As you've seen from several recent posts (and more to come), the UCLA Law Emmett Institute has had an observer delegation – as we do every few years – at the 25th annual Conference of the Parties (COP25) to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC). I've been there with faculty colleagues Cara Horowitz and Alex Wang, Emmett fellow Siyi Shen, and students Tom Callahan, Divya Rao, and Idalmis Vaquero.

I'll be doing a few posts on what happened – and what didn't happen – at this COP, and trying to put it in context. In doing so, I'll also draw on some of the highlights and conclusions from the new edition of my book with Andy Dessler, which is released in North America this month. This edition is our return, after ten years to trying to give a comprehensive view of the climate issue. This required us to grapple with the extremity of changes since Copenhagen, the increased gravity of the situation, the inadequacy of current responses, and the intensity of current confusion and conflict. In future posts, I'll dig into some details about current projections of risk, and the status and prospects of different types of response.

But in this first one, I'll try to give a more personal sense of what the experience of COP25 has felt like, within my context of 35 years of work, research, and advocacy on climate change and related energy and environmental issues – including bearing witness to four prior COPs, starting with the first one in 1995 (as well as the 1992 "Earth Summit," at which the FCCC was adopted).

This dreary and distressing COP is still grinding to a close as I write from mid-Atlantic on the way home. But the overwhelming impression of the meeting has been one of intense, crazy contradictions. Contradictions of every flavor are screaming at you everywhere you turn: small and large, simple and complex, transparent and opaque, ludicrously hilarious and profoundly tragic.

To try to give you the flavor, let me pick just a few. There are …

Contradictions between the cycle of day and night, rain and sun outside, and the perpetually brightly lit busy-ness inside the meeting hall – Cara got it just right yesterday, when she likened the feeling of being inside the COP to being inside a Las Vegas casino (Oh, is it midnight already?)…

Contradictions between the characterizations of business and industry, as the causes of the problem who must above all be held accountable for the harms they have caused, and as the sources of dynamism and innovation that are essential for

any viable path forward …

Between the legal formalism of working to adopt binding international legal agreements among sovereign states, and the growing sense that multiple states – including ours – can't even hold their own polities together for effective action in their citizens' interests…

Between the plan for next year's COP to be hosted by the UK in Glasgow, and the prospect that by that time Scotland may be on its way out of the UK and the UK on its way out of the EU…

Between the US's lame-duck status, having submitted notice of withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on November 4 (to take effect November 4, 2020, coincidentally the day after the presidential election), and the US delegation's throwing its (declining) weight around, albeit with a few others, to remove all language promoting strong action from the text of proposed decisions…

Between the repeated invocations of lofty aspirational words that purport to have some shared meaning – from "just transition" to "follow the science" to "nature-based solutions," to that sneakiest of all pronouns, the generic "we" – and the sense that no one has a shared understanding or agreement what these mean, not even "we" …

Between the incremental, process-heavy, formal, tunnel-vision focus of the delegations inside the negotiation rooms, and the panic and anger of the demonstrators on the street outside…

And even among the cacophony of desperate, angry, and contradictory messages among those demonstrators – at the largest scale, between climate change as an existential crisis for human society that over-rides all other concerns, and climate change as inseparable from a long list of other present injustices and future aspirations that must all be addressed together…

And finally, between the feelings of heartbreak and rage shared by many people inside the hall as well as the demonstrators outside, and the measured, pragmatic, oh-so-sophisticated understanding that this meeting is a "small COP," never intended to be more than a modest step to complete implementation details on a deal struck four years ago. Not with a bang but a whimper. I'm an old hand at this stuff, who should be hardened to the follies with decades of experience seeing and

maneuvering among the follies and evils and compromises of the world of international policy and politics, and I've just spent the past hour crying on the flight home, thinking about what life holds for my children (and all the other children – but all you parents know that it's thinking about your own children when the knife really turns).

That's my best shot at giving a sense of what it's been like here this week. Don't you wish you were here?

To close with a comforting thought – on Wednesday I ran into my friend Pablo Suarez, who runs a climate-change and emergency response program for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. (Those of you who were with the Emmett delegation at Paris will remember Pablo, as he generously took time to speak with our students.) The work of Pablo and his colleagues saves real people's lives, every month. When I ran into him here, he was about to lead a workshop on using humor to transcend communication gulfs and resolve conflicts. (In addition to being very wise, Pablo is also hilarious.) His words: "Yes, it's madness and it's chaos, but our job is to find the good madness and the good chaos and make them a little bigger." Thank you, Pablo.

In my future posts I'll keep it less personal. I'll start with one that continues the theme of contradictions, trying to make sense of the biggest contradiction or tension of all. This is one that those of us working on climate are asked about all the time: How bad is it? Is this our last chance to avoid catastrophe? Or is it already too late? And what do those statements even mean?