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Taking Political Time: Thinking Past the Emergency Timescapes of the New Climate Movements

Abstract

This article discusses the contrasting “temporal regimes” of Extinction Rebellion and the Feminist Green New Deal. We discuss the former’s emphasis on emergency in order to stimulate disobedient action, particularly out of concern for one’s future children and grandchildren. We argue that whilst this emphasis has successfully catalyzed public agency, this agency remains socially narrow, as emergency thinking subordinates the political time central to inclusive movement building, whilst the personalization of intergenerational concern risks reproducing privilege and asset protection. As a result, actually existing material and symbolic inequalities are characteristically de-centered. We contrast this with the timescapes of calls for a Feminist Green New Deal, which eschew both crisis narratives and reprocentric futurism. In troubled times, we argue, it is more productive to reconsider not just when but *how* to address the demands of climate breakdown.

Keywords: temporal regime; emergency; crisis; intergenerational justice; reprocentricity; Extinction Rebellion; Feminist Green New Deal

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Taking Political Time: Thinking Past the Emergency Timescapes of the New Climate Movements

Since late 2018, a new wave of climate activism has generated extensive political and media attention in the UK, most prominently through a series of youth strikes, and the staging of mass non-violent civil disobedience actions by Extinction Rebellion (XR). This wave marks a break with seemingly dominant trends in climate activism, in that it re-centers the institutions of the nation state as the locus of political change (as opposed to global summits or direct action activism), and privileges the public political agency of citizens (rather than their private lifestyle choices or actions through the market). Just as distinctive, however, is XR's centering of a long-standing feature of environmental discourse, that of emergency and apocalyptic framing (McNeish 2017, de Moor 2021). Launched in the wake of a landmark IPCC report which predicted that global heating would exceed 1.5°C between 2030 and 2052 unless rapid and concerted action were taken to reduce emissions (IPCC 2018), XR has explicitly cast climate change as a planetary emergency, demanding that we "act now" for the sake of future generations, and halt a "sixth mass extinction" (see for example Extinction Rebellion 2019; Grossman 2020).

In this essay, we discuss XR's emergency discourse, drawing on what Gillan and Edwards have identified as a movement's "temporal regime" (2020: 504). By this they mean both how activists make sense of the "timescape" in which movements move (e.g., neoliberal timescapes); and how they understand their connection to the past, present, and future (503). We suggest that the temporal regimes of climate movements can shed light on a movement's underlying ideology, as differing regimes inform differing strategies and actions. In the case of XR, we argue that its public mobilization capacity has been characterized by a temporal regime foregrounding two interlocking conceptions of time: on the one hand, the emergency time of citizen action; on the other, the imminent future time of the collective consequences of inaction, faced with the likely devastating impacts to health, livelihoods, vital resources, and human security outlined by the IPCC. In what might be called a "timescape of Anthropocene anxiety," only emergency action can forestall looming catastrophe. Because the planet's future is so bleak, the slogans go, we must 'act now!' in order to preserve the lives of our children and our children's children from intolerable conditions.

We problematize the dominant temporal regime mobilized by XR in the UK, positioning it within wider thinking about action, crisis, and futurity. We argue that this temporal regime has likely been key to successful public mobilization, notably catalyzing a wave of climate emergency declarations by UK local councils following XR's first mass public "Rebellion" in April 2019, which disrupted parts of central London for almost two weeks, featured over a thousand arrests, and inspired numerous similar movements across the globe. Yet we argue that XR's emphasis on emergency/futurity has also served to decenter vital political processes and critical reflections on immediate questions of justice and materiality. Whilst XR's championing of citizens' assemblies affords a privileged place to collective deliberation, its calls to emergency action – notably through civil disobedience – are predicated on both the rejection of the "democratic time" of existing representative processes and, as we discuss below, what Sarah Amsler (2010) terms the "political time" of inclusive movement building. The effect, we argue, means that there is *no time* for actually existing injustices, whilst questions of recognition and distributive justice are downplayed or displaced. This is most apparent in the group's adoption of civil disobedience strategies, and in its focus on – as a March 2019 action outside Downing Street was called – "the blood of our children".

At the time of writing, XR appears to be entering a period of relative demobilization, at least in terms of mass public actions.¹ In the final part of the essay, we accordingly focus on the feminist climate justice movement to emphasize alternate possibilities for understanding action and temporality, and the importance of centering material needs and practices in transversal movement-building processes. With echoes of what Donna Haraway calls “staying with the trouble,” we argue that this movement offers both alternative imaginaries and disruptive potential for activism in a “thick present” (2016: 1). We emphasize the importance of “taking political time,” and maintain that collective social responses to major climate impacts must center actually existing material and symbolic inequalities, and place procedural and distributive justice at the heart of transformative action. This is so even where climate change will have devastating physical and social consequences.

Emergency, Futurity, Exclusivity

XR’s strength has been to develop a mass mobilization strategy capable of harnessing public anxiety at social breakdown. Key to its success has been its capacity to translate this anxiety into a moral purpose, fostering citizen action from often highly personalized and proximate concerns. Attending the court hearings of XR activists who had been arrested for acts of civil disobedience at the April 2019 “London Rebellion,” we were struck by the way that ordinary activists justified their lawbreaking as a contractual relationship with their own children, replacing the social contract broken by the state. As one activist explained, “To uphold my contract with my children, I acted to shame the government to honor its part of the contract to stop climate change and species extinction” (see Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020). In Hyde Park in April 2022, at the start of XR’s fifth major “Rebellion”, organizers explicitly asked activists to visualize somewhere or someone specific, to “think about people and places you love,” and where they would be in twenty years, as a motivation for their action. Home-made placards repeatedly emphasized this personalization: “I refuse to leave to my children a dying world just because our leaders won’t follow scientific advice!!”; “I’m here for my daughter Hallie. I cannot look in her in the eye and say I did nothing to protect her future”; “I am here for my grandchildren Millie, Noah, Maya and Harrison and all the people and animals who will starve, burn or drown if we don’t ACT NOW”.² Some displayed pictures of their children or grandchildren; many emphasized motherhood, fatherhood, grandparenthood.

In this way, XR fosters public agency by making the coming catastrophe proximate, giving it a material, personal, and emotional form. For ordinary activists, agency consequently lies in acting, now – by facing the state directly and publicly, through disobedient action and (for some) arrest. For XR, this disobedient action is in the tradition of the US civil rights movement, often citing the 1961 Freedom Riders, underlining mass arrest as a means of escalating non-violent tension, ultimately leading to policy change. Here, breaking the law is justified by these claims to historical legitimacy, by the proven results that arrest can bring, and by the intolerable urgency of the situation. This intolerable urgency stands in contrast to the slow, open-ended, and provisional character of what could be called “democratic time”: because this is an emergency, citizens do not have time to wait for the established processes of negotiation and interest mediation, and are

¹ XR’s fifth mass ‘Rebellion’, organised in London in April 2022, attracted between 3000 and 4000 people on the first day (in our observation), producing 39 arrests, and causing little sustained disruption.

² All names have been changed

justified therefore in disrupting representative democratic process (see Humphrey 2006; Sommier, Hayes and Ollitrault 2019).

In the case of XR, these co-constructive timeframes of emergency/futurity serve together therefore to forestall the indeterminacy of the political process; action must take precedence over process. Yet emergency timeframes do not just short-circuit representative democratic processes; they also short-circuit the space required for the analysis of the operation of power and its multiple social exclusions. There is a paradox here. On the one hand, XR often expresses a commitment to racial climate justice, despite its absence from XR's founding goals. On the other, XR's insistence on emergency timeframes effectively crowds out the possibility of building that justice. To be sure, this paradox is not exclusive to XR; it is shared, for example, by many climate justice movements. Yet crucially, XR's understanding of emergency time is not built on a shared materiality of lived experience, or an understanding of suffering already endured within the history of that struggle, as it was for the US civil rights movement, or for indigenous peoples; rather, it is an imagined future, a projected shared fate at the planetary, "mass extinction" level.

This imagined future is of course far from a shared fate. Somewhat tellingly, XR's public agency appears rarely shared by marginalized communities, or even a broadly representative cross-section of the British public. As our survey of XR activists at the April and October 2019 "Rebellions" shows, those participating in XR actions are likely to stem from a highly-educated middle-class constituency, whilst those risking arrest are overwhelmingly white (Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020). A series of incidents in 2019 reinforced the sense that XR's arrest tactics lacked an analysis of state power and racialized policing, or an understanding of or interest in intersectionality, or the multiple, overlapping, but also distinctive nature of social inequalities and the unequal access to voice and agency. As we note elsewhere, for many on the left and in active social movement networks, these arrest-based protest tactics seemed "consciously designed to marginalize and exclude people of color and from working-class communities" (Doherty and Hayes 2023).

XR has notably responded to some of these criticisms by affording increased prominence to demands and voices emanating from the Global South. Reparative justice is of course a vital element of climate justice, and testimony to the development of dialogue between XR and climate justice movements after 2019. Yet the temporal regime of emergency, and the understanding of extinction as a future event (rather than one already lived), remains problematic. As Kyle Whyte argues, the problem is that bureaucratic emergency management processes characteristically reproduce the very colonial practices and policies that previously opened up indigenous territories for exploitation, as they silence indigenous voices. For indigenous peoples, the effect of emergency action is therefore one of "*going back to the future*" (2017: 156).

There remains however a sense of displacement about the location of justice in XR discourse, so that temporally, it is telescoped into the future, and spatially, across continents. But where justice does not seem to lie in XR discourse is in the intersecting material struggles of poverty and exclusion in Britain today. There are over 2200 food banks in the UK;³ four decades of neo-liberalism have not just brought climate breakdown and political disenfranchisement, but have brought about and are structured upon insecure work, unaffordable rents, and high levels of personal and generational debt. The post-austerity development of a new (in so far as it is newly explicit) majoritarian conservative politics is positioned on the silencing of the voices and experiences of groups and communities minoritized by intersections of class, race, and gender. As XR has emerged over the last three to five years, it has rarely engaged with these constitutive

³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8585/>

elements of Britain's post-liberal democratic politics, positioning itself (particularly in its early actions) as "beyond politics". Whilst it has increasingly targeted government and fossil fuel companies in its actions, XR has not developed a critique of how climate inequalities, vulnerabilities, and exclusions are produced through the operation of political and economic power. Ultimately, it has thus separated its own understanding of the urgency of the situation from a critique of the forces that are active agents in the actual production of social breakdown.

The Importance of Political Time

Sarah Amsler notes that the exploitation of crisis thinking to motivate action can serve to close down experimentation, analysis, and inclusion. Of the deployment of future catastrophe in climate narratives, she writes:

instead of exposing the indeterminacy of futures this approach recommends a sort of materialist fatalism in which catastrophic phenomena are regarded as naturally occurring, with predictable and uniform effects on an undifferentiated mass of subjects. There is no room here for a theory of political time, of a temporality which assumes the openness of the future, reconstruction of the past, or power of human and nonhuman intervention to shape the world. (Amsler 2010: 136)

For Amsler, "political time", the open-ended time of re-shaping the world, is subordinated by the power of crisis narratives, such that collective agency is reduced to a motivation to protect material and corporeal self-interest. If emergency action stands in opposition to the "democratic time" of representative democratic process, it thus stands equally in opposition to the "political time" of building other worlds.

Emergency time can, of course, be effective in mobilizing a constituency. XR's statements frequently make reference to some version of the house being on fire, a discursive framing which has enabled public mobilization around the fear of catastrophe; yet it is important again to ask who the constituency mobilized is. Uncomfortably, the image of the "house on fire" may also act as an implicit call to safeguard particular residents ("our children") and personal assets ("our homes"), especially when made as a heteronormative appeal towards a class constituency whose capacity for social reproduction is invested in precisely this form of property ownership and generational transmission. As Sarah Jaquette Ray (2021) notes, the class of people with high levels of "climate anxiety" and high resources will also be the last to suffer serious climate-induced loss and damage.

If building political time is central to building future worlds, this raises two fundamental questions. The first concerns access to political and material resources in the future, or the distributive contours of intergenerational justice. This is a question of liberal principles of justice, which hold that as the precise timing of one's birth is a morally arbitrary circumstance, the interests of future generations must weigh equally in present decisions. For John Rawls, it is enough for collective fairness to be achieved that each should be motivated by concern for the wellbeing of a specific future individual, so that "for everyone in the next generation, there is someone who cares about him in the present generation"; in this way, "the interests of all are looked after," and "the whole strand is tied together" (1971: 128–129).

Equally, it is a question of the material conditions of resource sustainability. Yet if the protection of a common pool resource so that future generations "should not be worse off than we are" (Barry 1997: 54) is a necessary condition of justice, we may argue that it is nonetheless not a

sufficient condition of justice; for as a reading of *Tragedy of the Commons* (Hardin 1968) shows, resource protection can be advocated for through aggressive (and racialized) exclusionary practices. These practices include securitized bordering and asset privatization, so that future resources are preserved through their appropriation by dominant social forces for their own exclusive use. In this sort of scenario, resource sustainability derives from a form of social grandfathering, a locking-in of privilege: those who already have access to resources are able to maintain access for future versions of themselves, whilst those who currently do not enjoy access have no such legacy to bequeath.

The second question concerns access to political and material resources in the “now” of collective agency, which shapes groups’ agency over the first question. The reliance on an intergenerational moral duty in climate discourse presents “reprocentricity” as another form of exclusion. As Emma Foster (2021: 94) argues, calls to protect the climate/environment for the sake of “our” children and grandchildren is “limited to only those who have had, or who plan to have, children, thereby invisibilizing care for the environment that is not rooted in having a genetic stake in the future.” As such, the discursive focus on future generations assumes that individuals will be motivated to protect only that which their biological offspring will need for survival. This, she maintains, is “a very precarious environmental ethic where only the aspects of nature perceived to be useful to sustain the life of human offspring generally, and one’s own genetic futurity specifically, are considered worthy of conservation” (*ibid*). Excluded from this ethic are all those not included within the heteronormative reproductive frame.

Faced with current and future biophysical impacts of climate change, we argue therefore that for the “strand to be tied together” requires more than an ethics of emergency action through personalized commitment to future offspring. It requires instead a commitment to political time, an analysis of power, an embrace of indeterminacy, and a commitment to patiently “staying with the trouble”. What matters are the recognitional, procedural, and distributive principles which underpin access to voice and resources now and in globally heated futures, and to what extent this involves material and symbolic redistributions and re-orderings of relations of power. This requires embodied, material and socio-structural thinking, and an understanding and analysis of the lived experiences of different and multiple social groups. In its absence, movements are not able to do more than reflect dominant social arrangements, and project existing exclusions into the future.

Ways Forward in Troubled Times

It is important therefore to ask how depoliticizing discourses of emergency/futurity might open up spaces for a return to political imaginaries that foreground longstanding questions of material inequality and injustice. For it is not unreasonable, in theory nor in practice, to voice demands for redressing current injustices as loudly as expressing hope for better futures for coming generations. As Haraway observes, “in urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe”; but what is needed instead is her concept of staying with the trouble: “eschewing futurism”, stirring up “potent responses to devastating events” and developing collaborations with diverse others (2016: 4). Here, then, slow and painstaking movement building remains paramount. In contrast to the “game-over” attitude, what is needed is a political process, involving an understanding of climate justice as something which does not just affect future generations and the world’s most vulnerable states (which it does), but directly affects marginalized, working class and minority communities in the here and now, and which calls for a publicly transformative, intersectional, and redistributive politics.

Less known than XR, the global feminist climate justice movement has been developing over several years and is active in many parts of minority and majority worlds. From around 2018, a coalition of organizations known as the Feminist Economic Justice for People & Planet Action Nexus has emerged to demand structural change and a sustainable future for all species. With no named leaders and an expressed commitment to centering the fluid leadership of Indigenous women and front-line communities, the movement operates via transnational networks and mobilizes to exert pressure at UN climate meetings and mass climate protest marches. Its analysis focuses on international political economy, capitalism, and the role of states and corporations, and integrates climate and economic (including debt) justice in an “action-nexus” for a radical alternative to neoliberal capitalism (Mucchada 2021). The structural analysis translates into a set of demands for fundamental transformation and “radical regime change.” These demands have been set out in different versions of a feminist green new deal (FGND). We compare this movement to XR based on two documents: one setting out an agenda for feminist and decolonial global GND (Yahaya 2021), one setting out an FGND policy roadmap drafted specifically for the UK context (Cohen and MacGregor 2021).

These documents show the feminist climate justice movement displays a temporal regime that stands in contrast to that found in XR rhetoric. While never denying the existence of climate breakdown or the urgent need for mitigation, the movement does not use the apocalyptic rhetoric of emergency or extinction: for feminists leading this movement, these ideas are regarded as minority world framings. Because the movement prioritizes the leadership of those for whom the violence of ecological breakdown has been ongoing for centuries, there is an approach to time that always includes sensitive curiosity about differing lived experiences of the past, present, and future. Analyses of climate and ecological debt caused by colonialism stretch backward and forward in time, with testimonies of present loss and damage anchoring the political strategy of now. Decolonizing climate justice demands learning from movements that have been operating outside of the Enlightenment liberal ideals for centuries. As ecofeminist theorist Stefania Barca puts it, Indigenous peoples have “resisted and survived the end of the world for the last 500 years, each struggle helping to push the falling sky up again” (2021: 25).

In their article problematizing the domination of environmental and climate politics by linear, Eurocentric time and an apocalyptic vision of “the future” defined by white people, Mitchell and Chaudhry (2020) argue that to become more inclusive, movements must embrace plural temporalities and heterogeneous futurisms. They refer to the work of BIPOC futurists who are engaged in the “active labor of world-building,” creating possibilities for approaching “ecological crises as sources of open-ended renewal and regeneration rather than either decline or extinction” (327).⁴ References to “the future” are scarce in the FGND documents; but rather than eschew futurisms entirely, feminist climate justice activists demonstrate an understanding of the need to both prefigure the kind of politics they want as well as to imagine a future characterized by justice and the meeting of material needs:

Only through such a transformation can we propel our world into the feminist future that many of us have envisioned and imagined: a future which consists of gender, environmental and climate justice, as well as a peaceful and healthy planet for all. (Yahaya 2021: 39)

Contrary to what might be expected of feminist movement rhetoric, the feminist climate justice movement does not use the imperative to protect “the future of our children and grandchildren” as a moral argument for action. A word search for “children” or “grandchildren” yields zero hits in

⁴ BIPOC is an umbrella term widely used in the US, meaning Black, Indigenous, People of Color.

these two documents. Care for the wellbeing of all living beings presumably includes children, but there is no evidence that future generations of humans are given a special place in their agenda, in contrast to XR. As Haraway reminds us, “feminists have been powerful players disabling the pretensions of human exceptionalism” (2016: 206). Moreover, they know the risks of conflating/confusing the interests of grown citizens with those of the unborn. For decades, a feminist commitment to reproductive freedom has informed a corresponding aversion to pro-natalist discourses. Most feminist climate justice activists uphold this stance against abhorrent eugenicist and eco-fascist tendencies within minority world environmentalism, whilst their rejection of reprocentric futurity is also a rejection of heteronormative rhetoric, as discussed above. Instead, therefore, what this movement shares, and sets out in all of its published versions of a FGND, is a call to center care work – the universally feminized, devalued, and exploited work that sustains all life – in any political program for climate action. The focus on care and eco-social reproduction stems from a materialist analysis shared by anti-capitalist decolonial feminists (Barca 2020). It aims for justice while remaining grounded in material practices (as opposed to abstract sentiments) of care and survival.

In conclusion, our discussion of the temporal regimes of XR and feminist climate justice movements yields a series of contrasts which we believe should open up avenues for wider reflection and movement building. In place of the appeals to “act now!”, it is more productive to reconsider not just when but *how* to address the demands of climate breakdown. In other words, a return to a politicized politics of material interests and social identity, valuing process and inclusion over urgent solutions and an inherently exclusionary *We*. The *how* question, says Haraway, must be central and consuming: “*how to address the urgency is the question that must burn for staying with the trouble*” (6). This – rather than foregrounding a future that few recognize, much less wish to inhabit – requires acceptance that there are still choices to be made, even in troubling times.

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