

Beware of Generationalism: The Structural (In)visibility of BIPOC Youths in Global Climate Summits

Laura Bullon-Cassis, MSc (New York University)
Lb3124@nyu.edu



*Screenshot from
Instagram story of the
UNFCCC account by
Laura Bullon-Cassis*

On December 11, 2019, a group of Fridays for Future activists performed a sit-in on the stage of an event on “the climate emergency” at the UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid, also known as COP25. The sit-in was unsanctioned, namely it was not pre-approved by UN Security, but was nonetheless received with great excitement by delegates: “this young generation holds great promise,” a fellow researcher confided as we exited the room. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Instagram account embraced it as part of their event, posting a story that featured the protesters and the tagline “Special #COP25 event on the #climateemergency.”

Later that day, an intergenerational group of 200 or so – which primarily included Indigenous groups and other people of color – held another unsanctioned protest. They were not received with enthusiasm but with disapproval: they were forcibly removed from the premises and threatened with being blacklisted from this and future COPs. All in all, the young people that participated in the afternoon protest received much harsher treatment.



The afternoon protesters are expelled from the conference area. Photo credit: Laura Bullon-Cassis.

I conducted two years of participant observation of assemblies, meetings, protests, and plenaries, inside and around UN climate summits in 2019 and 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that put in-person summitry on pause. This was complemented with 56 semi-structured interviews that sought to capture the comparatively different experiences of the young people who foreground their age and engage as “youth” in UN summits with those of young people who choose other categories of representation such as “Indigenous Peoples.”

Returning to the above example, the young people who participated in the afternoon protest had chosen to foreground *other* identities than youth, such as their belonging to (or their allyship with) Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) communities rather than with “youth” and paid a hefty price for it. At stake is thus to understand why the category of “youth” has been conferred a preferential status and thus receives a more lenient treatment in multilateral conferences over other identities.

The answer stems out of a structural feature of multilateralism: its intergovernmental nature. Indeed, the UN was created as a club of Member States in the aftermath of the Second World War to maintain global peace. Thus, the participation of non-state actors is subject to a protocol aimed at ensuring they do not upset this goal. For example, protests or actions must be pre-approved, and “naming” specific countries or corporations in these protests is forbidden. Thus, overt dissent against extractive processes is virtually impossible.

The UN welcomes a “young citizen,” who “represents the symbolic accommodation of [youth] activism into liberal democratic codes” (Kennelly 2011, 25) and is thus undisruptive to the intergovernmental nature of multilateralism. Further, “youth” has been shown to be a particularly useful social category for the neoliberal project of renegotiating previous welfare and development state entitlements and expectations (Sukarieh and Tannock 2014). Categories such as Indigenous peoples are instead fundamentally disruptive. As a young Indigenous woman shared during COP25, “White climate leaders are endorsed by politicians because they fit into a narrative that does not challenge colonialism and capitalism. We as Indigenous youth have to name the corporations coming into our territory, the decision-makers, the police forces. We have to name those because we are facing them immediately.” In doing so—contrary to the figure of the “young citizen,” they resemble the “young activist [who] is a troublemaker and hooligan, disrupting the apparently legitimate practices of the state” (Kennelly 2011, 14).

This contributes to explaining why, when they foreground BIPOC identities over their youth, young people are “adultified.” Adultification, a term used in sociology of youth, describes a phenomenon which reduces or removes the consideration of childhood as a mediating factor in Black youths’ behavior (Epstein *et al.* 2017). Carmen, a Fridays for Future spokesperson, recounted: “Journalists and policymakers have a lot of affection for Fridays for Future, because they see us as kids, as ‘cute.’ We realize that when you introduce yourself as a Fridays activist or from another group, you get a very different response.” Youth, and especially the white youth that Fridays for Future represents, are instead afforded special treatment as “children” in the multilateral space. I interviewed a young Bahamian man not far from where people were queuing to see Greta Thunberg give a press conference. He seemed very defeated and said, “I’ve been doing this work for years, so have many of others in the Global South. This is racism. It’s white Europeans, getting attention for what we’ve been doing all along.”

“Generationalism,” namely the systematic appeal to the concept of generation rather than other principles of division such as race in narrating the social and political (Wohl 1979), masks these profound structural racial inequalities. A dominant feature of political, media, and popular discourse in recent years, particularly in the area of climate change since the rise to fame of Greta Thunberg, generationalism encompasses the framing of climate change as a threat to young and future generations. This temporal framing of the Anthropocene does not recognize, for example, the environmental destruction that Indigenous peoples have been facing since colonization.

Thus, generationalism has repercussions on the visibility of climate justice movements. Social categories such as generations can indeed become central to symbolic struggles to impose and legitimize a vision of reality (Bourdieu 1991). Interrogating generationalism could offer a useful entry point to highlight structural inequalities that perpetuate and complexify the impacts of racism against Indigenous and Black young people in global politics. Not only do BIPOC youths experience exclusion through “adultification,” but the social category of “youth” is weaponized to avoid difficult discussions relating to climate justice such as extractive capitalism and historical responsibilities.

That such structural inequalities exist in multilateral fora could be surprising as multilateralism involves adherence to principles such as inclusion and solidarity. Generationalism could thus be understood as part of a form of discrimination which sociologist Bonilla-Silva (2014) describes as an “ideology of color-blindness” that obfuscates larger structural inequities. Critically examining generationalist narratives, as well as a broader commitment in policy, reporting, and research which foregrounds principles of division specific to BIPOC communities when narrating “youth” and climate change would a long way.

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Author contact: Laura Bullon-Cassis, MSc (New York University), Lb3124@nyu.edu

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