Who Gets to Shape Climate Futures? Voice, Representation, and Urban Experimentation at the Paris Climate Academy

Laura Bullon-Cassis[1][a]

[1] Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland

This paper examines the Paris Climate Academy as a site of urban democratic experimentation, foregrounding how recognition, representation, and affective politics intersect in participatory climate governance. As cities increasingly emerge as laboratories for democratic innovation amid planetary crises, the Academy offers a rich case of hybrid institutional design that combines education, activism, and municipal governance. Drawing on eighteen months of fieldwork, including interviews, observations, and document analysis, the paper analyzes how aspirations for co-governance and horizontal participation confront persistent inequalities of class, race, and geography. It highlights the infra-political labor required to sustain shared governance, revealing the micro-negotiations and organizational asymmetries that shape institutional dynamics behind formal procedures. The Academy also functions as an affective, offline space for younger people, offering refuge from eco-anxiety while struggling to accommodate more confrontational emotional registers central to climate activism. These tensions underscore the limits of recognition in participatory innovations that seek inclusivity while remaining embedded in unequal urban contexts. Situating the case within emerging debates on planetary governance, the paper argues that urban experiments like the Academy serve as grounded laboratories for reimagining democratic institutions under ecological crisis, while exposing the fragility of inclusive participation when deeper structures of recognition remain unresolved.

The climate crisis confronts political institutions with profound challenges of scale, urgency, and legitimacy. To date, national and multilateral systems have struggled to respond to the complexity and immediacy of planetary environmental breakdown. In this context, cities have emerged as increasingly significant sites of institutional experimentation, offering flexible, situated platforms for rethinking how democratic governance might evolve in the face of ecological crisis. Their material density, social heterogeneity, and relative autonomy allow for the testing of new political practices that blend education, activism, and governance. Cities become, in this sense, workshops for democracy, where alternative forms of participation, representation, and institutional design are negotiated in concrete, embodied ways.

This article examines the Paris Climate Academy as one such urban experiment. Established by the City of Paris in 2021 in the wake of global youth climate mobilizations, the Academy was designed as a dedicated space for young people to engage with climate education, activism, and policymaking. Neither a conventional civic institution nor a purely activist space, it operates as a hybrid *tiers-lieu*, bringing together city officials, youth NGOs, activists, and citizens in shared processes of learning and negotiation. In doing so, it reflects a broader trend in urban governance, where cities attempt to fill the institutional void left by stalled national and global responses to planetary challenges.

At the same time, the Academy highlights a central tension facing many democratic innovations in urban climate governance. While explicitly designed to broaden participation and foster inclusion, it remains situated within urban geographies marked by inequality, which can shape who accesses these new spaces of political voice and influence which young people feel recognized, included, and empowered within such experiments. Participation is not only a procedural question but also one of recognition, often linked to long-standing inequalities within Paris's urban fabric.

This article draws on eighteen months of fieldwork, combining semistructured interviews with young activists, NGO leaders, and municipal officials, as well as involvement at

a Correspondence: laura.bullon-cassis@graduateinstitute.ch

selected Academy events and meetings. This situated approach allows for a close examination of how institutional experimentation unfolds in practice, and how questions of representation, recognition, and belonging are negotiated within new institutional spaces. In dialogue with emerging debates on planetary governance and democratic innovation, this paper explores how cities may serve as laboratories of democratic experimentation, while underscoring the persistent inequities that continue to shape decisions on whose voices are included in these processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CITIES AS WORKSHOPS OF DEMOCRATIC EXPERIMENTATION

In recent years, cities have attracted growing attention as spaces where new forms of democratic experimentation are emerging. Their material density, institutional flexibility, and proximity to citizens make them particularly suited to testing alternative governance arrangements, especially in response to complex challenges like the climate crisis. Scholars have described cities as laboratories or workshops of democratic innovation (Ansell and Torfing 2021; Frère and Jacquemain 2013), where experimentation extends beyond formal policymaking into new institutional forms that combine participation, education, and activism.

Urban third spaces have become central to these developments. These hybrid spaces serve as material infrastructures for political engagement, blending formal and informal modes of participation. As Cefai et al. (2012) emphasize, participation in these contexts often unfolds beyond officially recognized arenas, in spaces that are neither fully political nor entirely private. Observing these spaces reveals forms of political engagement that may be subtle, embodied, and context dependent, yet deeply consequential for how individuals experience belonging and agency. Such "infra-political" practices are often overlooked by dominant models of democratic theory, which focus on formal deliberation or institutionalized participation (Malafaia et al. 2017). Instead, participation here emerges through situated practices, habits, and interactions that make visible "barely perceptible signs" of collective action and negotiation.

This perspective foregrounds the embodied and spatial dimensions of participation. As residents navigate urban spaces, alliances form through shared experiences of indignation, solidarity, or everyday cooperation (Vidal 2000). Even seemingly aesthetic or ephemeral interventions—such as performances, temporary installations, or local beautification projects—can take on political significance, as forms of embodied engagement with urban life (Chateauraynaud and Debaz 2017). Ethnographic inquiry into such practices allows researchers to grasp the full complexity of how participation unfolds in concrete urban contexts, far beyond formal assemblies or institutional procedures (Cefai et al. 2012).

RECOGNITION, REPRESENTATION, AND SPATIAL INEQUALITIES

While cities offer opportunities for institutional experimentation, they are also marked by persistent social and spatial inequalities that shape who can access emerging participatory spaces. Political representation cannot be meaningfully addressed without considering recognition, particularly in settings shaped by entrenched social and geographic divides (Fraser 2000). This concern also resonates with Hirschman's (1970) notion of "voice" as a means through which actors seek to influence institutions from within, drawing attention to whose participation is enabled or constrained in practice. Participation is not simply a question of formal inclusion but of who feels entitled, seen, and valued within institutional processes. In urban contexts, spatial proximity does not automatically translate into equitable access, as participatory infrastructures often remain concentrated in privileged neighborhoods, leaving peripheral or marginalized communities underrepresented (Reed and Bruyneel 2010; Wojciechowska 2019).

Such dynamics are highly relevant to climate governance, where youth movements frequently seek to link environmental concerns with broader struggles for social justice. However, these ambitions are not easily realized. Even well-intentioned participatory experiments may struggle to attract diverse publics when material, cultural, and symbolic barriers remain in place. The geography of participation thus reflects deeper structural inequalities that participatory innovations alone may not overcome.

CLIMATE MOVEMENTS AS INSTITUTIONAL IMAGINATION

Climate movements, and particularly those led by young people, have been at the forefront of demanding not only stronger climate policies but also institutional transformations that reflect their values and modes of engagement. Their calls for systemic thinking, shared governance, and inclusivity signal a broader dissatisfaction with conventional representative institutions. Groups such as Extinction Rebellion have explicitly called for citizens' assemblies to anchor democratic engagement, emphasizing the role of ordinary citizens in navigating complex climate decisions (Extinction Rebellion 2024; Huttunen 2024). At the same time, youth movements frequently embody experimental practices of their own, adopting horizontal decision-making, consensus models, and affective solidarity as core organizing principles. These practices often blur boundaries between activism and institution-building, creating hybrid spaces where education, advocacy, and community-building intersect.

Scholars of democratic innovation have sought to assess these experiments by examining their contributions to inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgment, and transparency (Candel 2022; Wojciechowska 2019), while also highlighting their potential to engage younger generations who often express frustration with formal political processes (Pitti et al. 2021). Yet the capacity of these innovations to produce genuinely inclusive outcomes depends not only on procedural design but also on the underlying

structures of recognition that determine whose voices are heard and whose concerns are marginalized (Fominaya 2022; Bullon-Cassis et al. 2025).

EDUCATION AS POLITICS

The Academy's emphasis on education as a site of democratic innovation resonates with long-standing debates in critical pedagogy. For Freire (1970) and Giroux (2011), education is never neutral but constitutes a political act capable of either reproducing or transforming structures of domination. In the context of climate crisis, education becomes a terrain for cultivating not only knowledge but also political agency capable of confronting systemic injustice (Kagawa and Selby 2010; Stevenson 2007).

Youth activists increasingly frame climate education as a form of emancipatory learning that integrates decolonial, intersectional, and systems-based perspectives, while also navigating complex emotional responses such as anger and frustration (Jones and Whitehouse 2021; Zembylas 2007). This contrasts sharply with dominant behavioral models that reduce climate education to lifestyle modification and individual responsibility (González-Gaudiano and Meira-Cartea 2010; Stevenson and Dillon 2010). Moreover, climate education involves significant affective labor, as youth confront eco-anxiety, grief, and political disillusionment in their engagement with systemic crises (Hickman, Marks, Pihkala, et al. 2021). Participatory institutions that fail to acknowledge these emotional dimensions risk alienating precisely those youth most invested in climate governance (Pulcini 2009; Roeser 2012).

PLANETARITY AS HORIZON FOR INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIMENTATION

Only recently have these grounded debates on participation and institutional innovation begun to intersect with emerging discussions on planetary governance. The concept of planetarity challenges modernist, anthropocentric models of globalization by emphasizing the entanglement of human and natural histories (Chakrabarty 2021; Appadurai 2021). Rather than proposing entirely new global architectures, some scholars suggest that planetary governance may emerge through relational, situated coalitions that span levels and geographies (Neyrat 2024). This opens space for considering how local experiments—such as those unfolding in urban contexts—might contribute to broader reimaginings of governance appropriate to the scale and complexity of the climate crisis. The 2023 Berggruen Institute dialogue represents one attempt to advance such thinking, envisioning institutional architectures that integrate perspectives from the Global South, recognize non-human interests, and coordinate across multiple scales of governance (Berggruen Institute 2023). Yet much of this work remains speculative, leaving open the question of how planetary institutions might emerge through concrete, bottom-up processes of experimentation.

These perspectives draw on traditions of polycentric governance (Ostrom 2010; Galaz et al. 2014) and institutional pluralism (de Sousa Santos 2014) that recognize the need for diverse, context-sensitive governance forms capable of navigating asymmetry, epistemic diversity, and political fragmentation. Situated experiments like the Paris Climate Academy do not offer universal templates but serve as empirical laboratories for theorizing how democratic institutions might evolve under planetary crisis conditions (Cornwall 2016; Escobar 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The Paris Climate Academy offers a unique empirical window into how participatory climate institutions emerge at the intersection of youth activism, municipal governance, and new models of hybrid governance. Beyond its localized particularities, the Academy constitutes an institutional experiment in what might be called infra-politics, the often-invisible work of negotiating power, inclusion, and shared authority across actors operating with distinct organizational logics. This study approaches the Academy not simply as a programmatic initiative but as an evolving laboratory for governance innovation under conditions of increasing political fragmentation. This research draws on a multisource qualitative approach integrating document analysis, participant observation, and semistructured interviews to capture the complex negotiations surrounding participation, co-governance, and systemic education within this hybrid institutional space.

MISSION, VISION, AND GOVERNANCE MATERIALS

The paper first analyzes the Academy's mission and vision statements, which articulate its identity and normative aspirations. Mission statements define organizational values and core purposes, while vision statements set long-term societal goals (Igoe 2003). These documents function as both internal coordination devices and external signaling tools. Some materials were available publicly, while others were collected during fieldwork. Key internal documents included the January 2021 youth demands cosigned by twenty-one youth organizations, the Academy's official statutes, and a 2023 governance evaluation commissioned from Université du Nous (UdN), a French cooperative specializing in participatory governance facilitation.

The UdN evaluation was commissioned after growing tensions between youth organizations and City administrators revealed deep ambiguities in how co-governance was to be operationalized. UdN's diagnostic provided a fine-grained mapping of existing decision arenas, identified systemic blockages, and offered pathways toward more durable hybrid governance arrangements. Analyzing these documents allowed for tracing both aspirational visions and evolving power dynamics.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND FIELDWORK

From July 2022 to December 2023, I conducted intermittent fieldwork around the Paris Climate Academy, including attendance at selected public events, town halls, and informal gatherings. The Academy's open-door policy enabled ob-

servational access to a range of moments—public programming, internal discussions, and interactions among youth participants, City officials, and partner organizations. While not continuously embedded in the Academy's day-to-day operations, I was able to observe key town halls, which emerged as important spaces for negotiating programming priorities, governance norms, and institutional tensions.

These observations offered insight into how affective belonging, inclusion, and authority were negotiated in practice. Informal moments—such as hallway conversations or exchanges over shared meals—often surfaced tensions that formal deliberative arenas struggled to contain.

Twenty-four in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with multiple stakeholder groups. These included youth NGO representatives, unaffiliated Youth for Climate activists, City of Paris administrators involved in youth policy, and Academy leadership employed by the City. Including municipal administrators was essential to capture divergences in institutional logics, work cultures, and accountability expectations shaping governance negotiations.

Youth for Climate represents a loosely affiliated youth movement that originated from the international Fridays for Future protests initiated by Greta Thunberg. Unlike formal NGOs, its decentralized, consensus-based organizing structures contrasted sharply with municipal administrative hierarchies. Yes We Camp, a civic organization managing the Academy's cultural programming and cafeteria, brought additional logics of social enterprise and urban experimentation. These multilogical interactions were central to the governance challenges observed. Interviews were conducted in French and translated into English for analysis. Snowball sampling allowed recruitment through participant networks, ensuring representation across diverse organizational roles (Heckathorn 1997; Baltar and Brunet 2012).

Thematic analysis was applied iteratively across interviews, field notes, and documents to identify recurrent patterns, dilemmas, and governance tensions. An inductive approach allowed findings to emerge from empirical material rather than from predetermined theoretical frameworks (Creswell 2014; Charmaz 2006). The analysis foregrounded participants' situated experiences, revealing how aspirations for democratic co-creation encountered systemic constraints.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were fully briefed on study objectives and assured confidentiality protections. Pseudonyms are used throughout, and all interviewees were over eighteen years old.

FINDINGS

A DESIRE FOR CO-CREATION

A defining feature of the Paris Climate Academy's genesis was the insistence of young activists on horizontal forms of governance and transparent co-creation with local authorities. Rather than being mere beneficiaries of a municipal

initiative, youth participants sought an active role in shaping the Academy's design and functioning. This reflected a broader ambition to transpose the organizational culture of grassroots activism—characterized by consensus, horizontality, and collective intelligence—into formal institutional design. One Youth for Climate activist articulated this ethos succinctly: "No one speaks on behalf of the movement here in France, we work together, by consensus. We would like to see more of that in politics."

The establishment of the Academy unfolded over several phases, marked by evolving negotiations between youth organizations and City administrators. In April 2019, as Youth for Climate mobilizations surged across France, fifteen young environmentalists were invited by the Paris mayor's office to a private lunch with Mayor Anne Hidalgo. This early dialogue signaled municipal recognition of youth mobilization but fell short of genuine co-design. Initial plans, largely driven by a small group of urban planners, educators, and philosophers, envisioned a more traditional top-down structure. The Paris administration proposed repurposing a former town hall as an educational center run by an independent association, with youth activists notably absent from early decision-making circles.

However, the creation of the Coalition Jeune in November 2019 shifted these dynamics significantly. Comprising around twenty youth-led NGOs, student movements, and environmental associations, the Coalition unified previously dispersed voices into a coherent negotiating body. Following Hidalgo's reelection in 2020, the Coalition became the city's principal youth interlocutor, formalizing a co-creation process in early 2021. After months of intense coordination, twenty-one organizations cosigned a collective position paper outlining their vision for the Academy.

THE FOUR PILLARS OF YOUTH DEMANDS

The January 2021 demands laid out four central pillars reflecting young people's vision for the Academy: affective inclusion, systemic education, shared governance, and civic innovation. First, they emphasized that the Academy should serve as a welcoming public space for dialogue and interaction across diverse publics, including those not yet engaged with climate issues. They proposed creating a variety of physical spaces—quiet zones, coworking spaces, accessible libraries—and a range of activities from book clubs to podcast workshops. Social inclusion was central, with proposals to employ marginalized individuals in reintegration programs and offer sliding-scale prices in the cafeteria.

Second, the Coalition envisioned systemic and interdisciplinary education transcending narrow environmental framing. The Academy was to address climate change as part of broader ecological, economic, and social systems, integrating issues of biodiversity loss, gender inequality, and racial injustice. This systemic pedagogy would combine theory with practical workshops, from sustainable cooking to participatory simulations of international climate negotiations, empowering participants to become climate ambassadors within their communities.

Third, shared governance was "nonnegotiable." Youth demanded full transparency over decision-making, funding

allocations, partnerships, and programming. They sought formal inclusion on governance boards, participation in drafting institutional statutes, and collective deliberation on all major decisions, with the goal of avoiding precarious volunteer labor while securing meaningful youth leadership.

Finally, the Academy was to serve as an innovation laboratory incubating ecological, social, and solidarity projects. The Coalition proposed iterative three-month innovation cycles where ideas developed through participatory workshops could be debated and voted upon, connecting local experimentation to the broader goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This comprehensive vision transformed the Academy from a city-run educational space into a dynamic hybrid institution, blending grassroots activism with municipal governance and experimental institutional design. After nine months of preparatory work, the Paris Climate Academy officially opened its doors in September 2021 in the former town hall of Paris' central 4th arrondissement. In the words of one interviewee, it quickly became "a major feature of Parisian associative, militant, and public life."

AFFECTIVE ANCHORING

In all interviews with young users of the Academy, it provided an affective anchor in navigating the psychological burdens of climate crisis and political disillusionment. Interviewees consistently described the Academy as a space of safety, solidarity, and personal development. Its physical design fostered openness: no barriers at the entrance, a welcoming courtyard with shared tables, affordable food, free Wi-Fi, and easy room reservations for meetings and organizing.

For Youth for Climate activists, many of whom were very young and unaffiliated with formal organizations, the Academy became a crucial organizing hub. General assemblies, banner-making sessions, protest preparations, and informal recruitment drives routinely took place on-site. As one activist described: "We can book rooms to meet, discuss ideas, plan actions, and prepare materials. We set up tables outside to engage passersby. It's our home base." As for members of more structured youth NGOs, the Academy offered a professional ecosystem, facilitating networking, partnerships, and career development. One NGO leader reflected: "It gave us a space to anchor ourselves both personally and professionally." Youth organizations used the Academy's coworking spaces freely, fostering an environment conducive to cross-organizational collaboration.

The Academy leadership actively embraced the need to address "eco-anxiety," which multiple interviewees identified as a pervasive emotional experience among youth engaged in climate activism. The Academy positioned itself as a therapeutic space where young people could transform climate-related anxiety into constructive action, bolstered by educational programming and supportive peer networks. This resonates with broader concerns about the "anxious generation" and how the 'rewiring' of childhood through screens intensifies youth anxiety—and the corresponding value of offline, physical spaces where solidarity and action

can be embodied (Haidt 2024). Yet, while affective inclusion was broadly successful for those already engaged, deeper challenges emerged regarding the Academy's ability to reach more marginalized and less politically engaged youth populations.

PERSISTENT INCLUSION GAPS: SPATIAL, CLASS-BASED, AND RACIALIZED BOUNDARIES

Despite its open design and inclusive rhetoric, the Academy's location and user profile raised persistent concerns about uneven access. Its central Paris location, easily accessible for middle-class youth and university students, limited participation from suburban banlieues where racialized and working-class communities are concentrated. Several interviewees voiced discomfort with the unspoken class homogeneity of Academy users. "It's still very white. It's very middle-class," remarked one youth NGO member. Another, from a working-class background, confided, "I feel alone here sometimes, like I don't really belong. Even the after-work events are coded for a particular kind of young person who lives centrally."

This dynamic reflected broader structural patterns within French climate activism, where environmental concerns remain disproportionately associated with privileged urban demographics. As one interviewee put it: "The climate movement wants to get closer to social justice fights, but that's difficult for most climate NGOs. They're still 80% environment, 20% social justice. That does not speak to everyone."

Academy leadership openly acknowledged these shortcomings and sought to address them through targeted outreach. Two main strategies emerged. First, educational programming was extended directly into suburban schools through partnerships with the Paris education authority. Second, leadership articulated a "meeting youth where they are" approach, introducing entry points tied to sports, employment training, and green job certifications for youth not yet politicized around climate issues.

Simultaneously, some youth engaged with alternative associative spaces outside the Academy's central location, such as Verdragon in the Bagnolet neighborhood, a grassroots community hub explicitly focused on environmental justice through an intersectional lens. The emergence of these parallel sites highlights both the vitality and the fragmentation of Parisian youth climate engagement.

While successful at providing a refuge for certain emotional registers, notably eco-anxiety, the Academy struggled to accommodate more confrontational emotions such as indignation or anger. As Youth for Climate activists increasingly adopted civil disobedience tactics in 2022, they concealed these activities from Academy leadership to avoid jeopardizing institutional relationships. One activist observed, "We still feel welcome, but we don't tell them about what we really do," referring to their acts of defacing advertising panels across Paris to protest the city's ongoing partnerships with corporate advertisers. These tensions reflect a broader question facing participatory governance initiatives: how far can institutional spaces accommodate activism that directly challenges municipal power or eco-

nomic interests? As one NGO member framed it, "That's the next big thing they'll have to decide—how to handle young people who have chosen to break the rules."

CO-GOVERNANCE TENSIONS: NEGOTIATING ASYMMETRY AND INFORMALITY

Despite its participatory ethos, establishing durable horizontal governance structures proved to be the Academy's most persistent challenge. Youth organizations repeatedly expressed frustration with opaque or inconsistent decision-making processes. One representative lamented, "It's definitely a place for young people. But it was supposed to be by young people. That is not yet the case."

Structural asymmetries in organizational rhythms compounded these difficulties. Municipal administrators operated on standard weekday schedules, while students and young workers were primarily available evenings and weekends. "They scheduled meetings during the day when we have classes. We could only meet at night, which is when they didn't work," explained one youth participant. Informal Friday lunches with City staff fostered goodwill but lacked binding authority. In 2022, the Academy introduced a formal monthly "council," bringing together City officials, youth delegates, and the Yes We Camp association (which managed the Academy's cafeteria and cultural programming). While these meetings facilitated recurring dialogue, many youth participants perceived decision-making power as remaining largely centralized with the City administration.

Academy leadership acknowledged these tensions while emphasizing an adaptive, iterative approach. As one senior official described: "We are an institutional UFO. We're partly an institution, partly not. Our methodology is qualitative: listening, learning, and adjusting." This open-ended approach, while fostering some flexibility, also contributed to ongoing ambiguity about where ultimate authority resided. The result was a hybrid governance space that blurred the lines between public institution, civil society platform, and experimental third space, but struggled to fully stabilize shared governance in the absence of clearly codified power-sharing arrangements.

The Université du Nous intervention: Toward structured hybrid governance

By late 2022, mounting frustrations prompted youth organizations to request external facilitation. The City of Paris commissioned Université du Nous (UdN), a French cooperative specializing in shared governance design, to conduct a comprehensive diagnostic evaluation of the Academy's governance structures. UdN's analysis provided a granular mapping of decision-making arenas and identified systemic imbalances. While youth input shaped many programming dimensions, financial and strategic authority remained centralized within the City administration. High turnover within youth organizations further weakened institutional memory, continuity, and representational clarity. UdN emphasized that informal, trust-based coordination—while initially effective—was unsustainable without formalized power-sharing mechanisms. Their proposed solution involved creating a hybrid architecture that combined:

- Operational Circles managing day-to-day programming and activities.
- A Central Governance Circle composed equally of City administrators and youth organization representatives, with each representative formally mandated by their respective constituencies.

Concurrently, youth organizations developed an internal charter formalizing rules for mandate delegation, representation, and rotation of leadership roles. This internal professionalization process addressed City administrators' earlier concerns about unclear youth interlocutors, while strengthening youth organizational capacity for sustained institutional engagement.

The hybrid governance model began phased implementation in late 2023. While still evolving, it represented a significant institutionalization of co-governance aspirations, shifting participation from informal consultation toward more stable, accountable shared authority. Yet questions remained about the long-term sustainability of this model amid continued turnover, resource asymmetries, and evolving political pressures.

DISCUSSION

The Paris Climate Academy offers a powerful site to examine the evolving infra-politics of participatory climate governance in practice. Its emergence at the intersection of youth mobilization, municipal administration, and experimental co-governance provides a uniquely situated window into how democratic institutions are being reimagined in response to planetary crisis. Moving beyond simplified narratives of either institutional success or failure, this discussion unpacks five interrelated dimensions that together illuminate the Academy's significance: education as politics, infra-politics as infrastructural labor, recognition and representation, affective registers of participation, and planetary governance from below.

EDUCATION AS POLITICS: CLIMATE PEDAGOGY AS INSTITUTIONAL STRUGGLE

From its inception, the Academy's educational mandate was not simply ancillary to its governance structure but was central to its political imagination. The young people involved consistently framed education not as neutral knowledge transfer but as a political practice inseparable from questions of power, justice, and systemic transformation. Their demands explicitly rejected narrow behavioral models of environmental education that focus on personal lifestyle changes, instead calling for systemic pedagogies that link climate breakdown to broader histories of colonial extraction, racialized dispossession, gendered inequalities, and economic exploitation.

As multiple youth activists emphasized in interviews, addressing climate change requires confronting the social, political, and economic systems that drive environmental

degradation. One Youth for Climate member noted: "We do not need more lessons about recycling. We need to understand who controls land, who controls production, and who profits from extraction. That is where change must happen." This reflects broader critiques of mainstream climate education that often depoliticize environmental harm by framing it as a problem of individual consumption rather than structural injustice (Aikens et al. 2016; Stevenson 2007).

The Academy's pedagogical innovations reflected these critiques. The participatory design process proposed workshops, simulation games (e.g., COP negotiation role-plays), systems-thinking modules, and applied projects that foregrounded the entanglement of social and ecological systems. Activists described pedagogy as a form of collective empowerment aimed at building what Giroux (2011) calls "educated hope"—the capacity to envision and enact alternative political futures through systemic analysis and collective action. However, significant tensions emerged between this transformative vision and the reformist tendencies embedded in municipal governance. For city administrators, education often remained tethered to existing civic models oriented toward responsible citizenship, social integration, and employability within existing economic structures. As one municipal staff member put it, "Our role is to prepare young people to be active citizens who contribute to the social fabric, not to organize revolutions."

These divergent pedagogical logics represent an unresolved struggle over the political function of climate education. Youth organizations saw education as a vehicle for destabilizing current arrangements of power, while city officials viewed it as a means of integrating youth into established institutional pathways. This conflict mirrors broader debates within climate governance about whether education should foster systemic critique or behavioral adaptation (González-Gaudiano and Meira-Cartea 2010; Facer 2011).

The Academy thus exemplifies how climate education itself constitutes a deeply political battleground, where struggles over knowledge are inseparable from struggles over institutional authority and political possibility. Its pedagogical experiments reflect an ambitious effort to equip youth not only with knowledge but also with political agency, while simultaneously exposing the structural constraints that shape how such education is framed, delivered, and contested.

INFRA-POLITICS AS INFRASTRUCTURAL LABOR: THE MICRO-POLITICS OF CO-GOVERNANCE

The governance challenges that surfaced at the Academy cannot be fully understood through procedural design analysis alone. Rather, they reflect what might be called the infra-politics of institutional co-creation—the often-invisible labor of sustaining fragile alliances across actors operating within deeply divergent institutional logics. Much of the work required to sustain the Academy unfolded not in high-profile deliberative arenas but in mundane negotiations over meeting schedules, email responsiveness, drafting protocols, representational mandates, and interpersonal trust-building (Malafaia et al. 2017). These micro-level negotiations often masked deeper asymmetries of power rooted in differences between municipal bureaucracy, youth activism, NGO professionalism, and intermediary facilitation expertise.

For municipal administrators, accountability was structured through legal mandates, performance indicators, and risk-averse logics of administrative responsibility. For youth activists, participation was anchored in horizontalist decision-making cultures that emphasized collective deliberation, consensus, and nonhierarchical coordination practices often incompatible with bureaucratic proceduralism. NGO professionals brought logics of project management, grant cycles, and organizational sustainability, while intermediary facilitators like Université du Nous introduced meta-governance expertise aimed at stabilizing fragile coalitions through governance design interventions.

What appeared as mere logistical disagreements often reflected these deeper organizational contradictions. As one youth delegate explained: "The city schedules meetings during working hours; most of us are students or working precarious jobs. They think we are being disorganized. We experience it as exclusion." These scheduling conflicts were not neutral; they were symptomatic of broader generational inequalities around time, precarity, and institutional access.

The intervention by Université du Nous proved crucial in rendering these infra-political dilemmas visible. Their mapping of decision arenas diagnosed how informal power was exercised outside of formal governance structures, often through interpersonal relationships between administrators and select youth leaders. Formalizing hybrid governance circles—with equal representation between city administrators and mandated youth organization delegates—sought to institutionalize these arrangements into durable, accountable infrastructures resilient to turnover and internal fragmentation.

Yet as youth participants noted, formalization does not automatically equal influence. As one NGO representative reflected: "We now have more structure, but real power is still with the city. They control the budget, they approve final decisions. We negotiate, but there are limits." Infra-politics thus continues not after procedural reform but within it, as participants continually renegotiate the boundaries of shared authority in contexts of ongoing power asymmetry.

The Paris Climate Academy's governance trajectory underscores that participatory innovation is not simply about designing better deliberative forums. It demands sustained infrastructural labor to build trust, manage turnover, translate competing institutional languages, and absorb conflict over time. Participatory governance lives or dies in these infra-political spaces where organizational cultures collide and must be continuously mediated.

RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION: THE DEEPER POLITICS OF INCLUSION

Recognition constitutes a second foundational axis along which the Academy's participatory experiment must be analyzed. As Fraser (2000) and Schlosberg (2007) argue, rep-

resentation in democratic institutions cannot be meaningfully inclusive without recognition—the validation of diverse identities, histories, and lived experiences as legitimate bases for political participation. Despite its progressive design, the Academy's participatory public remains shaped by entrenched inequalities deeply embedded in Paris's urban fabric. The majority of regular participants remained disproportionately white, middle-class, and spatially proximate to the Academy's central location. Youth from suburban banlieues and more precarious socioeconomic positions often remained underrepresented, despite repeated outreach efforts.

Several participants spoke candidly about these exclusions. One youth NGO member reflected: "We have a beautiful space, but it still feels inaccessible to many. Who has time to volunteer? Who feels entitled to walk into a city-run institution?" Another emphasized: "The banlieue kids are talked about as 'to be included,' but rarely as leaders shaping the agenda." These statements point to the enduring power of spatial, cultural, and symbolic exclusion mechanisms that operate beneath formal inclusion procedures.

Academy leadership made genuine efforts to expand inclusion, developing targeted educational partnerships with suburban schools, diversifying green jobs training, and piloting alternative outreach strategies via sports and employment programming. Yet as Wojciechowska (2019) and Pitti et al. (2021) observe, procedural inclusion mechanisms alone cannot overcome deeper structures of recognition unless marginalized groups have real agenda-setting power and epistemic authority within institutional spaces.

This challenge is amplified when recognition intersects with conflicts over acceptable repertoires of activism. As Youth for Climate shifted toward civil disobedience tactics—including symbolic property destruction and disruptive protest—some activists began concealing these activities from Academy leadership to preserve institutional goodwill. "We don't tell them everything we do," one activist confided. "There's a limit to what the Academy can accommodate." This boundary management reflects the institutionalization dilemma: how much dissent can participatory institutions absorb without compromising their legitimacy within formal governance structures?

In this sense, the Academy's struggles with recognition are not peripheral but are constitutive of its participatory experiment. Who belongs, who sets agendas, and which forms of political expression are deemed legitimate remain open questions that shape the Academy's evolving political identity. Recognition remains the Achilles heel of participatory innovation: the hardest to secure, the easiest to erode.

AFFECTIVE LABOR AND EMOTIONAL REGISTERS OF CLIMATE PARTICIPATION

Participatory governance scholarship often overlooks the affective dimensions of institutional engagement. Yet for youth confronting the climate crisis, participation is not simply procedural but is deeply emotional. The Academy functioned as both a site of affective refuge and a space of contested emotional labor. For many young people, the Academy provided a rare space to process eco-anxiety, climate grief, and political disillusionment collectively. As several interviewees described, it served as "a place to breathe," offering solidarity networks and relational support amid growing psychological strain. This affective infrastructure was as critical as its formal programming in sustaining youth engagement. At the same time, the Academy struggled to fully accommodate more confrontational emotional registers such as anger, indignation, or rage—emotions that increasingly animated radical climate activism as frustration with institutional inaction mounted. Youth for Climate members explicitly described compartmentalizing their more disruptive activities to preserve the Academy's institutional legitimacy. One activist explained: "They want us to be constructive partners, but sometimes we need to break things."

This tension reflects broader debates within climate movements about the legitimacy of diverse repertoires of contention (Fominaya 2022; Saunders and Hayes 2024). Participatory institutions that fail to acknowledge these affective complexities risk alienating precisely the youth they seek to engage. As Pulcini (2009) argues, affective energies are not obstacles to democratic engagement but central resources for political formation, particularly in contexts of systemic crisis. The Academy's partial accommodation of eco-anxiety, but limited embrace of more radical emotional repertoires, underscores the challenge of sustaining inclusive affective infrastructures within institutionalized participatory spaces. Managing affect is not simply a question of individual psychological support but of institutional design: how can participatory arenas hold space for emotional registers that exceed polite deliberation and reflect the existential stakes youth attach to climate governance?

PLANETARY GOVERNANCE AS SITUATED EXPERIMENTATION: LESSONS FOR DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

The Paris Climate Academy's localized experiment offers valuable insights for the broader project of rethinking planetary governance amid accelerating ecological breakdown. As Appadurai (2021), Chakrabarty (2021), and Neyrat (2024) argue, planetary governance demands forms of institutional imagination capable of navigating both scalar complexity and radical interdependence between human and nonhuman systems.

Rather than positing new global architectures from above, the Academy represents an emergent model of participation from below—one grounded in lived experience, relational negotiation, and situated co-creation. It embodies a multilogical governance architecture that integrates diverse organizational forms while remaining embedded in specific sociospatial contexts. Its hybrid design challenges simplistic binaries between state and civil society, formal and informal, global and local. Yet precisely because of its embeddedness, the Academy's exportability remains limited. As one interviewee noted, "This works here because of Paris's political configuration—a progressive city government, strong youth mobilization, available public infra-

structure. You can't transplant that blueprint without adaptation."

This caution aligns with calls for more situated approaches to institutional innovation that prioritize contextual specificity, relational accountability, and adaptive flexibility over universal design templates (Escobar 2018; Cornwall 2016). The Academy should not be seen as a blueprint, but as a living laboratory from which broader principles may emerge—such as the importance of infra-political labor, affective infrastructures, and multilogical governance design.

It offers a valuable empirical case for grounding what scholars have begun to describe as planetary institutional experimentation. Rather than resolving the tensions of participatory governance under crisis conditions, it makes them visible and manageable. By holding space for co-creation across asymmetrical actors and epistemologies, the Academy illustrates how democratic practice can adapt—even if unevenly—to ecological volatility and institutional fatigue.

CONCLUSION

The Paris Climate Academy does not offer a neat model for replication, but rather an evolving experiment in collective institutional imagination. It underscores that inclusion is not a matter of design alone; classed, racialized, and territorial inequalities continue to shape who feels entitled, visible, and empowered within such spaces. Tensions surrounding systemic pedagogy, the framing of climate justice, and the boundaries of acceptable activism do not signal failure, but reflect the ongoing negotiation of democratic participation under complex and unequal conditions.

In the broader context of planetary governance debates, the Academy offers a grounded illustration of how democratic institutions might evolve to integrate multilogical forms of participation amid fragmentation. As national and multilateral structures falter in responding to environmental crises, situated urban initiatives like this one showcase both the promise and the challenges of experimenting with distributed authority, co-creation, and inclusive decision-making. Governance innovation demands not only normative aspiration, but the sustained labor of building institutional arrangements capable of withstanding conflict, turnover, and structural asymmetry over time.

Whether such hybrid models can stabilize or scale remains uncertain. Yet their value lies not in offering universal templates, but in demonstrating the intricate and often invisible work of institutional co-creation needed to sustain democratic engagement in times of ecological and political uncertainty. In this sense, the Paris Climate Academy stands as both a local innovation and a valuable lens into the evolving politics of planetary institutional experimentation, reminding us that democratic spaces matter not only for their procedures, but for the in-person connections and sense of solidarity they can sustain in times of crisis.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Laura Bullon-Cassis is a postdoctoral researcher at the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy of the Geneva Graduate Institute. Her research examines how environmental crises and emerging technologies are reshaping democratic agency, institutional legitimacy, and the politics of attention. In particular, she looks at how media infrastructures, digital platforms, and elite actors shape public engagement and political authority in climate governance. Her current projects focus on youth movements and institutional participation, tech platforms and civil disobedience, elite-driven adaptation strategies, and the pedagogical and political implications of artificial intelligence.

Bullon-Cassis received her PhD from the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University in 2022. Her dissertation analyzed the symbolic construction of "youth" in UN climate diplomacy, focusing on the affective and communicative dynamics of global summitry. She has taught at NYU and Pratt Institute and has worked closely with the UN system in both research and professional capacities. She also serves as team leader and writer for the International Institute for Sustainable Development's (IISD) Earth Negotiations Bulletin.

Bullon-Cassis has held visiting fellowships at the Centre for Political Research (Sciences Po Paris), the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk (University of Cambridge), the Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics (George Washington University), and the Centre on Social Movements Research (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales). She has also served on the editorial team of *Public Culture* and on the board of the American Anthropological Association's Children and Youth Interest Group. She co-hosted the podcast *Who is Voting in 2024?,* which explored evolving forms of political voice in a critical electoral year.

Bullon-Cassis holds an MSc in global politics and a BSc in sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

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