

One of the most frustrating aspects about the debate over the degree to which “Wokeness” (never defined) has taken over the Academy (or not) is that it relies almost exclusively on anecdotes. Someone says or writes something ridiculous; someone else is fired for saying or writing something ridiculous (or often not ridiculous). It is very hard to get a good general picture of things.

Recently, Jon A. Shields, Yuval Avner, and Stephanie Murvachik of the Claremont Colleges (Shields and Murvachik at Claremont McKenna; Avner at Scripps) [have actually shed important light on the issue with what to my eyes is a clever method of examination](#): look at the syllabi offered in undergraduate courses. They drew on a “database of millions of syllabi, [and] explore[d] how three such subjects are taught: (1) racial bias in the criminal justice system; (2) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and (3) the ethics of abortion.”

You might well ask: what in the world is this doing on Legal Planet? It seems to me that the study has useful implications and warnings for environmental scholars – even if, as I argue below, their findings do not directly implicate some of the most hot-button environmental issues.

The authors’ findings are not hopeful. They conclude that syllabi in these three controversial areas are significantly imbalanced. On Israel/Palestine, they lean very strongly toward pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist views, only rarely providing Zionist historiography and rarely including the most prominent critics of the Israeli “New Historians.” On criminal justice Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* is the most common reading assigned; but only rarely are her critics such as Yale’s (!!) James Forman Jr. or John Pfaff ([the latter of whom has effectively demolished Alexander’s thesis](#)). On abortion, Judith Jarvis Thompson’s foundational article dominates curricula; far less often are anti-abortion voices assigned.

This does not indicate some sort of conspiracy of indoctrination. Rather, at least to me, it indicates that a sort of groupthink has permeated academia: some things just seem more plausible than others, and then you hear from others about what is important, and you get into a cocoon.

This is also how appointments work. You think a candidate is absolutely terrific and it turns out that that candidate’s work is...well...a lot like yours, now that you mention it.

So how does this relate to environmental scholarship and teaching? In subtle ways.

Let's get the obvious out of the way: this is **not** a call to teach climate denial and other anti-science theories. We don't have to teach the [phlogiston theory of combustion](#), either, and we shouldn't. Shields, Avner, and Muravchik are clear in terms of advocating for teaching scholarly debates, not having students read random twitter comments.

But I think that there is a danger about neglecting theories because they do not fit our political priors. I have spoken to several students over the years who simply do not understand the idea of discounting to present value across generations as a way of estimating climate damage, and when I explain it to them, they simply do not want to hear it. In many ways, [I don't buy it, either](#), but that isn't the point: lots of thoughtful people do, and students should understand those arguments. Similarly, I wonder if professors and students who consider climate change understand the actual costs of climate mitigation and adaptation, and are prepared to consider what they will have to give up in order to deal with it. It's not just a few billionaires ruining it for everybody.

I don't think that if one replicated the Shields et al study for environmental syllabi, one would find something as egregious as what they found, mainly because the science of climate change is so well established. But I suspect we would find trends that would not comport with our views of scholarly or pedagogical rigor. In environmental *law*, it would be far more difficult, because most environmental law classes just use casebooks, which are fairly bland. But we might be able to look at environmental law articles and see how vigorous the debates actually are.

But as a start, perhaps it is time for someone to do the Shields et al study for environmental studies. And be clear-eyed about what we might find.