

## **The Environmental Political Theory Workshop: An Oral History**

*In the summer of 2021, nine long-time participants in the Environmental Political Theory (EPT) Workshop, held annually in conjunction with the WPSA conference, gathered via Zoom to discuss their experiences over the past two decades. Our discussion centered on three questions: first, how did the workshop get started and what was the motivation for doing so?; second, what role has it played in both the development of EPT and your own professional development?; and third, what might or should the future of the workshop look like?*

*Below is an edited and heavily abridged version of our conversation.*

*Participants were:*

*Andrew Biro, Acadia University*

*Sheri Breen, University of Minnesota-Morris*

*Peter Cannavò, Hamilton College*

*Teena Gabrielson, University of Wyoming*

*Cheryl Hall, University of South Florida*

*Breana Holland, Lehigh University*

*Tim Luke, Virginia Tech*

*John Meyer, Cal Poly Humboldt*

*David Schlosberg, University of Sydney*

### **Q1: How did the EPT workshop get started; what was the motivation for doing so?**

*At the 2001 WPSA Conference, following discussion with others at WPSA excited about the emerging field of EPT, Tim Luke and John Meyer reached out to WPSA President Tim Kaufman-Osborn and Local Arrangements Chair Ted Jelen to discuss the prospect for a workshop to be held the day before future WPSA conferences. Both were encouraging and enthusiastic. It could help build attendance for the conference and was the sort of activity that was highly valued by the association. The first workshop was held in 2002 in Long Beach and was attended by approximately 30-40 people.*

*Peter Cannavò: A number of us were attending the Western regularly by the late 1990s. We found a community among political theorists exploring environmental concerns that didn't seem to exist elsewhere in the discipline or in the graduate programs that many of us just completed.*

*John Meyer: I think the fact that so many of us were recent Ph.Ds seeking a community of scholars was significant. We were working in a field that didn't have a clear identity and – especially in the US – there were only a few senior scholars in the 1990s, like Tim Luke, Bill Chaloupka, Jane Bennett, Harlan Wilson, and John Dryzek, but most of us didn't know anybody who did this kind of work in our own departments or our own graduate programs and this was before there were many opportunities for online stuff. We didn't know how to navigate professional spaces while doing this thing that some started calling environmental political theory, when nobody else even recognized what that was.*

*We were trying to model this workshop after what we saw as the very successful Feminist Theory Workshop held annually at WPSA. In fact, we organized some sessions in collaboration with their workshop, but I think early on leaders in both groups realized that we were both getting too big to bring everyone together (typically over 100 people) and still call it a workshop.*

*David Schlosberg:* The other thing that happened before all of this was that there were a series of “new books in environmental politics” panels that became sort of a standard thing that we were organizing beginning around 1997. And by 1999 we specifically started calling it “new books in environmental political theory.”

*John Meyer:* I think it was because of things like that, and the Western’s receptivity to it, that the conference became a center of gravity for many of us.

*Timothy Luke:* It was always the most receptive to unorthodox or diverse perspectives on political science.

*John Meyer:* I agree; I’ll just note that one downside of that was that once our workshop was going, modeled after the feminist theory workshop and also the Latinx politics workshop that I believe started around the same time, is that they became largely mutually exclusive events. That’s a part of an explanation for why the first few years were overwhelmingly male dominated workshops. I think we were particularly aware of the gender imbalance.

*Sheri Breen:* When I first started going I actually wanted to go to the feminist workshops too, and it was a struggle to decide where I wanted to be. Those were both compelling workshops going on that day, the other thing that I remember strongly about why I started going to EPT was that I felt I’d finally found people who were speaking my language, because I was doing such interdisciplinary things that didn’t fit into traditional political theory at all, and also people for whom ecological goals were front and center in all of what we were thinking, and that certainly isn’t true of political theory broadly so there was a community that had not been there before, and that was really important to me.

*Andrew Biro:* Yeah, I came a little bit later, so the first WPSA that I went to was in Oakland which I guess was 2005. I missed the workshop but arrived for the first day of the conference and everybody was talking about [invited guest presenters at the workshop]. I felt that I just found this kind of real intellectual community that had been lacking.

*Breana Holland:* I guess I came in 2004 so it’s actually before I graduated; Sheri were you a graduate student when you came the first time too?

*Sheri Breen:* I was teaching full time but I hadn’t defended.

*Breana Holland:* I think it was Leigh Raymond who told me about the group because he was on my dissertation committee, and he was the only person on my committee that really did much work on environmental policy. And he was kind of throwing me a lifeline by trying to connect me with a bunch of people that were interested in the same thing.

*Peter Cannavò:* Cheryl, you came in differently; you and Lisa Ellis too.

*Cheryl Hall:* Yeah, my story was different. I had a whole other life before EPT! Although it started in the very beginning with environmental issues, but then I thought I had to choose between environmental issues and political theory. Because back in the 80s, there really wasn’t a good sense that you could do something that included both, so I picked political theory and feminist theory and I did go to feminist theory workshop when I came to the Western for many years. And then I went to an EPT Panel on Climate Change on a whim in 2006. Steve Gardiner was on that panel; I don’t remember who else, but

it blew me out of the water in two ways. You know, an 'oh my God I kind of knew, but I didn't really know.' So it was a real kind of wake up epiphany of the nature of the crisis.

But it blew me out of the water in another sense, because I had no idea that you could be a political theorist or philosopher and think about these things. So I went to another panel, and it was also really, really good, so I went to another panel, and it was really good. By the time I think the conference was in Albuquerque in 2007, I just threw my whole schedule out and I ended up doing five EPT panels at that conference, and it changed everything in terms of the trajectory of my career, because I came to see that it was possible to do both.

I started going to the workshop the next year and without the workshop and the EPT Section, I don't know how I would have been able to kind of retrain myself; you know, switch gears. I almost felt like I had to kind of start over, and it was thanks to the workshop and just being able to have the conference within the conference at the Western that I was able to do that.

As Sheri intimated, it was a bit of a struggle to sacrifice the feminist theory workshop for that, but it seemed clear that this was going to give me more of the training and orientation and community that I needed.

**Q2: What role has the workshop played in the development of the field and your own development?**

*Breena Holland:* For me, I probably wouldn't have developed much professionally [without it]. I might have just bailed on academia, by now, without the workshop, because the only mentorship I've really had has come from this group. Without the workshop it wouldn't feel like such a community and there wouldn't be such an ease of access to these people and all of the contacts I made through the workshop.

The workshop is great because there's substance in the topics we take up, but I also feel like it's really an opportunity to grab people if you want to talk to them about something during the breaks and go to lunch together; and the dinners... everything makes it more possible to engage in relaxed conversation. So it seems like there's time to get to know people a little more, and there's not time during the normal conference to touch base with so many people that way. It's important to have that more relaxed time to just talk and to develop the kinds of relationships that make it comfortable to call upon people when you need help with something.

*Teena Gabrielson:* I agree; the EPT workshop has been incredibly important to my growth as a scholar. As a community it has been open, supportive, and yet challenging and productive. It has been a great place to not only meet and connect with other scholars, but to do that in a way that is consistent with the kind of mentor that I hope to be for others.

*Sheri Breen:* I think that's one of the key things. When I was making some notes in advance of this discussion, on this question, I just could keep going on and on about it.

The contributions that I think that the EPT workshop, and EPT as a community more broadly, has made to this field... the welcoming is crucial, the fact that grad students have played an integral role in the workshop every year, even though a lot of us were grad students when we founded it.

In the first few years it was a lot of the same people; we always added a few new people, but it didn't grow rapidly. Then the grad students started coming in and we started actively inviting them ...not just actively, but almost aggressively inviting them!

And they shifted everything. I think the role of grad students and the openness and welcoming of grad students has really been important and that ties that to another point – that this workshop has helped define collaboratively what EPT can include and that's been a welcoming, broad based thing. For me, and I think for a lot of us, the discussions about our own research and where we're going has been educational, enlightening, and provocative. It's really shifted me to think about areas that I would not have otherwise thought of. Teena, your work has prompted me to think about the body, for example, in ways that I had not. It really helped to incorporate that into my own work. This has happened again and again and it's been through not just collaboration, but anti-cliquey collaboration; a very welcoming collaboration.

*Peter Cannavò:* I totally agree with that. I compare it to some of the other groups in political theory and I think this group has been very down to earth – no pun intended!

I get the sense that a lot of the graduate students who've been involved in the workshop have actually gotten jobs in this really tight market, and I wonder if the support that we've given them has really helped with that.

You know, Tim, you were a mentor to me when I was finishing grad school. It was a time when it was really difficult for me to feel like what I was doing was worthwhile. So I think that this group has been terrific.

*David Schlosberg:* I think the mentoring has been crucial. I mean, I was lucky as a grad student to work with John Dryzek, who showed that you could actually do political theory and environment together. I think it's been a really important part of the group and the workshop to illustrate that to students and... the collegiality; there's just nothing like it elsewhere in the discipline as far as I've seen. But the other thing I think that's crucial is that we've helped legitimize the field. Showing that you can publish and you know, the relationships members of this group have built with MIT Press, for example, Oxford U.P. and other presses ...just showing that this is an important area in political theory.

Not just for publication, but also in the job market. I remember people telling me when I got a job, at Northern Arizona University [in 1996] that was in environment and political theory, that they've not seen anything like that. And afterward more jobs were designed like that. As that happened it legitimized this as an area of political theory for other departments as well.

*John Meyer:* I think everybody here contributed to the Oxford Handbook [of Environmental Political Theory]. That would not have happened without the workshop. The structure of it was brainstormed at the workshop, the contents were to a large degree identified there, and as David says I think it has played a legitimating role but also defining role in what the field is and can be in the future. And I think that's probably true as much for people outside of the workshop as inside of it. I'd like to believe that, at least.

*Sheri Breen:* The workshop has been the instigator and source of some high quality work, including edited volumes with high impact publishers.

*Breana Holland:* I think it's hard to overestimate the impact of that legitimizing role for graduate students. In my case, I didn't even really realize it until later. I didn't realize how significant that was to what I was doing because the group normalized the kind of work I do. Then, after I got a job, I remember one of my colleagues at Lehigh said, "You know when I was hired here there weren't even people who did work like you do in the discipline." That was when it hit me that EPT is sort of newly accepted by "normal" political science departments.

So an important value was that it diminished the tendency to constantly be questioning myself and the kind of work I was trying to do--you do enough of that as a graduate student all the time, right? And so, when you feel like there's this community of people to support you who are doing similar things, and that you're a part of a network, it's just really significant given how hard it is to just sort of get through a PhD and then get through tenure.

*David Schlosberg:* You're reminding me, you know, one of the political theorists on my dissertation committee very early on was trying to convince me not to do anything on environment or environmental justice. She said you'll never get that published and she wanted me to write on Grotius instead. I will never forget that, but her argument was that this is not a thing... like Grotius!

*Cheryl Hall:* I have spent some time trying to think about why this community might be different and I'm not sure I have a full answer but it does strike me that the salience of the issues themselves are just so front and center that the the kind of cliquishness and the competitive academic posturing just kind of takes a backseat. I don't know why that isn't true as much in some other areas where the issues are really important too, but for whatever reason, I do think that one thing that has really drawn me and made me feel good about this community is that it's been very non-competitive. And really focused on the right stuff; the subject, the content, the point of the work. Maybe I shouldn't even make comparisons, let's just say it feels like it's very much in the right hierarchy.

*Sheri Breen:* There's an irony here in the fact that you know we are congratulating ourselves here! Any group that's talking about the origin and path of a community or workshop that it started might want to do the same thing. But the fact is what we're also doing is delineating what our goals were and to what extent we actually have not only met those goals, but added to them and clarified the importance of those goals and so I'm fine with self congratulation and thinking about what we've done because I think the way in which we've figured out what some of the possibilities are and brought people into it and given them avenues that they can pursue within academia has been not commonplace.

*David Schlosberg:* Yeah, can I just add that I think there's a flip side to the support and the mentoring and that is something like anti-cruelty. Sheri sort of hinted at this but you know just the nastiness and the cutthroat and the unnecessary criticism that is common and that graduate students in particular will often experience at conferences presenting their first papers, I mean we've been consciously and deliberately against that.

*Timothy Luke:* This is reflected in the larger institutional culture of the Western too. I think it's the least pompous and hierarchy reinforcing; it's always been very welcoming. As an association it features EPT as well as the annual review of budgeting in the western states. That's quite a spectrum of topics and there's something very unusual about the way that it's welcoming of those who often have been made to feel somewhat unwelcome at other meetings.

*Breana Holland:* One thing that has fostered that at the workshops is that we do stuff in the community. Or we sometimes bring organizations in to talk to us, which gives it this sort of values-at-the-center feeling and I'm always marveling at how engaged everybody is with those experiences. I mean they're really interesting and productive for thinking differently and creatively about whatever it is that I'm presenting at the workshop that year. I think it keeps us kind of attached to reality and place.

*David Schlosberg:* I think that's a really crucial part of the workshop - to find out what's happening in the places that we go so that we're not just sitting in the same business hotel that looks like every other business hotel. It's that part of the workshop, exactly as Breana says, that's a grounding mechanism. It also legitimizes that those issues and those activists and those places are areas of study and subjects for this scholarship as well.

*Andrew Biro:* I think those activist workshops and the pedagogy sessions in particular also give it more of a sense of collective enterprise, rather than just our own individual research projects. I also feel like often the workshop kind of sets a tone or a theme for a discussion at a lot of the panels over the following conference that is reflecting back on these things that happened at the workshop.

All of this makes us see other participants as more multi-dimensional. You're not just hearing 15 minutes about a particular research project but you're also hearing about how people teach; how people are engaging these activist projects, all these other kinds of things.

*Cheryl Hall:* I do want to name one thing: For the sake of this conversation we're identifying what is good about the workshop and by definition we're missing the folks who aren't here, so by definition we're missing potential voices that might have a different perspective. So I don't know whether everybody feels as welcomed, as I did, and have. I just want to name that because there's not really a good way to represent that short of doing some kind of survey.

*Peter Cannavò:* I think one thing that's also been true is we're almost all white and that I think is something we talked about in the past, but if we consider that a goal or an objective we had was to make this more inclusive that's definitely not something we've achieved. So in terms of inclusion, I think that is something that we need to really think about, especially as the field is becoming more inclusive in terms of climate justice. I think climate activism and environmental activism is becoming more inclusive and I'd like us as a group to really be reflecting that.

### **Q3: What might or should the future of the EPT workshop look like?**

*John Meyer:* I think both those points that Cheryl and Peter made are powerful and important, and maybe also a segue to thinking about what the future of the workshop might look like. I should also acknowledge, though, that those of you who are here today are those who have been sort of involved in the workshop since the early years.

And so, to some extent, in addition to the challenges of race and inclusion, we're the old fogies of the group at this point. Or the ones left standing and the ones that keep coming back from year to year. So that's a self selection process that to some degree reflects the question that we were asked to address for this WPSA history, which is how this workshop evolved. but I do think it's a limitation when we consider the future. If the workshop is a continued success it'll be because it speaks to other folks who are not part of our conversation today.

*Breana Holland:* One challenge is that sometimes the workshop is really big now, and I feel like that takes something away.

I think it would be valuable to think about how to structure it in ways that allow us to keep the small, closer, community feel. Maybe smaller groups or something like that, so we don't lose that sense of community, as it seems to just keep growing. Am I wrong about that? Isn't it just getting increasingly big?

*Sheri Breen:* not wrong; it's a very mixed blessing.

*Peter Cannavò:* Have we reached the point of breakout sessions?

*Breana Holland:* Not on zoom I hope. In person, it's OK.

*John Meyer:* It certainly has grown. Not exponentially, but you know we're getting to that point where, pre-pandemic, it was more than 50 people each year and that's hard. I think there's two somewhat distinct issues. One is that 50 or more people is just hard to have that kind of dialogue and conversation, but I suspect that many of us know that we're often in classroom settings with 50 people that can feel somewhat more intimate. So the other is actually driven by the way that these corporate hotels structure the room we're in. You have this big rectangle with vast empty space in the middle and horrible acoustics. It could be 30 people, and we still can't hear each other half the time with the air conditioner noise and everything. It could be better with the same number of people, or it could be that we need to find ways to do breakout sessions and have smaller groups, and I think both of those things might be true.

*Sheri Breen:* One way in which large rooms of people in classrooms work is with circular tables so that you're sitting at a table with no more than 10 people. It has advantages and disadvantages, but you do get to see who you're sitting with and have conversations that way.

*Teena Gabrielson:* I think Cheryl's work with the virtual communities clearly extends the workshop and creates legs for the work we do there. The virtual sessions are exciting opportunities to connect, to stay intellectually engaged, and to meet new people.

*John Meyer:* Shout out, too, to Jamie Mayerfeld who helped make that happen, and in particular to Gwen Ottinger and Ross Mittiga who have been leading the virtual EPT workshop for the past year and I think really made that into a space that has attracted new folks.

*David Schlosberg:* I do think that one of the goals has to be to diversify the group. The virtual EPT group is one important way to do that. Not just racial diversity, but geographic diversity as well. It's a way to try and bring in people from the South and folks that wouldn't normally come to the West into the discussion.

*Sheri Breen:* Also economic diversity, because some can't afford to go to in-person conferences, or not very often.

*John Meyer:* I wanted to invite Sheri, who wrote this great – she says selfish – comment, but I think it's the opposite of that, to share that here so that we can record it and that may be as good as any place for us to start wrapping this up.

*Sheri Breen:* One of the points that was very important to me, was how important this community is; what a group of really good people, these are. People I really care about and I love being with. It's not just old friends that you can go see at any conference, but I always come away with a notebook full of ideas, you know my moleskine just grows every year. I keep those notes, I feel provoked and inspired and appreciated. So that's why the Western has become virtually non negotiable.

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*Breana Holland:* Can I raise just one question, because we're supposed to be wrapping up and I guess that I kind of interpreted the last question about the future of the workshop to be maybe more about content. Like, what are the kinds of things we want to take on, given the state of the world and the ongoing failure to address environmental issues in a serious way.

Is there a role that the workshop can play, or is there something that we think is really important to be talking about in the future? I just feel we are at this crisis point, as the West is burning, and we just had the worst air quality in the State of Pennsylvania in decades due to the particulates coming from the fires. That should lead us to think about content at the workshop in some way. Not that I have an idea, but just wanted to throw it out there before we take off.

*Andrew Biro:* One other thing in terms of content, that connects back to the earlier point about diversity, is indigenisation. Certainly, in Canada there's an increasing sense that you really can't talk about environmental issues without also talking about indigeneity and decolonisation and so weaving that into the workshop I think is important.

*Sheri Breen:* In terms of indigeneity, I'm remembering back to the one we did in Vancouver in which there was a really strong element of the day devoted to that topic. That can be something to keep in mind for local components of future EPT workshops as well.

*David Schlosberg:* These two sorts of issues that people have been talking about: emergency and turbulence and disruption on the one hand and decolonization and more diversification on the other aren't mutually exclusive, and one of the things that we've been doing is talking about the experience of cultures and countries that have already done a lot of adaptation. So there's plenty of examples there.

*Our conversation ended with many highlighting the innovative scholarship and energy of many newer participants in the EPT workshop, suggesting excitedly that it will continue to grow and evolve in the future.*