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Extinction Rebellion's disobedient environmental citizenship

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ABSTRACT

We examine the public protest of Extinction Rebellion (XR) in the UK as a specific political practice. We do so through our observation of the plea hearings of activists charged with public order offences during the April 2019 London 'Rebellion', focusing on those pleading guilty at the first opportunity. We show how these narratives establish the values and beliefs of these activists, including their relationships to existing state agencies and institutions, the extent and nature of their public duties and the corresponding rights they encode, and the definition of the political community they represent. Drawing on the importance of embodiment in the critical environmental citizenship literature, we highlight how these narratives reveal tensions and inconsistencies between disobedient action and structural critique, as they reveal a 'disobedient environmental citizen' whose orientation is primarily based on an individualised civic duty in the service of the localised rights of future generations.

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Introduction

In environmental political theory, the debate over environmental citizenship has generally remained normative, focusing on its various liberal, republican, and 'post-cosmopolitan' declensions (Dobson 2003, Bell 2005, Barry 2006). Whilst this work remains central to theoretical reflection on rights and responsibilities in both private and public spheres, it has rarely addressed how environmental social movements might create (or indeed foreclose) specific modes and possibilities of citizenship through the forms, claims, and constituencies of collective public actions (for an exception, Cao 2015). Further, there have been

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few corresponding attempts to analyse how the collective practice of citizenship is embodied in action, by whom and for whom, and intersects with (or is underpinned by) structural inequalities of sex, race, or class (for exceptions, Gabrielson and Parady 2010, Clarke and Agyeman 2011, MacGregor 2014, 2016). If, as Dobson suggests, environmental citizenship is concerned with obligations that are ‘owed primarily to strangers, distant in both space and time’ (2000, p. 59), then the public collective behaviours undertaken by environmental movements must be seen as enactments of such obligations, the political memberships they imply, and the possibilities of justice they carry. Here, we set in tension the ideas of disobedience and embodiment, as derived from the critical citizenship literature, to show how XR activists bring meaning to their public actions, and how this constitutes a specific political practice of being ‘a citizen’.

We do so by bringing political theory into dialogue with the sociological literature on collective action, particularly Gerbaudo (2017a, 2017b) discussion of citizenship movements, in which he termed the post-2008 collective mobilisation for citizen rights in southern Europe ‘citizenism’. This dialogue is important because collective action is undertaken by embodied agents through interaction, and this agency not only brings citizenship claims into public space, but locates these claims within the specific bodies that carry them. Gerbaudo’s model shows how individuals and collectives ‘make’ their own citizenship through material practices of contestation, illuminating the precise contours of the justifications they develop for these practices, in the public contexts of their enactment. We suggest here that ‘citizenism’ is a useful lens to understand XR’s political practice, as it anchors collective claimsmaking about citizenship in specific and non-universal understandings of time, space, and materiality.

Indeed, XR’s action was founded on explicit claims to citizenship, creating a revitalised sense of public agency around climate change. On its launch in October 2018, XR claimed ‘it is a citizen’s duty to rebel using peaceful civil disobedience when faced with criminal inactivity by its Government’,¹ privileging mass participation in obstructive non-violent action to occupy public space and so force public authorities to accede to the group’s three key demands (‘tell the truth’ about climate change; achieve net zero by 2025; create citizens’ assemblies to manage the transition).² Until it revised its tactical repertoire in winter 2022 (Saunders *et al.* 2024 for discussion), XR’s action model was designed to court arrest, bringing activists into direct interaction with the criminal justice process, and thus with the coercive agents and institutions of the state. Point 3 of XR’s ‘civil resistance model’, as set out by co-founder and main tactician Roger Hallam, is ‘You have to break the law’ (Hallam 2019). The group’s handbook ends with a cut-out-and-keep social contract, between ‘The State’ and ‘You, the Citizen’.

Accordingly, we term XR's specific configuration of action *disobedient environmental citizenism*.

In the XR campaign, arrested activists must negotiate tensions integral to the definition and boundaries of citizenship, particularly concerning their relationship to the state, the extent and nature of their public duties, and the definition of the political community they represent. Yet, despite widespread discussion of XR's tactics, organisation and claims, we know little of how XR activists themselves understand and internalise these elements; here, we seek to do so, by analysing the self-presentation narratives of those arrested by the Metropolitan Police Service ('the Met') for public order offences during the group's first 'Rebellion', staged in London in April 2019. By adopting the novel approach of a court ethnography, we can grasp how disobedient activists construct their action in the specific interactional context of being called to account by the state, centring the voices and motivations of 'ordinary' activists rather than official movement discourses.

We undertook ethnographic observation of weekly court hearings in summer and autumn 2019. This enabled us to establish the values and beliefs of those we term 'soft arrestables', those pleading guilty at the first opportunity (and thereby relieving the state of its burden of proving guilt); by a ratio of 2:1, this group represented the majority of activists prosecuted after the first Rebellion. These activists were able to make mitigation statements immediately before sentencing, providing personal explanations for their disobedient action. As we will show, their narratives reveal strong levels of trust in the criminal justice process; emphasis on action as moral agency and civic duty; and foremost, a depoliticised conception of action, which is primarily undertaken on behalf of the local community and, especially, a personalised commitment to the rights of future generations. We argue that this depoliticization was not itself necessarily a weakness, as it enabled broad participation in disobedient action. Nevertheless, by placing disobedience in tension with ideas of embodiment, we can see how these values and beliefs are also a site of exclusions, as they reveal implicit assumptions over who may participate in this action and on what terms, to whom obligations of justice are owed, and whose rights are correspondingly valorised. XR's environmental citizen thus emerges as a paradoxical figure: disruptive and disobedient, explicitly claiming their public agency as citizens, yet eschewing structural critique and system-challenging behaviours.

Citizenship and citizenism

In the immediate post-Cold War context of the 1990s and 2000s, environmental political theorists focused on citizenship as emblematic of the particularity of environmental politics. Whether in its liberal (Bell 2005), republican (Barry 2006) or thick cosmopolitan (Dobson 2003, 2010) variant,

this literature focused primarily on the non-reciprocal duties and responsibilities of individuals towards the environment, through accepting the need to provide stewardship for nature (Barry), or in a form of cosmopolitanism in which individuals took responsibility for the material impact of their ecological footprint on others, who could be ‘distant in time and space’ (Dobson 2003). This latter variant in particular took the idea of environmental citizenship into the private sphere of individual consumption, and transcended national boundaries, as ecological footprints could have impacts on distant, non-familiar others.

Feminist green theorists noted, however, that this conceptualisation of the environmental citizen reflected its roots in Western political theory and as a result reproduced a model of citizenship that was intrinsically exclusive. For Gabrielson and Parady (2010), the ‘good green citizen’ was someone able to act on their obligations, leaving those supposedly without this capacity, the poor and marginalised, without agency or political significance other than as victims. Critical theorists argued that an understanding of citizenship as corporeal was necessary in order to take account of the non-universal ways in which people and nature are differently situated, beyond the (gendered and hetero-normative) ‘ideal citizen’ (Elmhirst 2011); Fenney Salkeld (2017) extended this analysis to the implicit ableism of conceptual frameworks which neglect the diversity of bodies, challenging the ‘epistemological privilege’ of the westernised, disembodied understanding of citizenship. In order to grasp how models of citizenship may reflect or challenge structural asymmetries of power, misrecognitions, and false universalisms, MacGregor therefore argued that we should ‘start with bodies’, understanding citizenship as always situated, corporeal, and potentially exclusionary (MacGregor 2016, pp. 615–616).

These predominantly normative dialogues over environmental citizenship provide important critical counterweights to sociological approaches aiming to categorise and explain the resurgence of explicitly citizen-framed public collective action in Europe (and elsewhere), which emerged in response to the global financial crash. Here, Gerbaudo identified the emergence of the ‘indignant citizen’, outraged at being deprived of political agency within the neoliberal post-democratic order (Gerbaudo 2017b, p. 7). Gerbaudo termed the ideology of this indignant citizen to be citizenism, which he defined as ‘the project of a popular reclaiming of citizenship’ in the face of democratic enclosure (2017a, p. 37), rooted in a left-wing popular discourse and ‘horizontal’, participatory forms of movement organization. This discourse was anti-oligarchic, challenging the concentrated power of political and economic elites; but in contrast to the global justice movement of the 2000s, it was directed within national political space, and primarily aimed to create a new democratic form for state institutions as the favoured mechanism to overcome austerity and inequality.

These elements – a reformed and participatory model of democracy, the recentering of the political around the rights and duties of citizens, the refocus on the nation state – are equally foundational to XR, which grew out of Occupy, student and anti-austerity direct action movements in Britain in the early 2010s (Doherty and Hayes 2023). They are present in its adoption of apparently anti-hierarchical ‘holacratic’ internal organisational arrangements (Berglund and Schmidt 2020, pp. 41–58); arguments in favour of transferring decisional power from political elites to civic mini-publics (Sandover *et al.* 2021); the re-location of climate activism away from international summits and back towards the national political community (De Moor *et al.* 2018). XR is, Berglund and Schmidt (2020) emphasise, ‘solution agnostic’: there is no commitment to a specific ideological framework or set of policy instruments to reduce carbon emissions. Indeed, one of XR’s key claims is to be ‘beyond politics’ (Extinction Rebellion 2020).

XR can thus be understood, we argue, as *disobedient environmental citizenism*. To centre an analysis of power, political action, and social justice, we bring the concept of citizenism into dialogue with critical theories of green citizenship, enabling us to go beyond primarily normative categories to define movement discourse and practices interpretatively. In general, the environmental citizenship literature has little to say about collective action by citizens; however, as Cao notes, ‘[c]itizenship cannot exist without citizens, particularly active ones’ (2015, p. 107), whilst Barry argues, ‘in the struggle for more sustainable, just, and democratic societies, we need civil disobedience before obedience, and more than ever, we need critical citizens and not just law-abiding ones’ (2006, p.40). Despite Barry’s observation, the environmental citizenship literature tells us remarkably little about collective action, overlooking how activists themselves conceive of the stakes and scope of such action; what kind of democratic political settlement it projects; what ‘issues of recognition and participation in democratic collectives’ it presupposes (Latta 2007, p. 378); and how this action foregrounds bodies.

The centrality of the political agency of the body is particularly important for civil disobedience, which is long associated with ‘unruly bodies’ (Shaw and Nevins 2006, Hohle 2009, Sommier *et al.* 2019). Disobedience involves physical practices of obstruction, where resistant agency makes particular bodies visible and brings them into deliberate contact with state agents. Self-evidently, environmental disobedience involves questions of rights (of existing and future humans, of non-human nature), and of responsibilities (including to the past); yet where citizenship is articulated in action, the precise character of these rights and duties, and which bodies may bear and represent them in public space, is an empirical question. Indeed, citizenship is in practice always generative of non-citizenship, as community axiomatically involves the identification of others, to whom rights are denied (Tonkiss

and Bloom 2015). The category of citizen action is thus inevitably tied to the boundaries of the political community.

These boundaries, as imagined and practised through actually occurring struggle, thus require definition. Normative approaches characteristically foreground the rights and responsibilities of abstract citizens, obscuring social positionality and power; but practice involves materiality, status, and struggle, and this is always embodied and unequal. For Rosenow (2019), XR's emphasis on the primacy of science, truth, emergency, and the rejection of 'politics' was born out of a 'methodological whiteness', whilst its organisational tactics were 'grounded in a conventional, unproblematised understanding' of who may act as a 'citizen', whilst for Morris, XR's universalizing discourse 'naturalizes traditional hierarchies of power' and 'amplifies a distinct form of green nationalism with *both* civic and ethnic appeals' (Morris 2023, p. 696, p.697). How, therefore, XR activists express their understanding of their commitment – through their responsibilities to the bodies of familiars and strangers – may be expected to reveal their conception of political space and community.

Equally, these issues raise questions of institutional trust. Direct action has traditionally been associated with *low* levels of political trust: those who are *least* trusting of political institutions are *most* likely to engage in it (Kaase 1999). Yet civil disobedience – certainly as it is classically defined in the liberal tradition – pre-supposes at least some level of trust in the political system, if not in specific parties or governments, for two reasons. First, because deliberate but limited public law-breaking is framed in liberal theory within an over-arching fidelity to law; and second, because the persistent failure of parties and institutions to produce policy reform, thus requiring civil disobedience as a corrective, also requires policy-makers to produce that reform in response to disobedient appeals (Sommier *et al.* 2019). Indeed, in 2019, XR's objectives included catalysing public authorities to declare climate emergencies and accelerate net zero targets. In our survey of XR activists at this time, we nonetheless noted high levels of electoral engagement, moderate levels of trust in the police, but low levels of trust in government, established mass media, parliament, and political parties (Saunders *et al.* 2020, pp. 23–24).

Methods and data

How activists present their justifications for law-breaking within institutional forums may therefore tell us much about the wider character of XR's model of citizenship, the bodies that are implicitly assumed to be central to it, and thus the capacity of its disobedient citizen action to carry structural critique. To investigate this, we observed the magistrates' court hearings of activists charged with minor public order offences during XR's occupation of

four sites in central London (Parliament Square, Marble Arch, Oxford Circus, and Waterloo Bridge) in April 2019.³ The Met made 1,148 arrests (of 1,076 separate individuals, some being arrested more than once), the vast majority under section 14(5) of the Public Order Act 1986 (for failing to comply with a condition imposed on a public assembly, though some had an aggravating factor, such as sitting or lying on the road, being glued to the road surface, or locked-on).⁴ These activists were charged in two phases: in late spring, and through summer and autumn 2019, when two courtrooms were set aside every Friday at the City of London Magistrates' Court for nineteen weeks to process pleas and set trial dates.⁵ These were not therefore trials, but administrative hearings designed to mass process pleas.⁶

We attended on seven separate Fridays in August, September, and October 2019, observing 132 individual defendants in total (plus 12 in absentia), or 17% of the total number charged in this second phase of prosecutions (144/851).⁷ Attendance enabled us to collect defendants' basic profile information (age, domicile, prior convictions) along with observational gender and ethnicity data (in court, defendants are not asked to self-identify), and to note what proportion entered a plea of not guilty and so elected for trial. Those pleading guilty ($n = 94$) outnumbered those pleading not guilty ($n = 45$) by a ratio in excess of two to one. Amongst those pleading guilty there was a broadly even split between men (51.1%) and women (48.9%); for those pleading not guilty, the difference was more acute (men 62.2%, women 37.8%). Of the 132 defendants we observed directly, all but two were white. A larger dataset on the self-defined ethnicity of all the April arrestees, provided by the MPS following a Freedom of Information request, shows a broadly similar picture: 1,032 arrested activists identified as White (90.3%), whilst a further 54 (4.7%) did not state their ethnicity. Of the remaining 5%, 11 identified as Asian (1%), 5 as Black (0.4%), 31 as Mixed (2.7%), and 10 as Other (0.9%).⁸

We secured ethical clearance from the corresponding author's institution, following the British Sociological Association's guidelines (BSA 2017). Courts are public spaces, where interactions are underpinned by principles of open justice; as such, consent is not required from participants for the observation, transcription, analysis, and presentation of data. Nevertheless, prosecutions can be highly stressful, and can place defendants in delicate positions. For plea hearings, defendants' names are not routinely reported; accordingly, we use pseudonyms, and sometimes disguise or omit specific individual details. All cases we discuss are closed.

Court ethnography

The defendants were predominantly heard by a District Judge (Magistrates' Court) (DJMC), although some cases were heard by a panel of lay

magistrates. Around a dozen defendants were assigned to each session (morning or afternoon), but each defendant was heard individually, and was free to leave once they had entered their plea (the vast majority did so). Where pleading guilty, defendants were invited to make a short mitigation speech; they then read statements explaining their involvement – some from memory, some from notebooks, some from typed sheets of A4, some trembling as they held the paper. Many were sustained, eloquent, articulate. Two read specially written poems. In some sessions, the DJMC asked those presenting written statements (or other artefacts) if they wanted to lodge them with the court. Many were relatively inexperienced activists; in only two of our cases did defendants have prior convictions for protest actions. The hearings typically lasted around ten minutes for each defendant pleading guilty.

Court ethnography is relatively rare (Baldwin 2008), especially for protest cases; as far as we know, our own work is the only instance (Hayes *et al.* 2021). Here, our approach presented two specific advantages. First, it enabled us to adopt an interactional approach to the judicial encounter; through observation, we could note physical, gestural, and verbal interchanges. As discussed below, this allowed us to understand these hearings not as simple administrative affairs but rather as freighted with material, moral, and emotional stakes, and to observe relationships of complicity and resistance in court. As Roelvink (2016), p. 98) notes, testimony is conveyed through both bodies and words, and cognitive and affective registers.

Second, it enabled us access to the justifications of individual ‘rebels’, mediated only by the directness of this judicial encounter; invited to address the court in mitigation, their speeches revealed recurring themes and discursive structures central to their reasonings and engagements. Polletta notes that stories are ‘differently intelligible, useful, and authoritative depending on who tells them, when, for what purpose, and in what setting’ (2006, p. 3). In legal settings, stories are shaped by legal requirements (Cammiss 2006) and constructed in testimony through question-and-answer sequences, which shape the narrative (Cammiss 2012). But stories provided in mitigation are not similarly constrained; relevance requirements are more relaxed, and defendants can provide an unfiltered story. Here, mitigation speeches are what Tilly (2006), p. 19) calls ‘popular’ (as opposed to specialized, or technical, in this case legal) accounts of action, tied to moral stories of agency and community. We therefore see these encounters as *situated truth-telling performances*, capable of revealing multiple motivations, commitments, and identities. We took verbatim notes in court, actively developing our note-taking through a two-step coding procedure (Holton 2010). Here, our initial observations enabled us to co-construct emergent categories, through open coding and continuous comparison. We then refined our data into core themes through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022).

Soft arrestables

Our observation focuses on those we call ‘soft arrestables’: activists prepared to undertake arrestable action and, importantly, who pleaded guilty at the first opportunity. This observed population is not necessarily representative of all those prosecuted: around one third of those charged pleaded not guilty in these initial hearings and were given a later trial date (these we term ‘hard arrestables’). Meanwhile, around 10,000 people are estimated to have taken part in the April ‘Rebellion’. Though we were not able to observe them in court, it is possible the values and motivations of both ‘non-arrestables’ and ‘hard arrestables’ were different from those of soft arrestables; as such, the picture we build is necessarily of a focused group of XR activists. We believe this is nonetheless a revealing population, as it captures activists who were almost all in court for protest offences for the first time, with many commenting that this was their first experience of civil disobedience (and for some, of protest generally). This is consistent with the findings from our survey, which showed that most participants in XR’s 2019 London protests were not highly experienced protesters (Saunders *et al.* 2020, p. 3). Of course, it may be that pragmatic or logistical factors best explain why soft arrestables pleaded guilty; nonetheless, our observations identified these activists as highly invested in attending court (they could have done so by post, or been found guilty in absentia) and, as we will show, committed to explaining and justifying their actions. It is these ‘ordinary’ activists’ statements that provide rich insights into the contours of XR.

Trust in criminal justice

Amongst those pleading not guilty, some disputed the lawfulness of their arrest; others indicated their intention to plead justification, or draw on various protections afforded by the European Convention on Human Rights (such as Articles 10 and 11 protecting freedom of expression and assembly, but also, in the case of one defendant in her mid-60s, Articles 2 and 3, which protect the right to life and prohibit torture and inhuman and degrading treatment; here, the DJMC corrected the defendant, sympathetically). On numerous occasions, the lawyer from the Crown Prosecution Service explained to the defendants, nearly all of whom had no legal representation, how the process worked and how to think about challenging evidence. One defendant, an academic in his early 40s, refused to enter a plea, saying his position was one of non-cooperation, as the court had ‘consistently sided with those who create the crisis’.

But as noted, hard arrestables were in the minority, and refusal to co-operate was exceptional. Amongst soft arrestables, there was occasional criticism of the criminal justice process and of the police.

Reading a prepared statement, Zac (from London, in his late 20s) told the court:

I am sure others will speak about climate crisis . . . My actions while unlawful were made in the best interests of the community. So instead I want to talk about my experience in police custody. . . it withered my respect for the police. I witnessed a man being pulled screaming from a tree in Parliament Square. Another man was shoved into a fence by police and left there bleeding.

Zac said the police were ‘violent, insincere and callous’, and described his treatment in custody as humiliating. His observation of police ‘pretending to be medics to break a blockade’ and carrying out random immigration checks during the protest ‘confirms the police’s institutionalised racism’. Whilst this type of statement was not unique, explicit criticism of the police was however a minority position. In court, several defendants apologised for any ‘inconvenience caused’ by their action. Rebecca, arrested on her 73rd birthday, told the court ‘I appreciate the respect the police showed’. Many echoed these sentiments:

I’m pleading guilty so the arresting officer can spend more time policing on the streets. (Benjamin)

I respect the police who arrested me, they were courteous. I respect the court and what you are having to do. But I do have a grave problem with the lack of faith from politicians. (Richard)

Firstly I’d just like to apologise to the people I inconvenienced in April, and thank the police for their professionalism in my arrest. I’d also like to acknowledge my privilege as a white middle class man . . . There are many people less fortunate than me. (Peter)

The DJMCs generally responded supportively to the speeches, telling the defendants that they had heard what they had to say, and recognised the sincerity of their action:

‘I acknowledge your genuine and heartfelt concern . . .’

‘I appreciate all the care and thought you have put into your mitigation . . .’

‘You accept that you crossed the line into criminality. You have not sought to waste court time, you have accepted responsibility . . .’

‘But I have to bear in mind the serious disruption caused to businesses, services, transport . . .’

They were told that they had crossed the line, had acknowledged this, and must therefore be sentenced to a conditional discharge for six months, plus (in most cases) £20 victim surcharge and £85 costs. In one case, a defendant removed a series of postcards from her handbag and showed them to the DJMC; they were reproductions of paintings made by her daughter before

she died, of flooded landscapes, piers battered and houses submerged; on the back, there was a climate-related poem. ‘They are really wonderful’, the DJMC said; ‘You can keep them’, replied the defendant. The DJMC thanked her and placed the cards on the desk, before passing sentence.

Here, Kaase’s (1999) interpretation of activists taking direct action as a consequence of distrust does not ring particularly true, at least in terms of the defendants’ interactions with the state’s specifically repressive institutions. Trust in the police among XR activists was varied, of course; but in general, court interactions were respectful and supportive, involving a high degree of cooperation. What we see from XR activists therefore goes beyond an abstract belief in the fidelity of law; consistently, we see a sense of trust in the criminal justice process; and this was a structural feature of the court interactions.

Acting from moral duty

This general trust in criminal justice was not mirrored by a corresponding trust in existing climate policy or, more widely, political arrangements. Indeed, we regularly saw low trust in politics; many ‘rebels’ underlined that their disobedient action resulted from a loss of faith in representative democratic arrangements, encompassing parliament, parties, and the mainstream environmental movement:

Prior to Extinction Rebellion, I had completely lost hope in environmental campaigning, signing petitions, and joining marches, and I was right to lose hope. (Julie)

Although I do vote, I currently have little faith in the democratic process to make the change that we need. Marches are routinely ignored . . . Extinction Rebellion got people in the media, both national and international, talking. As a tactic it worked. All I had was my body and its potential for disruption. (Carol)

I have limited funds, I have no political power, but I do have a body that I can use politically. (Diana)

I’ve never been to court before, I’d never even been to a climate protest before, but I felt that I needed to do something. (Daniel)

Many emphasised the attempts made in their personal lives, as individuals, to reduce their carbon footprints. Nick, in his late 40s, told the court:

Over the years, like many other concerned citizens, I have signed petitions, gone on marches, donated money to environmental causes. I have recycled, limited my flights, changed my diet to vegan, sold my car and all the while emissions keep rising and the government does not implement the policies needed to protect its people from the climate crisis.

Heather, an events manager in her late 20s, told the court:

I gave up meat three years ago, I do not use single use plastic, I walk everywhere. I feel guilt about my carbon footprint – it makes more sense to live locally and use less of the world's resources. I try to speak to friends some of whom have also changed, one has turned vegetarian. But change is not coming as fast as it needs to: the IPCC says we have less than eleven years before damage is irreversible.

Two women in their mid-30s said that they had chosen not to have children because of the climate crisis. One, Caroline, said:

I've recycled obsessively and nagged everyone I know to do the same, I refill my water bottle and write to establishments to avoid single use plastics, I no longer eat meat and I buy cruelty-free products, I've signed multiple petitions and written to my MP, I've protested for protecting green spaces in London, I've stopped my 15-year career working in retail marketing due to the obsession for increasing consumerism and year-on-year growth. And I have not had children.

All of these personal actions feel utterly inconsequential to stop the global emergency; what else am I, Jo Public, meant to do to affect change?

I don't want to be here. But these times are urgent and unprecedented – this is existence for your children, grandchildren, your families, your friends, our nature.

Many consequently underlined they were acting from a sense of personal and civic duty:

I took part in the Extinction Rebellion protests in London as my conscience would not let me do otherwise. (Darren)

I regret the disruption, but I had a moral duty to act. (Jonas)

When I joined Extinction Rebellion on Waterloo Bridge I did so out of desperation, an inability to live with the guilt of standing by and doing nothing. I felt compelled to act. (Alannah)

It is our duty to do more, and I joined the nonviolent XR action in order to bring awareness to as many people as possible. We must take direct action to force the government to tell the truth. (Joanna)

We therefore saw a complex dynamic. As we have seen, most defendants retained trust in the rule of law, as represented by the courts and police. But they were distrusting of government, dissatisfied with democratic arrangements (at least concerning climate), and in some cases, reflected that their own private pro-environmental behaviours were insufficient to produce meaningful change. As a result, they felt 'compelled to act', as Alannah put it; and their political resource for doing so was to consciously use their disruptive, disobedient bodies, as Carol and Diana highlighted.

Rights and responsibilities in time and space

An emphasis on individual responsibility and civic duty faced with the failure of ‘politics’ is paramount in these narratives. Indeed, it was perhaps foremost present in the act of attending court itself, as these examples from our notes show:

Helena is obviously in considerable pain, seated at a table, propped up on pillows, a close friend crouching by her side, holding her hand: she is recovering from lung surgery, and struggling for breath. When invited to speak by the judge, she can only say a few short sentences, about the legitimacy of her actions, about the science, about the importance of the protests to move the political process forwards; compared to the sustained eloquence of many of the other defendants this morning, her speech is brief and fragmented, punctuated by gasps.

Emma, in her mid-40s, waits to see the police bodycamera footage of her arrest before deciding to plead guilty. She explains that she joined Extinction Rebellion because of the IPCC report and her ‘horror’ at government inaction. She starts to break down. Speaking through tears, barely able to get the words out, she tells the court of her poor health, and her anxiety of coming to London, both for the protest and for the hearing. (‘I don’t like London, I’ve only ever been five times in my life, it’s out of my comfort zone’).

This emotional and physical investment in *being there* was far from exceptional. Many seized the opportunity to recount stories that began with a loss of innocence and a coming to consciousness. Imogen, in her late 20s, recounted her experiences of wildfires and climate disruption whilst staying with a friend in Portugal; her emphasis was not so much based upon an abstract scientific view, but upon her personal journey to the courtroom. Many other defendants cited the 2018 IPCC report, BBC Nature journalist Sir David Attenborough, biodiversity loss, the burning of the Amazon; Lucinda, in her late 60s, reading from a tablet, invited everyone to log on to NASA’s website and look at the ‘blue dot’ (citing Carl Sagan); ‘If we lose the earth, where do we go?’, she asked.

There was nonetheless a strong and consistent sense of place and of home, of climate change directly affecting where the defendants worked and lived:

Without action to halt global warming and sea level rise, London will be at risk of flooding, which will cause considerably more disruption than the protest. (Mark)

I loved my career but today it seems irrelevant, when nature itself and London in particular are under threat from extreme weather events. (Ken)

What I worry about next is society breaking down, law and order breaking down, food production breaking down, there being no food in the shops – what will we do then? Climate change really scares me, really scares me. We live quite close to the sea, I worry about sea-level rise . . . (Jim)

Equally, many discussed to whom they owed responsibility, and whose rights needed to be defended. Prominent here were the rights of future generations. Repeatedly, defendants emphasised acting on behalf of their children or grandchildren: 'We have to win this for our children', Heather said to the court. Others made similar statements:

To uphold my contract with my children, I acted to shame the government to honour its part of the contract to stop climate change and species extinction. (Susan)

I am a mother and a grandmother and a great grandmother [...]. As part of the generation whose complacency has led to this emergency, I should prepare to be arrested. I couldn't in conscience stand aside in the face of the threats that confront us all. (Edith)

I was there for my children and my grandchildren. (Sarah)

I'm 69 years old. I take this action not for myself but for everybody else, especially the young, especially the young, because they have the right that we bequeath to them a future. (William)

These were repeated refrains. It is particularly striking that many placed their activism in the context of the failure of the state to uphold its side of the social contract. Equally, they cast their activism as an expression of their moral integrity, and of their specific responsibility as a parent; in Kim's words, to 'look my children in the eye', or as Emma put it, 'I am immensely proud to be part of XR, because I can look my children in the face and say that I tried, I tried to do something'. 'I'm horrified because I have to explain to my children why things are getting worse', she said. 'If we don't stand up for our world, if we don't stand up, what kind of future are our children going to have?'

Discussion

These court narratives indicate how XR was for many defendants a means of personal political transformation. For Nick and Heather and Caroline, disobedient action was a public response to the inability of private consumer action (such as recycling or veganism) to achieve urgent and necessary change. It was also, as Susie and Carol and Julie underlined, and consistent with Gerbaudo's discussion of citizenism, a reclaiming of political agency from the dead ends of parliament, parties and traditional campaigning. This agency was self-evidently a disobedient agency, and – as was clear from multiple mitigation statements – it was consciously undertaken as a civic duty. Most strikingly here however, this civic duty was repeatedly understood as an individual duty, born of conscience and personalised commitments.

This personalisation was apparent in two ways. First, as noted above, the principal question of citizenship duties concerns to whom these duties are primarily owed, and on what basis. Here, they are rarely set out as ‘owed primarily to strangers, distant in both space and time’ (Dobson 2000, p. 59), and indeed there was little evidence of Dobson’s ‘thick cosmopolitanism’ at play here. Instead, commitments were proximate, based around locality and family, frequently derived as moral duties from intimate relationships with the defendants’ own children and grandchildren, real or imagined. This does not mean, of course, that these activists were ignorant or insensible of wider possible frameworks and commitments; but they primarily expressed a sense of justice as intergenerational and affective, rather than socio-spatial, intersectional, or structural-systemic. The political character of their action, especially in terms of its capacity for structural critique, was therefore highly circumscribed.

Second, we return to an issue that is central to corporeal citizenship: which bodies are able to act fully as citizens, and how power operates on and through the body. We think it likely that arrestability correlates with various forms of risk, or its attenuation: of time invested and available; of age, responsibility and prospects; of financial resources and material vulnerability; and that these risks are shaped by socio-spatial, intersectional and structural factors. Some of these factors were acknowledged by activists in their statements. But whilst there is ample evidence of the defendants’ understandings of their duties to and the rights of future generations, and their position to act as ‘allies’ of these generations to come, only one defendant in our sample, Peter, used his statement to acknowledge what might be seen as their class and racial privilege in being *able* to be arrested, charged, and found guilty.

This action was undertaken on the basis of trust in the rule of law, the courts and the criminal justice process; it did not seek to challenge or disrupt these agencies and institutions. This can again be illustrated in two ways. First, the response to the police in the court mitigation statements was for the most part supportive. Not all were as stark in their support of the police as Benjamin, of course, and some, like Zac, were highly critical; nonetheless, the large majority avoided criticism, and this was mutually recognised by the way the judges acted. Second, that the clear majority chose to plead guilty at the first opportunity is itself revealing: when offered the opportunity at modest cost to themselves to challenge their prosecution, and (at minimum) tactically occupy police and court time, two-thirds declined to do so.

It is important therefore to return to Barry’s call for a *disobedient* citizenship, alongside MacGregor’s call that we understand citizenship as *embodied*. On one level, embodiment is fundamental to the ability to take action; as Carol and Diana underlined, in the absence of faith in the political system, their own disruptive bodies were the central resource of their public agency.

The sense of the civic was thus not just a question of conscience, but was corporeal, and was also apparent in the very presence of XR rebels in court. This was perhaps most clear in the speeches of Helena and Emma, which were emotional and material performances, embodied and enacted and *felt*. Though some defendants were dealt with in absentia, it did not appear that the defendants themselves considered the hearings to be a waste of court time or money; rather, they were important moments of truth production. There was a strong commitment to being heard, institutionally; an investment in ‘speaking truth to power’ as a privileged means of producing change.

More widely, however, it is important to ask *whose* embodiment counts, and who the community represented through actually occurring struggle was in these cases. This speaks directly to Barry’s appeal to disobedience: if the translation of theory into action foregrounds a much-needed public agency, this should also lead us to ask whose disobedient agency is mobilised in these actions and whose is excluded from it. As we can see, mobilisation draws boundaries and specifies motives; and in so doing creates exclusions, whilst participants consistently accounted for their action by preferring one set of rights and duties (those of future generations linked by personal bonds of filiation) over other potential commitments. These might, for instance, involve a redistribution of assets and rights in concurrent time and space, or invoke civilisational collapses that have already been perpetrated to others (see Hayes and MacGregor 2023 for further discussion). Indeed, as refracted through the narratives of those activists willing to take disobedient action, our sense is that XR’s disobedience is essentially post-political: in important respects, it conceals struggles rather than reveals how power operates. In their primarily moral and individual interpretations of civic duty, XR defendants, however understandably, co-produced with the courts a de-politicised form of climate activism.

Conclusions

In this article, we have drawn on the critical normative approach of citizenship theory to assess how far the narratives of XR defendants articulate a form of citizenship that reflects the world as it is, and on sociological interpretation of discourse in the form of citizenism to classify and situate XR’s political practice. Defendants, presenting themselves as citizens acting with integrity on behalf of the community, gave deeply personal and often emotional justifications for why they broke the law. The DJMC, working with defendants who were respectful and wanted to be heard, were able to co-produce an occasion in which the defendants could give an account of their motives to the state.

Our court observations capture an early moment in XR’s mobilisation, where it was building mass participation in disobedient action, but had –

to our eyes at least – little in the way of a coherent strategic approach to supporting activists in court or learning from experience (and of even knowing who had been charged and was to appear). It is important to note that the structure of the courtroom encounter is individualising, as defendants were called separately, and invited to present mitigation for their own actions. As Polletta (2006) notes, narratives vary according to institutional context and those that take place in settings such as a court are subject to rules and restrictions. Yet these mitigation speeches were also open: at no time did we witness DJMCs policing what defendants could or could not say; the sentence was the same in each instance (albeit with minor variations); and each speech was made in the context of collective appearance in court, and seemingly also unmediated by ‘official’ XR discourse. If these court narratives and performances were therefore situated, we think it highly likely they were also consistent with the broader dispositions of these activists.

These narratives reveal activists whose orientation is primarily moral, and who act out of intergenerational concern, on the basis of a personalised commitment (derived from their own conscience, and their understanding of their own obligations to others). They reveal a disobedient environmental citizenship characterised by (i) relatively low levels of trust in the operation of existing representative democratic institutions, coupled with relatively strong levels of trust in the courts and police; (ii) a belief in individual responsibility and moral agency, characterised by an at least partial rejection of private action, and by a commitment to local frameworks of analysis and action (especially through an intergenerational commitment to the rights of future generations, conceptualised as their own children and grandchildren); and (iii) through this place-based reasoning, a depoliticised conception of the political community, and an implicit, even if unintended, exclusionary bias at the collective level towards those who do not have access to the same *de facto* rights to exercise their citizenship.

This last point is worth emphasising, as it brings into focus the various tensions between normative and sociological approaches to citizenship, between action and embodiment, and between disobedience and systemic challenge. There are three major conclusions here, which should advance our analysis of both the contours of XR’s political agency and our wider conceptual understandings of disobedient citizenship. First, whilst liberal and republican models of citizenship typically place different emphases on rights and responsibilities, in the justifications put forward by XR activists we see a balancing dynamic, where the moral obligation to act in the present is motivated by and for the rights of future generations. Second, however, we see that for XR activists, these obligations are primarily owed to future extensions of themselves, to those who are proximate and familiar, rather than distant and strange. Finally, in our attention to

both the form of action and to the rights and responsibilities that this action is intended to carry, by ‘starting with bodies’ we are able to see that a disobedient citizenship is not necessarily one that is open to everyone, or articulates structural critique.

Notes

1. Extinction Rebellion, ‘Rebellion against UK Government’s criminal inaction on climate breakdown’, <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2018/10/26/rebellion-against-uk-governments-criminal-inaction-on-climate-breakdown/>, 26 October 2018.
2. ‘Our Demands’, <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/>, last accessed 8 December 2023.
3. In 2019, XR organised two major waves of climate obstruction and disobedience in central London, in April (‘April Rebellion’), and again in October (‘London International Rebellion’).
4. Metropolitan Police, ‘Total costs for the Extinction Rebellion protests in April 2019’, https://www.met.police.uk/SysSiteAssets/foi-media/metropolitan-police/priorities_and_how_we_are_doing/corporate/met-operations—extinction-rebellion—april-2019, June 2019.
5. Sky News, ‘Courtrooms turned over to hundreds of Extinction Rebellion cases’, <https://news.sky.com/story/courtrooms-turned-over-to-hundreds-of-extinction-rebellion-cases-11761341>, 11 July 2019.
6. In October 2019, the Met reported that all arrests made in April had been processed, producing 920 charges, with no further action decided in 225 cases, and three cautions issued. Of the 920 charges, 385 cases had completed the criminal justice process, with 350 individuals pleading or being found guilty. Figures from MPS, email correspondence, 4 November 2019. The ‘completion’ figure does not, axiomatically, include not guilty pleas.
7. This percentage feels intuitively correct: on each of the seven occasions, hearings took place in two courts, and we covered one court. Given that we attended on roughly one-third of potential occasions, it logically follows we covered around one-sixth of the possible pool of hearings.
8. For reference, 86% of the population of England and Wales identified as White in the 2011 census, 7.5% as Asian, and 3.3% as Black.

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