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Episode 11: Jacquelyn Gill

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DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 0:04

Hello and Welcome to Retrieving the Social Sciences, a production of the Center for Social Science Scholarship. I'm your host, Ian Anson, Associate Professor of Political Science here at UMBC. On today's show, as always, we'll be hearing from UMBC faculty, students, visiting speakers, and community partners about the social science research they've been performing in recent times. Qualitative, quantitative, applied, empirical normative. On Retrieving the Social Sciences, we bring the best of UMBC's social science community to you.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 0:41

I'm sure I'm not the only person who rang in 2022 with a little extra enthusiasm compared to years past. Of course, my wife and I hosted a very small get together rather than a huge party this year. Because the thought of all of our New Year's resolutions getting waylaid by a nasty case of COVID was a pretty strong deterrent to more intensive forms of socialization. But at our tiny gathering, there were hors d'oeuvres, there was champagne, and above all, we seemed to share the same feeling. Let's put 2021 behind us as fast as we possibly can. Because you know, there were a ton of reasons why

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22:40



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skyrocketing COVID case numbers, and miserable winter weather are just a few reasons that one might feel a little down these days. But when it comes to climate change, our negative emotions are potentially much more harmful than we might realize. That's the contention of Dr. Jacquelyn Gill, an ice age ecologist whose work focuses on paleo ecology, extinction, climate change, and a whole host of other topics. Dr. Gill is Associate Professor of Paleoecology and Plant Ecology at the University of Maine, and is also the principal investigator of the BEAST Lab at the University of Maine, which investigates how biodiversity responds to climate change. Dr. Gill has recently used her expertise to serve as an important science communicator with a podcast called Warm Regards, which discusses the impact of climate change on our lived experiences. Dr. Gill also publishes a blog called The Contemplative Mammoth, which touches on topics from Ice Age ecology, to the experience of being an academic. Through all these public interactions and scholarly investigations, Dr. Gill has identified a growing problem in the way we think about climate change. Simply put, if we succumb to a doom and gloom perspective about the future of the planet's ecology, it might be very tempting to give up the fight. Let's listen in, as Dr. Gill explains the "doomer" mindset and how to defeat it in this rebroadcast of a UMBC lecture from 2021.

DJ Dr. Jacquelyn Gill 3:19

You could go back to a number of different points within the timeline. But I'm going to start with 1965, which is really the first time formally that the scientific community approaches the US government with this problem of climate change. The US scientific community tells the federal government that we are concerned about the impact of emissions on changing the Earth's climate. It was kind of a small moment, it didn't gain a lot of traction, but it was, I think, a formative moment, an important one. And it points out that there have, the reason I'm starting here from this position is it's recent enough in our memory, in terms of our relationship with policy, that it shows that these conversations aren't new, but have been playing out in different spaces and in different ways and then only recently have gelled in terms of a recent, you know, sort of global sense of urgency. And the types of people who are having these conversations is a theme that I will come back to over and over again. In the US are quite different from those that are in your

[Download on Android, iOS](#)[Log in](#)**DJ Dr. Jacquelyn Gill 4:18**

Alright, so 1965 we get this report, restoring the quality of our environment, it doesn't really get a lot of traction, although you start to see in the ensuing decades, the rise of an environmental movement. You know, the first Earth Day happens after this, etc. Really, it's not until 1988 that we start to see some sort of global galvanization around climate change as a scientific problem. Various nations actually came together and agreed to do this formally here on the Kyoto Protocol. And then the United States Senate immediately refused to ratify the treaty, which represented a shift. I think it's really important to note that prior to this moment, in the sort of early decades of our sort of political awareness of climate change, it wasn't a controversial issue, it wasn't a partisan issue like it is today. And that, you know, that shift, that change from being something that everyone was on board with to something that became highly partisan ties directly back to the fossil fuel industry and fossil fuel money in politics specifically. And so it's part of a long term coordinated campaign... kind of represents kind of a point at which this work starts to become really politically divisive. But it still doesn't really gain a ton of popular traction. It's being picked up in the environmental movement. I was in high school at this point. But it wasn't really something that was on our radar in the same way that it is with today's youth.

DJ Dr. Jacquelyn Gill 5:35

Year after year after year of record breaking temperatures. So we see, you know, the last five years prior, so this came out in 2019. So the last five years, were the, you know, the hottest years on record globally. That trend has not changed, going into you know, last year. And I think, you know, people are starting to wake up to these headlines that every year we're sort of breaking these these global temperature records. And it's we start to see climate coverage really emerging in the national and international media. There's a watershed moment that happens here. And what's interesting is it sort of just this year 2018, it's kind of buried in the middle of this. Jem Bendell puts out what you could really call a white paper called Deep Adaptation, A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy. It gets rejected from the scientific literature. It's,

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could happen at any moment. And it's going to trigger the sort of wide scale global societal collapse or civilizational collapse. So we're not just talking about changes in our relationship with the natural world or disruptions to our food systems or social systems. We're talking you know, they literally use words like collapse civilizational, collapse here, and it what it does is it presents a sort of ethical or philosophical framework. It's not actually modeling anything about future climate change, but it presents this framework as a way to deal with this idea of impending climate breakdown and civilizational disruption which it takes as a given. And so it starts from this perspective, that mitigation alone, not enough to stave off collapse. Even if we are to completely hit net zero emissions, and add some aggressive solar geoengineering. And in this paper, Jem suggests three strategies for us to deal with this impending collapse that's, that's coming. First is resilience through infrastructure upgrades. Which makes sense. This is actually adaptation, climate adaptation. But then he goes on to talk about this idea of relinquishment, so that we're going to need to give up aspects of civilization that lead to additional climate risk. And, and, you know, a sort of cynical way of interpreting this would be that, you know, affluent, Western nations with large carbon footprints are basically going to have to, you know, change our lifestyles to be more in alignment with the rest of the world. His paper has been downloaded over 800,000 times. You know, it's widely cited among, you know, members of certain spheres within the activist community, or even the scientific community. But scientists like Gavin Schmidt and Michael Mann, climate scientists, well, you know, well respected, criticized the scientific foundation of this Deep Adaptation paper, because it fails to account for, you know, global disasters that are already occurring outside the global North or outside the West. And so it sort of, I think, sets a tone for, essentially, people who are waking up to the climate crisis for the first time because they think it might start to affect them personally. And by people, I mean, largely, you know, people who live in affluent nations. The impacts of climate change are felt the first and the hardest by those who have contributed the least. It sort of takes a "we're all in this together" sort of framework and just glosses over the widespread inequalities within, you know, climate impacts and also within, you know, the contributors to climate change. And it's very overly fatalistic. For a lot of people, you know, they've, they've mentioned that it removes any

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sort of framework of the paper, this idea that, you know, there's a growing awareness that this, this sort of doomism, could potentially be just as bad or or you know, even worse than than denialism because the outcomes could potentially be the same, right. There's a Margaret Atwood quote, from one of her novels, *MaddAddam*, where she talks about how when people believe that nothing can be done, they do less than nothing, right? And so it's this sort of idea of, if you give up hope, you're just going to, you know, continue on with business as usual or even worse, you know, ramp up your consumption and, and harmful activities. Stop engaging, you know, in society, because you don't think that there's a point. This idea of thresholds starts to really emerge often based on faulty assumptions or understandings or misrepresentations of the science. So a couple things to keep in mind. You know, the time came out, you know, we already are at 1.2 degrees Celsius warming. This idea of climate catastrophe is the this... and so what they have to do instead is have more of a gradual decline, and then we make up for the rest by aggressive decarbonisation. So we're sort of sucking carbon out of the atmosphere, you know, in the second half of the century, which isn't ideal. But it's sort of the, basically what the UN report said was, the most likely likely scenario is you either have to get all of your emissions to zero, incredibly fast, like unrealistically fast given, you know, all of the challenges that we face, both technologically and politically and socially, or we overshoot that target, and then we have to suck a bunch of carbon out of the atmosphere. That 1.5 degrees target, you know, you know, where does that come from? Well, it comes out of the Paris Agreement. And so most of the scientific literature around 2015, and all the discussions that were happening in Paris, you know, focused on this idea of getting well below two degrees. And that's because a lot of Pacific island nations started saying, okay at two degrees we're flooded, you know, this is game over for us. And so from that perspective, it is a climate catastrophe, right. Losing your homes, their ancestral homelands, that is, that is a catastrophe. Having to move out because your land is being inundated is 100% a climate catastrophe. And so there's this idea of, of these targets and thresholds that are extremely difficult, if not, you know, really, like improbable to impossible to reach. So we're sort of set up to fail. And there are these timelines beyond which the, you know, the the media is framing failure as total catastrophe. And so this framework, this 12 years to limit

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within the climate movement. And so what I would say is that we have a new problem on our hands as a community of what Eric ?? calls climate people, right? Engaging in the climate conversation, scientists, activist policymakers. We have grown up as climate people in a world where we thought we were fighting climate denial. And so we've been trained, you know, those of us who have been thinking about this for a while, we've been trained to argue with people, to convince them, to shock them to scare them, whatever, into believing, to understanding recognizing, right. And somewhere very quickly, I would and I would say around 2018, we sort of blew past that. And and we're now in a completely different problem, where we are now fighting climate doom. So doomism, doomism is the new denial, meaning, you know, we no longer are finding ourselves in a position of having to convince people, most people, that climate change is real, right? The this is from the Yale Climate Change Communications Six Americas project, which is the highest quality data we have about climate belief in the US. It's highly granular. It's, you know, incredibly well detailed. And what it tells us is that the dismissives, who we would, you know, think of as the climate deniers, they are almost the smallest, you know, group within the US, they're 8%. And that number has dropped from something like 11 or 12%, just a couple years ago. So we're seeing a decline, a steady decline in dismissives. And doubtfuls are also getting smaller. Disengaged are folks who are just like, Yeah, I don't really care if it's a problem or not, I just have other things going on. Like, you know, maybe your house is about to be, you know, taken by the bank, or you're having trouble feeding your family, or there's just something else going on that's weighing heavily on you. Whereas the cautious concern and alarmed group and especially the alarmed group are growing, right. The the concern used to be large, larger, and the alarmed bubble was smaller, kind of closer to the dismissive ends. And it's been growing by quite a lot in just the last few years. The real, you know, urgent need, I think, now is to talk to these folks and to galvanize them into understanding and believing that their actions matter, and that there's still something that can be done and we're not powerless. Mary Hagler has, who's a wonderful climate essayist, has called the "doomer dude," right. Very typically, white male, very often, you know, very highly engaged in environmental issues. And yet kind of comes to this conversation with this sense of, there's nothing we can do. And it's really

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they tend to be well educated, they tend to be very comfortable. You know, they're they're novelists like Jonathan Franzen, but there are members of the scientific community who I would classify in the same sort of group. And they're all people who, you know, who have lots of ample, who have ample resources, right. They can be mobile, they are not the most vulnerable, they don't live in the most vulnerable communities. Emergence of climate doomism seems to be happening, you know, all at the same time as you know, we're seeing this increase in headlines. A lot of those responses are, you know, it's like it only seems to matter when it affects, you know, affluent, middle aged white men, right. And so that's a big problem with the narratives that we're seeing within the climate movement in general. Really the last year or so that we've started to see this framework emerging. However, we I think we do have some ideas that we can draw on from other aspects of, you know, psychology research, climate delay, and they kind of characterize some of these responses and talk about, you know, how harmful that they can be and equally harmful to climate denialism, right. And so some of these things, you know, we have the individualism, right. Someone else should take actions first. It redirects responsibility. We see this sometimes even among, you know, climate activists. Like, oh, our personal choices don't matter, because, you know, it's, you know, it's the fossil fuel industry, right. Sort of ignoring that, yes, there are structural problems that are, you know, and barriers that are limiting our individual choices, but markets are still out there to produce products that are, you know, that people are consuming, right. So each of these discourses, they're all delaying action, right. They all have the same kinds of outcomes that denial has. And so one potential people within the Climate Movement, you know, and I think that there are intersections between doomism and climate anxiety, you know. I think we should get a better handle of what the long-term impacts are. Do know, from psychology, which is researched decision making in lots of other contexts, including the environment, but fear appeals usually don't work. They tend to cause people to shut down, they get people to disengage, because they become more immobilized by their anxiety. So there, there is some suggestion that, you know, waking people up to some extent is, is important, it raises awareness, but that awareness doesn't necessarily translate into action, right. And that's what we want. We want, we don't just want people to care about climate change, we want them to do

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damaging and devastating. But you need to give them somewhere to go with that. You need to give them again, sense of agency and the belief that their actions will matter. And so you have to pair these two things together. And this idea of just shocking or scaring people where a lot of this doomist framework kind of emerges from, it doesn't seem to work, right. And so it's not, it's not a good strategy. So the harm reduction model basically says, okay, well, instead of preaching abstinence, what we're going to do is we're going to make it as safe as possible for people to engage in this behavior, and that has much better public health outcomes overall, than if you just tell people not to do those things that are risky, right? Because harm reduction frameworks recognize that risk and vulnerability aren't shared equally, because we already know that harm has happened. A no harm scenario went it comes to climate change is impossible, because we already know that people have lost their lives, people have lost their homes, you know, climate changes are impacting communities. It's just impacting, you know, the marginalized, it's impacting people in the Global South, it's impacting the most vulnerable communities, communities of color. Those aren't the communities that necessarily make the headlines, right? These movements are long term, they take time. And, you know, all I can never, can never, like the best I can hope for is not to solve this problem, right. But the best I can hope for is to make the world a better place for my children and my grandchildren. Right to to to minimize future harm and current harm, right. And so if you appeal to people on that level, and you know, drawing from other kinds of, you know, similar movements that are that we know are long term and but are still worth that fight, you know, harkening back to Mary Hagler's point that home is always worth it. And then I want to take a moment just to say, you know, the lone climate hero is a poor model. The media keeps propping up the same individuals, you know, this idea of, you know, the the one, the one guy, it's usually a guy, who's the only person who is completely, you know, awakened to this challenge of climate change, and why won't anyone listen to him? And he's just gonna fight it. And it's this sort of embattled lone climate hero. That sort of reinforces this idea of individualism, which has been incredibly damaging. Which isn't to say, the individual actions don't matter. We do know that, you know, small actions can lead to bigger actions and bigger actions, right. They can build capacity. The people and the lone climate heroes who

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climate-friendly actions or choices. And so I think instead, what we need to do is learn from environmental justice and the sort of more recent Climate Justice Movement, which, you know, comes directly out of decades and centuries of social justice, that our climate movements need to be explicitly feminist and anti racist, and that they need to build coalitions so that we're not just focusing on you know, individual solutions or pretending that there's nothing we can do because the structural barriers are too large, right? And so, so I actually have this series of tweets in 2019 kind of responding to this idea of of doom versus hope and sort of being really alarmed that I had a growing number of people emailing me asking me if you know if there's even any point in having kids you know. I'm hearing more and more from youth that are worried about you know, whether they'll get to grow up and you know, this is sort of the, the landscape that you know, that people are occupying right now.

CC Campus Connections 20:27

Campus Connections (6x)

DJ Dr. Jacquelyn Gill 20:29

Connections Campus Connections, Campus Connections.

DI Dr. Ian Anson 20:34

Today's Campus Connection helps us better situate the opinions of climate change Doomers within a broader cultural, economic, and even regional context. Dr. David Lansing is Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Environmental Systems at UMBC. His work spans a variety of topics in the field, but most relevant to today's discussion is his work on rural perceptions of climate ecology and conservation policy. In a recent article published in 2018, in the Journal of Rural Studies, Dr. Lansing and co-authors looked at the ways in which farmers and non-farmers conceived of ecological best practices in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. While many college educated urban elites might be climate change Doomers according to Dr. Gill, Dr. Lansing's study explored the multifaceted and often polarized discourse surrounding climate change and environmental best practices outside of city

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those with greater awareness of climactic shifts expressed a desire for updated agricultural best management practices. Together, Dr. Gill and Dr. Lansing help us better understand the diversity of opinions surrounding climate change today, and the potential risks that these attitudes might have when it comes to the environment today and in the future.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 21:54

That's all for today's episode. Until next time, don't be a Doomer. Use your knowledge to press for better social and environmental practices. And as always, keep questioning.

DI **Dr. Ian Anson** 22:06

Retrieving the Social Sciences is a production of the UMBC Center for Social Science Scholarship. Our director is Dr. Christine Mallinson, our Associate Director is Dr. Felipe Filomeno and our production intern is Jefferson Rivas. Our theme music was composed and recorded by D'Juan Moreland. Find out more about CS3 at socialscience.umbc.edu and make sure to follow us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube where you can find full video recordings of recent UMBC events. Until next time, keep questioning.

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