

**Reflection: Environment and Global Governance**  
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*“Homo sapiens have single-handedly caused anthropogenic climate change within the equivalent of a fraction of a second in Earth’s cosmic history, and our myths have hindered us from effectively working together to remedy the problem.”*

*- Jolene Lim in Governing Climate Change: Global Cities and Transnational Lawmaking*

**The myths that constrain us and the banks that fund destruction.**

No other quote better sums up how I feel about global environmental governance at this present moment. When the foundation of our current global system is predicated upon the Westphalian nation-state, which is in many ways bound by interests as dictated by national/cultural myths that are often inimical to those of other states, how effective can state-based global governance ever truly be? The myths that tie each person, negotiator, politician, or whatever actor you may want to identify to her or his nation seem to be the root of so much global conflict and inaction. To build on Francesco’s eloquent statement on “making a point”, because these are singular humans managing various national interests, goals, and priorities, one can imagine that the majority arrive at these global meetings to *score points* that tie neatly into their respective myths.

But I would also argue that the issue goes beyond national myth and we can more specifically link it to the construction and nature of global capitalism. The US\$1.9 trillion that has gone to the fossil fuel sector from major banks since the Paris agreement is a stunning reflection on how much vested corporate, financial, and (in the US case) governmental interest there is in maintaining the status quo regarding fossil fuel usage. What we didn’t see in our simulation was the underlying power that banks and fossil fuel companies gain through lobbying many of the actors - but perhaps that is most pronounced in domestic U.S. considerations on the topic.

I'm just not sure any degree of collective action could change the behavior of these gigantic financial institutions. Divest movements may work at the university level, but what are the chances enough people would care and coordinate enough to challenge the behavior of a behemoth like Bank of America? Thanks to the UN, environmental, social and governance (ESG) focused investing has taken off, but responding to climate change is just one of four components to ESG investing, and this clearly hasn't stopped big banks from continuing to support the fossil fuel industry.

Because of the aforementioned challenges posed by national myths and financial institutions, it is difficult for me to be optimistic about the state of global environmental governance. I wonder, however, if it may still be useful in signaling the importance of the issue so as to further empower/inspire MNCs, cities, and civil society to advocate for the necessary changes. New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently made headlines for her impassioned speech in a hearing of the House Financial Services Committee where she excoriated Republicans who have called the Green New Deal elitist.

*“[P]eople are dying...this should not be a partisan issue, this is about our constituents and all of our lives...broad swaths of the midwest are drowning right now, under water - farms, towns that will never be recovered and never come back. And we're here and people are more concerned about helping oil companies than helping their own families? I don't think so...we are facing a national crisis, and if we do not ascend to that crisis then I don't know what we are doing here.”*

If local and regional politicians can increasingly inspire and mobilize in a way similar to what Ocasio-Cortez is doing, might there still be hope? Knowing that a significant portion of that hope in a global governance context is dependent on action by the US and China, I am again

deflated. While China may be forging ahead with or without the US, as long as American financial institutions continue to not face pressure from lawmakers and consumers to change, and the government refuses to invest the necessary resources into clean energy and skill transfer programs to anticipate the move from fossil fuels, the US will carry little moral weight in this debate. If only politicians 20 years ago in the US were as dedicated and vocal as Ocasio-Cortez...

**Yes the house is on fire, but burning is a process.**

I was also deeply moved by Greta Thurnberg's speech at Davos that we watched in class, though I want to unpack a few of her arguments to shed even more light on the degree to which we may have no hope. In one of the more striking segments, she states that "either we choose to go on as a civilization or we don't. That is as black or white as it gets. There are no grey areas when it comes to survival." But as David Wallace-Wells has outlined in his new book *The Uninhabitable Earth*, climate change might not be best understood through binaries. He argues that "[p]erhaps because of the exhausting false debate about whether climate change is 'real,' too many of us have developed a misleading impression that its effects are binary. But global warming is not 'yes' or 'no,' nor is it 'today's weather forever' or "doomsday tomorrow."

This is important for two reasons. First, there is a danger that in working through this panicky binary we encourage a defeatist type of behavior that suggests because we cannot radically change the world, we might as well do nothing. Second, collective action right now is indeed imperative, but we must also understand that there probably won't be some one-off catastrophic tsunami leveling our skylines à la *The Day After Tomorrow* - climate change is much more nefarious than that. Summers will continue to get hotter and sea levels will continue to rise, and that's precisely what makes collective action and effective global governance so difficult.

The deleterious effects are slow-building and gradual.

Burning is a process.

But because of that, thankfully, every bit that we do can help. Ms. Thurberg is perhaps completely correct in stating that we either prevent 1.5C of warming or we don't; however, we must also not forget that 1.5C of warming would be a lot less disastrous than 3.0C of warming, than 4.5C of warming, and so on. I am still completely sympathetic to Ms. Thurnberg's tactics, especially considering the lack of alarm within the older generation - this is the kind of passion (like with Ocasio-Cortez) needed to shock the global decision-makers of the world. I also believe however that we must consider how we tailor this message to different actors at different levels so as to achieve the best results possible with each stakeholder. This can range from a global governance context addressing how climate change affects a given nation's identity, to the corporate world and the economic benefits of sustainable investment.

My natural instinct is still to be the Greenpeace activist disrupting negotiations, aggravated by slow-moving incremental change on an issue that requires action of an unprecedented magnitude and immediacy. But I'm also unsure of how to manage the inertia of global governance, the weight of the nation, and the nature of capitalism.