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Paris Talks: The Art of Climate Communication

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Eyes on the Rise

Paris Talks: The Art of Climate Communication

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This special series of posts is produced by [Juliet Pinto](#) (Florida International University) and [Phaedra Pezzullo](#) (University of Colorado-Boulder)

In collaboration with [International Environmental Communication Association](#), FIU's [Sea Level Solutions Center](#), and [eyesontherise.org](#). Both Pinto and Pezzullo are attending [COP21](#) in Paris.

By Phaedra Pezzullo, from Paris

My CU Boulder colleague and IECA member Max Boykoff gave a smart presentation on his collaborative work this semester to the IPCC Director of Communications Thursday afternoon at COP21. He encouraged the director to consider communication scholars as not just an afterthought but as potential co-producers of future reports.

The director noted that they already had started to incorporate science communicators (by which he meant technical writers to help translate scientific data) and graphic designers; another marine biologist in the room suggested she had sponsored several young scientists to come to COP21 to place them in a context to practice speaking with policymakers and civil society. Neither of them seemed to fully appreciate the constitutive role of symbolic action in the process of producing scientific reports...yet.

At COP21, there are plenty of presentations from experts in STEM fields focusing on facts: climate scientist reports and mathematical data are shared, while technological and engineering innovations are understood as necessary parts of solutions to transform our energy systems and revitalize global economies. But, the headline news and daily debriefs about people making a difference? They focus on the interdisciplinary arts of how to think critically and to communicate in ways that might move others.

Negotiations and speeches require rhetorical skills, press conferences flex media savvy, summaries of ongoing events provide discourse analysis, orchestrating all that is going on reflects deep organizational expertise, creative art performances in a state of emergency draw on inspiration and perseverance.

And the most heated questions—about loss and damages, about how much we should change course and how quickly, about who will hold intellectual property rights, about deciding which nations are going to pay for and financially benefit the most from this new energy era, about intergenerational justice and human rights, about the role of gender, about the threats against indigenous cultures, and so forth—all pivot on regimes of value.

Across the many languages spoken and countries represented, no one at COP21 is debating the validity of STEM. Consensus can be found on scientific evidence of a global crisis, as well as engineering technological solutions and

the value of mathematical models to help quantify risk, resilience, and accountability. What COP21 is about is the wheelhouse of the liberal arts: how to critically engage research, make compelling arguments, foster peace, and inspire new ways of living on Earth in our everyday lives.

Perhaps this is why those who are climate deniers tend to loathe the liberal arts. They do not want the next generation to learn how to make sound, evidence-based arguments, to find common points of identification across cultures, or to innovatively dream about our collective futurity. Fostering these capacities risks troubling the status quo.

At COP21, every stakeholder at the table knows what is being debated: nothing short of the making and unmaking the world. Shaping that conversation from inside the negotiation hall to outside in the streets involves economic and military power, but it also is an art.

Dreaming about a Just Transition

Since this is my last post and there is much more to say, I want to share a second line of thought I've been spending a good deal of time talking about with others at COP21 (such as CU Boulder Prof. David Cipler, Sierra Club President Aaron Mair, former Filipino Climate Commissioner Yeb Saño, IECA companera Juliet Pinto, IECA/COP guru Gregg Walker, and more).

Today, in the U.S., one of our greatest challenges we face is how to stop the ongoing murder and disregard for Black lives. For Thanksgiving, @Shaun King, a compelling scholar of BlackLivesMatter gave thanks for protesters in the New York Daily News. As usual, his words were historically grounded and compelling. Among much gratitude, he claimed he was most appreciative of protesters' willingness to dream: "They are America's dreamers. They are our visionaries. They look at what are as a nation right now and absolutely refuse to believe that it is our best." (Source:

<http://m.nydailynews.com/news/national/thanksgiving-thankful->

[protesters-article-1.2447697?cid=bitly](http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript))

During the Occupy Movement, on October 10, 2011, philosopher Slavoj Žižek rejected how protestors of that movement were being called dreamers: “The true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are. We are not dreamers. We are the awakening from a dream that is turning into a nightmare. ... We all know the classic scene from cartoons. The cat reaches a precipice but it goes on walking, ignoring the fact that there is nothing beneath this ground. Only when it looks down and notices it, it falls down. This is what we are doing here. We are telling the guys there on Wall Street, “Hey, look down!”” (Source: <http://www.imposemagazine.com/bytes/slavoj-zizek-at-occupy-wall-street-transcript>).

In an era I call “The Late Age of Fossil Fuels,” I think both King and Žižek offer insights worth considering for the climate justice movement. Like King, I feel gratitude, for climate justice advocates (and negotiators) willing to dream against great odds through a range of embodied acts, including protests and meetings. This dream imagines a world re-energized from the ground up, with the limits of ecological systems and human species as the accepted rhetorical constraints of our global future.

I also believe it is important to remember that those that oppose progress at COP21 have a competing dream in which we can continue to perpetuate the nihilistic fantasy about business as usual that Žižek described. This latter dream appears enticing for those short-term thinkers who have benefitted the most from the carbon economy and those who struggle to imagine life otherwise.

These two climate dreams are competing for our collective cultural imaginary. One values the voices of everyday people who suffer the most from climate injustices and hopes for a creative, decentralized energy future.

(Think of the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative announced this week, for example.) The other dominant climate dream values the voices of the elites who bury evidence of our planetary state of emergency (see: #ExxonKnew or the Sierra Club's Labor Campaign for critiques), as well as those who manufacture consent through encouraging shopping, sports, and war " over protest, "outdoor activities," and peace (see, for critiques, The Climate Games or Klein's articles in *The Guardian* or the Indigenous Environmental Network's statement <http://www.ienearth.org/no-war-no-warming-build-an-economy-for-people-and-planet/>). These two dreams offer competing perspectives of who has the right to communicate in the public sphere and who does not, as well as the embodied modes of communication we deem "safe" or "risky."

Former Sierra Club President and communication professor Robbie Cox noted in the 2007 inaugural essay of the journal, *Environmental Communication*, that our discipline has an "ethical duty": "[O]ur task is more than the documentation of failure, distortion, or corruption in human communication. It is also a willingness to recommend alternatives, to enable 'policy decision makers, communities, businesses, educators, and citizen groups' to respond to signals of environmental stress in ways that are appropriate to human and biological well-being."

As environmental communication scholars, students, and/or practitioners, we know we should listen to the pragmatic results of negotiations at COP21 (i.e., what degree Celsius will the collective plans allow us to rigorously transition towards?), but we also should listen for and articulate constitutive modes of expression that enable us to dream the dream we believe is most ethical.

At COP21 one of the most important dreams being constituted by environmental and labor movements is for a just transition. "Just transition" is a term developed by labor and climate justice movements to refer to the

idea that the major transformation from a fossil fuel economy to a low or zero carbon economy should incorporate both ecological and social justice.

A just transition values:

1. the development of job training and opportunities across sectors with safe working conditions and benefits;
2. addressing mitigation of loss and damages from those most directly impacted by climate chaos;
3. preventing further climate injustices and redressing past ones.

Advocates imagine not just a retreat from developing and working in fossil fuel industries, but also an opportunity to rebuild a world with more sustainable energy and employment. (For those interested in reading policy, COP language related to this may be found at:

http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_norm/-relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_420286.pdf)

COP21 is not going to be the end of anyone's dream—just a significant chapter. It's important to witness it unfold in global policy arenas —it's also worthwhile to become an active participant in how it will continue to be negotiated by each one of us.



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