

# The 'new' climate politics of Extinction Rebellion?

**Creating a movement that can have the impact XR aims for will require confronting the political as well as the moral challenges posed by climate change.**

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During October and November 2018, a new environmental campaign called Extinction Rebellion (XR) has attracted widespread mainstream media attention in the UK, with its call to 'Fight for Life' in the face of an ['unprecedented global emergency'](#).

Currently, it is trying to set up chapters in many other parts of Europe and the US as well. A series of high profile actions, including a blockade of the UK government's Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy culminated on Saturday, November 17, in a day of mass civil disobedience, as 6000 activists shut down five major road bridges [over the Thames in central London](#).

For those following the histories of protest, this type of action is nothing new. But it does appear that XR is currently able to attract exceptional attention and participation. Part of this might be due to timing. In October, two devastating reports on the global environment were published: the latest IPCC report made it clear that there would have to be major and immediate social and economic changes to [keep global warming below 1.5°C](#). Then, WWF released its annual *The Living Planet* report which showed an average decline of [60% in vertebrate species populations since 1970](#). At the same time, long prison sentences for three protesters who had disrupted fracking for shale gas in Lancashire received major national coverage, although [their sentences were later overturned on appeal](#). In addition, the election of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil, and in particular his plans for the Amazon, deepened the sense of crisis.

Making use of this perfect media storm, XR's ['Declaration of Rebellion' on 31 October](#) was supported by well-known UK environmentalists including Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, journalist George Monbiot, and the ex-Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

But there have been many moments of global attention for environmental crisis before, and these have not led to this kind or scale of mobilisation. So what, if anything, sets the 'extinction rebellion' apart from previous campaigns? There are at least three ways in which XR occupies a remarkable position in this context, relating to its framing of the problem, its understanding of who has the responsibility for taking action to deal with it, and its strategic call for making those responsible act (or as social movement scholars like to call it: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing).

## Catastrophism and disaster

Firstly, in its framing of the climate problem, XR is exploring new ground for an environmental movement in the UK. While environmental movements typically combine *urgency* and *optimism* ('if we act now, we can still solve this problem'), XR is clearly emphasising catastrophism and disaster ([‘We will not be led quietly to annihilation by the elites and politicians’](#), write the group).

During one of its actions this month, XR activists hung a banner from Westminster Bridge in London bearing the legend: ‘Climate Change: We’re Fucked.’ In many of its public statements, it embraces the importance of grieving for the losses humanity has already endured and still faces. In so doing, XR echoes the aims of other groups, like Dark Mountain, which already in 2009 placed acceptance, grief, and coping as central to its aims.

Yet XR remains committed to battling climate change, as if to say: we’re screwed, but we still have a choice, even if it is only a choice over how bad it will get. While somewhat awkward, this framing may resonate well with the emotional experience of many who are concerned with climate change and mass extinction today; people who feel trapped between a sense that they’re fighting for a hopeless cause (especially considering the lock-in effect of so-called ‘tipping points’), and a refusal to accept defeat and its planetary implications.

While XR’s talk of extinction and annihilation is arresting, it is also depoliticising: it frames the question as a *moral* one which affects us all equally, passing over the questions of who is most vulnerable to climate change, over the power structure of climate politics, and over questions of history and justice, debt and inequality.

It has already been criticized for this framing. Referring to XR’s apocalyptic message on the banner it dropped on Westminster Bridge, Jamie Henn of 350.org argued that [“It is one thing to say such things from the safety of London, but it’s another if you are living on the frontline of climate impacts. Some people don’t have the privilege to give up.”](#)

In this way, XR breaks with recent radical climate actions in the UK which have explicitly sought to connect public policy and consumption practices with questions of social class, poverty, ethnic minority exclusion, and neo-colonialism. [Activists](#) who occupied the runway at Heathrow in July 2015 stressed that whilst ‘the victims of climate change are black and brown poor communities in the global South’, those who benefit from airport expansion are [‘a tiny elite’](#).

Activists who did likewise at London City airport in September 2016 did so because [‘climate change is a racist crisis’](#). Many of the activists currently on trial in Chelmsford, and facing a maximum penalty of life imprisonment for blocking a Home Office [deportation flight at Stansted in March 2017](#), have a history of activism in environmental campaigns, such as over university fossil fuel divestment and BP’s sponsorship of the Tate. XR may be a different type of campaign; but it is nonetheless remarkable that it does not address issues of inequality and justice.

This is probably a tactical choice: XR aims to keep its message focused on the urgency of climate action to maximise support from across the political spectrum. But inevitably a mobilisation of this kind is open to others with alternative framings. For example, mid-November actions in London included civil disobedience at the Brazilian embassy, coordinated with LGBTQI activists and Brazilian Women Against Fascism UK. And in XR's occupation of London bridges campaigners from Mongolia, West Papua, Bangladesh and Ghana spoke about the impact of climate change, colonialism, and fossil fuel [corporations on the Global South](#). Thus whatever the aim of XR's initiators, political questions of justice will arise in protests about climate change.

### **'bringing the (nation) state back in'**

Beyond its diagnostic framing, secondly, XR is also somewhat exceptional in its understanding of responsibility. Its tactics represent a break with recent trends towards DIY (Do It Yourself) environmentalism. Faced with decades of inadequate government policy, many citizens have embraced types of action that pursue a direct positive effect on environmental goods, such as by adopting or promoting more sustainable lifestyles, or by opposing environmental bads through direct action against things like open cast coal mining and fracking. Though very different, both DIY-strategies share the virtue of not appealing to, and relying on, governmental action, instead preferring unmediated intervention.

But this DIY approach is seen by many to have important shortcomings, especially in terms of the scale and endurance of effects: neither the adoption of more virtuous behaviours by individual citizens, nor the accomplishment of targeted acts of obstruction or property destruction are based on the successful and sustained public mobilization of large enough numbers of people. Nor is there, in the eyes of XR, evidence that large NGOs or green parties can respond effectively to current ecological crises as it has recently also challenged [the mainstream environmental movement for its failures](#) (occupying the offices of Greenpeace UK).

In raising questions about scale, the importance of government policy is underlined. Some have therefore begun to argue that states' apparent inability to address environmental issues should not be taken for granted: who says governments aren't so much unable, but rather simply unwilling, to act? Even though XR has found some (such as the Green Party politician Jenny Jones) who are willing to say that conventional politics has failed, XR squarely puts the responsibility to act back with the government. XR is not direct action so much as indirect action: forcing the government to act is the clear aim of its actions and demands.

XR is thus part of a trend to 'bring the (nation) state back in': for a long time, scholars, NGOs, media and politicians, have placed the onus of climate action in the international arena (if not with consumers' individual responsibility), expecting global governance institutions like the UN climate change convention (UNFCCC) to come up with solutions to the climate crisis.

Yet in the lead in to the 2015 Paris climate summit (COP21), we increasingly saw climate activists [reject any possibility of the UNFCCC solving the climate crisis](#). Equally, other state and non-state actors have increasingly embraced the notion that states should lead on

climate action, and that the main role of international arenas is to coordinate 'nationally determined commitments' (NDCs).<sup>[1]</sup> Whilst XR's demands are far removed from this type of institutional language, it also adopts a strategy that relies on the state to address climate change.

## Unusual suspects

Finally, XR stands out in how it seeks to make governments accept these responsibilities. Instead of using traditional forms of lobbying or climate marches to advance policy change, XR promotes the widespread use of mass civil disobedience. There are precedents in recent climate activism, such as the sit-in outside the White House in 2011 to protest the [Keystone XL Pipeline](#). And similar to the annual ["Ende Gelände" shut down of open cast lignite coal mines in Germany](#), one main goal in these protests has been to get concerned citizens from outside the hard core of environmentalists to engage in more radical tactics.

Doing this is designed to have two effects: to legitimize a strategy otherwise considered the terrain of radicals, and to increase exposure. This may indeed be one of the reasons why XR is now attracting so much attention.

At the action at the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, one grandfather who participated in a street blockade explained on XR's Facebook livestream that he had never done anything like this before, but that he feared the looming crisis more than being arrested or imprisoned. He also indicated that XR was giving great support for those who wanted to try this type of action. Providing both motivation and support, XR seeks to enable the 'unusual suspects' to escalate environmental activism.

But it is also important to note that XR is pursuing a particular kind of civil disobedience. XR provides training and emphasises the importance of being accountable for your actions; effectively, this means accepting arrest and trial, and preparing yourself psychologically for prison. Part of the aim appears to be to create a crisis by filling the jails.

For a while, this 'newness' may attract media attention, but a classic lesson for social movements is that this effect wears off over time. The media gets used to a certain repertoire, which in turn loses its news-worthiness. The authorities adjust by changing their practices. They might for example not press charges against those they arrest; or they might make the experience of containment or arrest more unpleasant.

Activists are then faced with a series of difficult strategic decisions, from renouncing their previously successful attention-winning tactics, to engaging in a media-driven 'arms race' of increasingly spectacular actions. How XR navigates these decisions may determine its future.

## Mass movement?

XR fits in a longstanding tradition of transgressive environmental action; but it is also novel in the British and wider European context, notably in its emphasis on grief, its alarmism, and

its privileging of moral action over political analysis, as well as its emphasis on demanding action from government through civil disobedience.

This is perhaps precisely what makes the campaign so potent now. Its success in getting thousands of people to undertake civil disobedience is impressive, but as with any new movement, it remains to be seen whether it can maintain this momentum, particularly in the absence of an underpinning mass membership.

Of course, XR's stated aim is to build a mass movement. This month's events may have kick-started this, and like all movements, if it develops, it will come in part from existing networks. But creating a movement that can have the impact XR aims for will require confronting the political as well as the moral challenges posed by climate change. First and foremost, to achieve XR's aim of reducing actual (not 'net') carbon emissions to zero by 2025, there will need to be other kinds of democratic political action beyond a demand that governments act.