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Giving Form to Consciousness

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Article abstract

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Giving Form to Consciousness

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Abstract

Engaging Debbie Hopkin's arguments on fly less or no fly movements, this essay reflects on faculty efforts to reduce aviation-related emissions at the University of British Columbia.

Keywords

climate change, higher education, organizing, aviation emissions

"Fly less or no fly" movements are both tricky and straightforward politics. They are straightforward because we have to cut emissions, and those cuts should be by those who have taken more of the fair share of the global commons – including people like me. They are tricky because, at first glance they follow in the long history of ineffective shame-y environmental politics, a political demand that focuses on individual choices rather than corporate and industrial emitters. It's practically a cottage industry in geography to shoot down forms of environmental politics that fail to confront the structural forces that maintain the profoundly unsustainable status quo (see Huber 2022). For Hopkins, it is not only that academic fly less is individualizing or inadequate, but that a narrow, emissions-only focused approach might reproduce inequalities and injustices that mark many universities. Too, Hopkins argues, drawing from Konietzko, "Carbon Tunnel Vision...may miss the opportunity to reorder knowledge production and consumption and challenge hierarchies" (this issue, Hopkins).

A major strength of Hopkin's analysis is her invitation to connect efforts to reduce academic aviation emissions with other material organizing efforts in the academy. For her, "decarbonising academic practice cannot be detached from the labour conditions,

contractual arrangements and job markets of academic work/lives”; it needs to be thought alongside the conditions facing a growing academic precariat. Fly less then, Hopkins argues, should be interwoven with efforts to undo the many inequalities and injustices that persist within our fields and departments. Others advocate a similar connective approach to decarbonizing the academy, one that interweaves the urgent need to reduce emissions with decolonial politics (see Nevins et al 2022, Hunt 2020). Hopkins and her interlocuters, at least in theory, are promoting approaches that are a far cry from shaming and individualistic blaming. Academic emissions are understood as a manifestation of an institutional structure over the long, ecological imperialist *durée*.

I myself have been involved in a variety of on-campus climate efforts, from divestment campaigns to what we called the zero emission university (Zero Emissions University, n.d.). The latter initiative emerged in 2019 when I was one of a dozen or so fellows at an interdisciplinary institute at the University of British Columbia. The institute is a cohort model meant to inspire collaborations across wide disciplinary divides from engineering to medicine to philosophy. My cohort was also ideologically (very!) diverse. Throughout the year’s discussions we returned often to climate change, not because everyone in the cohort studied climate or even environment (most didn’t), but because of the IPCC special report on 1.5 degrees that came out that year.

While I don’t think this was the kind of collaboration the institute anticipated, a few of us decided we would work to raise awareness in our departments and at the faculty level about climate change and aviation emissions, drawing from the research of a Geography PhD student, who found that academic emissions at UBC mirror social hierarchies found more broadly – much higher at higher income and rank brackets (Wynes et al 2019). We used funding from the institute to hire a research assistant who helped put the website and resources together. Our materials included a pledge faculty could take to reducing their own emissions and an open letter we sent to the President and Board of Governors, which asked for things like increased video conferencing software and hardware as well as changes to tenure and promotion guidelines to reduce incentives for air travel (Zero Emissions University n.d.).

As the yearlong fellowship ended, the collective faded away with other demands on our time, and, well, of course, the pandemic, which quickly brought into reality many of the technological shifts we had asked for.

Hopkins’ essay made me reflect on this time. I think our work fell into many of the traps that she identifies. In particular we held a relatively narrow frame, adopting the “avoid, shift, improve” approach. We did not do a good job of connecting the dots between aviation emissions and wider issues of inequality in the academy. Hopkins’ essay and the discussions in *The Professional Geographer* forum (Anderson et al 2022) have pushed me to think about what we might have done differently, who we would have connected with, and how we might have written a different set of demands.

The group largely dissolved after the pandemic emergency, although some faculty have recently picked the issue back up. This ebb and flow of energy points to the need for organizing formations built for the longer haul on university campuses. This is especially the case if one undertakes multi-faceted political organizing along the lines that Hopkins suggests. It’s hard enough to sustain energy and knowledge to take on single issues. This

challenge doesn't mean we shouldn't do it, of course, it just means we have to think more carefully about how we organize ourselves on and between campuses. What role is there in this work for our faculty associations or unions and student groups? It's worth noting the wise words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022), on the importance of strong organizations for effective political organizing: "... if consciousness is the means through which we imagine ourselves into the future, organizations are the form. We have to have the form or we can't get there".

Here at UBC we've started a Centre for Climate Justice (CCJ).¹ It has become a hub for progressive faculty and students. We have staff who are essential to making it work, and the structure and support make it possible for us to be more effective in institutional struggles for climate justice both on and off campus, with an ambitious, serious mandate. It is also worth noting that institutional support for the CCJ emerged out of a previous set of small to large climate organizing efforts at UBC. Those efforts – imperfect as they are – wove a set of personal relationships on campus that are the basis of any hopefully lasting political organizing, no matter what the issue – from shifting notions of academic excellence, to graduate student stipend pay, to climate action.

So, yes, fly less must be grounded in wider, sustained, and organized university struggles, but we also have to start somewhere (often imperfectly) prototyping our tactics, building strong relationships, and honing strategies.

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¹ Centre for Climate Justice mandate at <https://climatejustice.ubc.ca/about/mission-and-mandate/>