ALUM PROFILE: ALEX LENFERNA WORKS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Submitted by Britta M. Anson on May 28, 2019 - 11:26am

Alex Lenferna (Ph.D. 2019) was already a dedicated climate justice activist in his native South Africa before moving to Seattle to complete his PhD in Philosophy at the University of Washington. He continued his advocacy here in the U.S. while completing his PhD. Now, back in his home country, Alex works as South African Climate Justice Campaigner for 350.org, an international non-profit organization that works on climate justice and clean energy advocacy on six continents.

We asked Alex to tell us a bit about his experience as a philosophy doctoral student pursuing a non-academic career, the relationship between his philosophy and his activism, his current work, and his advice for other graduate students looking to apply their philosophy to the real world.

Why did you decide to pursue a PhD in philosophy? What were your career goals prior to joining the PhD program, and did they change over time?

I pursued philosophy because I know it could be a powerful tool to help support, generate and defend research, advocacy and activism that advances climate justice. Many complex philosophical questions—such as questions of justice—are at the heart of understanding and addressing climate change.

My career goals involved combining research and advocacy to advance climate justice. I considered going into academia, but through my research I realized that time is not on our side to address climate change—i.e. we’re in a climate emergency. As such, I decided to dedicate myself to more directly pushing for change in the short window we have left to do so.

Why did you come to study in the United States?

I came to the States in large part to do climate justice advocacy in the metaphorical belly of the beast on climate change, as the U.S. is the world’s largest historical carbon polluter and richest country on earth with arguably the largest moral responsibility to act on climate change. I also came on a Fulbright Scholarship in order to receive specialized training in climate ethics as there were no philosophers trained in that field in South Africa at the time, and I wanted to bring those skills back to South Africa.

What parts of your graduate training did you find most useful?

Having the opportunity to take classes on climate ethics and teach environmental ethics was very valuable - it sometimes astounds me that more students aren't engaging with these fascinating and complex questions which are central to some of the biggest crises we will collectively face. Additionally, the critical thinking and writing skills I've developed as a philosopher have been valuable in my line of work as an activist. For example, philosophy's approach to deconstructing bad arguments is very useful in debunking fossil fuel industry propaganda as well as in contesting bad and unjust policy positions.

As a doctoral student not primarily interested in becoming a professor, how did you approach your dissertation project as preparation for a non-academic career?
My PhD dissertation was entitled *Equitably Ending the Fossil Fuel Era: Climate Justice, Capital and the Carbon Budget*. It was a very applied dissertation that looked at how questions of justice and ethics can inform how and why we should rapidly wind down burning oil, coal and gas. By focusing on such an applied question, which directly relates to my current line of work, I feel I was better prepared to make the transition to a non-academic career.

How did you go about forming a supervisory committee that could support your dissertation project?

Having a supervisor (Professor Stephen Gardiner) who appreciates and helped pioneer more applied climate ethics work was very helpful in allowing me to put together a diverse committee and write the very applied dissertation I did. My committee had three philosophers with expertise in climate ethics, global justice, and health justice respectively. I also had two environmental politics professors and a climate policy expert on my committee. By creating an interdisciplinary committee with applied expertise, I was able to write a hands-on dissertation and get really helpful feedback to shape such a project.

What other activities did you pursue alongside your philosophy work while completing your PhD? How did you integrate your activism and academic work?

I was engaged in a lot of climate justice advocacy, including numerous fossil fuel divestment campaigns (with one successfully targeting UW), two state carbon pricing ballot initiative campaigns, and a campaign advocating for international climate finance for the global south, among other things. I managed to integrate my advocacy work with my philosophy by having my philosophy and my advocacy dovetail and focus on similar questions. Often, I would be writing about issues that myself or members of the climate justice movement were involved in advocating for; or I would do research which would then subsequently inform what advocacy I would do. That being said, there were definitely times where I felt overstretched engaging in so much advocacy on top of my PhD, teaching, research, and other commitments.

How did you approach "going on the job market" as a PhD pursuing a non-academic job?

To be honest, quite haphazardly. I only really went job searching in earnest after I finished my PhD. Fortunately, through my previous advocacy work, I had a good sense of where and how I wanted to work, good connections within the advocacy community, and quite a bit of experience there too.

What will you be doing in your current work with 350.org?

My role will be as South African Climate Justice Campaigner with 350 Africa. It will involve developing and implementing climate justice campaigns in South Africa, building alliances, coordinating research, and assisting the broader African team. For example, I am working on putting together a campaign focused on advocating for a just transition away from fossil fuels in South Africa embedded within something akin to a South African version of a green new deal.

Has growing up in South Africa shaped your climate activism?

Given its deep inequalities and historical injustices, the South African context is challenging when it comes to climate justice. In some ways, it is a microcosm of the deep inequalities that permeate climate change globally, with rich wealthy individuals and communities contributing most to the problem, and the poor and marginalized who have contributed the least being most impacted generally speaking. Such a context makes finding and advocating for truly just solutions very challenging both politically and philosophically. Growing up in South Africa definitely helped me be more acutely aware of those inequalities, and to think of climate justice with them in mind.

How does being a philosopher make you better at your job? Do you think it would be beneficial to have more
philosophy PhDs working outside the academy?

There are few disciplines where you really get to critically grapple with ideas of justice like philosophy. For my work in climate justice advocacy where there are many competing and complex ideas of justice at play, that training has been invaluable, as has been related training in philosophy of science, epistemology, political philosophy and more. I definitely think that there are many people with philosophy PhDs who would do a lot of good outside of academia applying their skills to make the world a better place. That being said, there are also some philosophers who would perhaps be best kept locked away high up in an ivory tower to prognosticate and gaze at their own navels.

For philosophy students interested in learning more about climate ethics, what are your top recommendations for articles, books, or philosophers to start with?

One of the books that initially inspired me to study climate ethics was Professor Stephen Gardiner's book A Perfect Moral Storm – I am not just saying that because he was my PhD adviser, rather he was my adviser because of that, although as my PhD dissertation attests to, he and I have a number of points of disagreement too. Some other great climate ethicists are Kyle Powys Whyte, Chris Cuomo, Henry Shue, Catriona McKinnon, Marion Hourdequin, Lauren Hartzell-Nichols, Chukwemerije Okereke, Simon Caney and John Nolt.

Do you have any advice for a prospective or current philosophy graduate student who may prefer to pursue a non-academic career?

To borrow from Kristie Dotson, find the ways that philosophy can help serve the causes or the issues that matter to you and to the world. Philosophy can be a powerful tool in service of positive change. Try and connect to communities and organizations that can help you ground your work in making change, and find out what questions you can help unpack to help serve them.

Do you have plans for continuing to engage with philosophy going forward?

Yes, I am hoping to turn my PhD dissertation into a publicly accessible book. I also hope to continue to read and write on climate ethics/justice more broadly, and teach every now and then if I can. I am not sure if I will ever be a professional academic philosopher, but I am sure philosophy will continue to play a role as I dedicate the next chapter of my life to advocating for climate justice in the short window of time we have left to avert the worst impacts of climate change.

People Involved:  Alex Lenferna
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