A Glacier Anthropologist Attends COP23

GlacierHub is pleased to have a report about COP 23 in Bonn from Jessica O'Reilly, a professor of international studies at Indiana University (IU) and one of our associates. She was featured in an interview with GlacierHub last year. She is currently in Bonn, attending the meeting.

O'Reilly is widely known for her work on Antarctica, where she applies anthropological methods and concepts to understand the world of cryosphere scientists. Her book *The Technocratic Antarctic* explores the intimacy with which Antarctic scientists experience their frozen world—an intimacy that includes feelings and moral concerns as well as facts—and shows how this connection shapes their work. She has also written about glaciers in the Himalayas and West Antarctica.

O'Reilly is attending COP23 as an official observer from IU, along with several others from the university. She is familiar with COPs, having attended as an official observer from other educational institutions and from the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, an environmental advocacy group. Her report from COP21 in Paris can be found here.

O'Reilly's Report from COP23

In between the two formal zones, the "Bula Zone," where plenary halls and the delegation offices are located, and the "Bonn Zone," the site of the pavilions of organizations, sit the massive inflatable Climate Action Domes. These domes are the site of the unofficial United States pavilion and its high-powered contingent of governors, mayors, senators, and corporate executives. This pavilion is the temporary home of the We Are Still In movement that sprung up to counter President Trump’s intention to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement.

This place is where the Resistance meets the Establishment in U.S. climate politics. To visit it is to be inspired. It is a place where people learn that mainstream, bipartisan leaders are continuing to push forward in the absence of national leadership, where they hear exchanges about marshalling the incredible wealth, optimism, and technological expertise in the U.S., and where they enjoy the hospitality of the welcoming space. But it is also troubling, as the mainstreaming of climate activism pushes others to the side.

This contrast was apparent in the event held to launch 'America’s Pledge,' a commitment to lower carbon emissions that represents 49 percent of the U.S. population. If it were a country, it would be the third largest economy on the planet, behind the United States and China.

The South Pacific nation of Fiji chairs this meeting, despite its Bonn location, and Voreqe Bainimarama, the Prime Minister of Fiji, came to the Climate Action Domes to give a speech. It is the first time that a COP has been chaired by a small island developing state. He spoke about the climate pitches he receives: "buy electric buses"—but the roads in Fiji are too rough for the relatively fragile machines. "Invest in e-ticketing for your public transit!"— but they can’t afford the transit, let alone the e-ticket system. His speech reminded us of cultural and material difference, and of the vast economic and climate inequalities we live with.

California Governor Jerry Brown, speaking after the Prime Minister, was interrupted as four groups of protestors stood in turn to challenge Governor Brown on California's continued fracking activity, among other concerns of indigenous and frontline communities. As each group was escorted away from the pavilion, they chanted "Still in for What?"
It is clear that they are contesting the Paris Agreement, as a plan to draw down carbon emissions over time while also keeping intact our structural inequalities, our economic system, and our consumption patterns.

Climate risks and suffering are unequally distributed. People in El Alto, Bolivia—including the city's poorest people, many who do not have access to running water—have protested water rationing as the glaciers that historically recharge their reservoirs become diminished after a recent severe drought. The meeting underscored similarities across the most vulnerable regions. The International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) linked high mountain issues with concerns in the Arctic and among small island states. It also discussed the forms of mountain community engagement that can promote resilience.

Even climate mitigation, as idealistic and necessary as it is, asks certain people to bear the burden for the common good, and it's the same people bearing environmental costs since the outset of European exploration—indigenous people, poor people, women, and people of color. The contentious history of the Belo Monte dam in Brazil, while a major source of renewable hydroelectricity, displaced 20,000 people, including indigenous people and their territories, underscoring the capacity of renewable energy projects to devastate communities and environments.

It is clear, from scientific reports and the accounts of people with deep knowledge in a place, that anthropogenic climate change is an urgent matter in need of immediate attention. However, the people asking “Still In For What?” at COP23 remind us that using the same tools that got us into this situation may not be sufficient for getting us out, and can continue to reproduce structural harm in our quest for solutions.