals who make it up: “Being here and looking around me, I’m like ‘Oh my god, I’m just a dot in this big ocean of people who are fighting for climate justice, fighting for a better tomorrow.’ That really gives me the motivation and inspiration and hope!”

At the Convergence Space the next day, Marco Cadena drew out the political lessons for radicals, indicating that the walkout marked the beginning of a collective vision and a stronger movement:

I think the walkout we saw yesterday was a *huge* momentum for our movement. We had a *huge* array of different organizations, who sometimes we have very different views or takes on certain issues. But we were really united and stood strong, shoulder-to-shoulder, and today we had loads of discussions about how to continue that. So, I’m really positive on the movement side. We are really, really building something big. And we’ve not just stopped because of all the leaders and everyone inside just basically failing the planet and failing the people. So I think we’re starting. This is a continuation of something that’s already began, but I can really feel the scaling-up of this movement.

The emotion of hope, memories of past victories, the powerful meme of climate justice, and the scaling up of a global movement – these are the constituent parts that have led to the formation of stronger political cultures of opposition and creation that are growing in vision and numbers with each passing COP. The walkout was an act of opposition and creation – opposition to all that is wrong with the COP and creation of a unified movement (if only for a few hours), made possible when activists can find common purpose amidst their differences.

Did the actions of civil society make a difference? At the very end of the Warsaw meetings, the COP finally created a “Loss and Damage” mechanism that would presumably be funded when the final treaty was signed in Paris in 2015 (the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage was not funded in Paris, but merely mentioned in the final Agreement, with details to be worked out in future COPs (UNFCCC 2015)). For many, this was an example of the success that is possible when civil society is united and stands in solidarity with progressives inside the negotiations. It should be noted that Yeb Saño did not come to COP 20 in Lima in 2014, due to what many suspect was pressure on his government to silence a critical voice in the negotiations. Yeb Saño is now part of the civil society side of the global climate justice movement.

## **Conclusion**

Two of the largest questions that confront us as scholar-activists are: Where do social movements come from, and what holds them together? We have suggested that the wellspring of activism comes from powerful emotions, is based on collectively shared but individual experiences, and comes to be expressed in words and actions when all of these are deeply felt and widely shared. Given the failure of world leaders to act in their interest, increasing numbers of young people around the world are taking the matter of climate crisis into their own hands. They may be divided by many things – nationality, gender, race/ethnicity, education, or class among them – but they come together around a common conviction that something must be done, and there’s no one else who will do it for them (Stephenson 2015).

The impression that, like their elders, youth climate justice activists are polarized between those embracing reformist identities who seek change within the existing political and economic arrangements, and a radical side that rejects the existing order is real, but it also has been seen to be fluid and subject to change based on the steady worsening of the climate crisis and individuals’ and groups’ experiences within it. Differences can be overcome when emotions and stakes are high, as in the global reaction to the disaster in the Philippines or the general stalemate of the COP process itself, which resulted in the walkout. It

may be best to view the political cultures of opposition and creation we have identified as lying on a spectrum, without clear boundaries. Indeed, climate justice activists themselves see the larger picture as a spectrum of consciousness (Russell 2012). For global youth today, this looks more like a broad, ongoing debate or conversation among complex individuals who share far more with each other than their older counterparts in the national delegations to COPs do.

Political cultures change over time, both for particular individuals, and for whole organizations and now, global networks. Their differences may not be as deeply entrenched among young people across the range of struggles for social justice as they are for the current and past leadership of the older generations. Given the inexorable march of climate change, we may be on the cusp of a sea-change in ecological consciousness and political cultures on a mass scale: as Naomi Klein (2014) has put it, *This changes everything*.

COP19 in Warsaw, November 2013, will not go down in the history of the climate negotiations as an event where much of significance was accomplished, at least as far as making progress on a global climate treaty is concerned. But it will be remembered in the history of the climate justice movement, both for the dramatic political action that occurred there and the less visible but equally important movement building (Juris et al. 2014) and learning – experience in how to act as a broad-based brilliantly diverse movement – that occurred behind the scenes. And the youth who were there were in large measure responsible for both of these outcomes.

As for the future:

The story ends well; of course it does: Why else would we be fighting? The head of one of the Norwegian environmental NGOs, Frederic Hauge, who was part of the Young Friends of Norway in his youth, said when they were working in the environmental movement they used to say that “Everything’s going to hell, but at least we’re going to make it difficult for them on the way.” And that’s not how it should be; it can’t be that we are [just] going to be making it a bit difficult on the way.

We are not going to go that way because we are going to stop it. That’s the story we are going to tell, the story of how our planet is going to look in fifteen, seventy, one hundred years, and that it’s going to be a more beautiful planet to live on than the planet we have today. A planet where everything is better.... We will have clean energy that isn’t ruining the planet. We’ll have ... energy for all, so that we don’t ruin our planet by simply surviving (Silje Lundberg, interview, 2013).

In terms of the big questions we have raised – Do these diverse phenomena foreshadow new paths to radical social transformation in the future? In other words, is there some way to win the centuries-old struggle for political and economic equality? – while it's too soon to tell, it's not yet the end of the world.

### **Links to Interviewee Organizations**

Connected Voices: <http://connected-voices.org/>

Earth in Brackets: <http://www.earthinbrackets.org/>

Arab Youth Climate Movement: <http://aycm.org/>

Push Europe: <http://pusheurope.org/>

CliMates: <http://www.studentclimates.org/>

Sierra Student Coalition: <http://www.sierraclub.org/youth>

SustainUS: <http://www.sustainus.org/home>

UKYCC: <http://ukycc.org/>

Reclaim Power: <http://www.reclaimpower.net/>

Young Friends of the Earth Europe: <https://www.foeeurope.org/yfoee>

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