CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: XR, the Climate Change Movement and Capitalism

Abstract  It may be unwise for a climate change movement to declare itself anti-capitalist if it seeks a broad appeal. However, it is equally untenable for a climate change movement not to engage with capitalism and the political economy since this is where the driving forces of climate change can be found. Climate change activists therefore ought to consider how climate change relates to aspects of capitalism, such as growth, trade, profit, property rights, financialisation and class relations.

Keywords  Climate change activism · Anti-capitalist · Capitalism · Political economy · Climate change · Climate emergency

In this book we have sought to explore, understand and contextualise Extinction Rebellion as political actors. We have done so by putting their tactics, strategy, structure and political demands at the centre of our analysis. We have argued that XR have greatly contributed to the increasing attention paid to climate change by citizens, policymakers and other actors. They have done that through practising civil disobedience in a way that has been hard to avoid and that has created tensions in society as intended. Civil disobedience is a battle over legitimacy. XR have captured the zeitgeist of political polarisation and used this to their advantage. This has resulted in fierce critique from a minority but in an increase in concern about climate change amongst the public. It has forced people
to take a stance as the model of polarising disruption that XR use intends to.

We have shown that XR’s lawbreaking protest shares much more with the liberal tradition of justifying civil disobedience than with the anarchist direct action tradition. This is because XR’s goals are not anarchist and their direct action is often not prefigurative in that it does not directly seek to enact in the present what it aims towards in the future. Instead it seeks to disrupt in a mixture of direct and indirect ways. They share the liberal concern with justifying their disobedience by emphasising that it is a last resort and that it is practised within an overall fidelity to law. The open, conscientious and sacrificial elements of the disobedience along with the reverence for the police shows this liberal, rather than anarchist, ethos in XR’s lawbreaking.

In exploring XR’s views and practices of democracy we found a dissonance between the critique against the lacking democracy in society at large and internal practices that are not particularly democratic. Although the movement shares much of the critique of liberal representative democracy that has grown in social movements over the past decades, they deviate from those social movements in how they view the role of internal democracy in that critique. In this sense they break with the prefigurative horizontality of post-Cold War social movements. For social movements, practising direct, deliberative and participatory democracy internally has been a way of protesting the lack of true democracy that the liberal democratic state offers. It has been a way of showing what is possible. In doing so, many movements have sacrificed efficient decision-making for democracy. XR do the opposite. They sacrifice democracy for efficiency. The internal structure is officially transparent but in practice opaque. Whilst holding assemblies is influenced by the prefigurative horizontal tradition, XR’s assemblies are not where power lies and they are merely consultative. That said, anybody is free to set up an XR group and can obviously influence what the group does. This has enabled the movement to grow as quickly as it has. Though it is always perilous for scholars to predict the future, we anticipate that the lack of internal democracy is what will eventually lead to XR’s decline. When people give up their free time, they want to feel that they can have an influence, that they are being heard and that they are not just foot soldiers. The lack of such influence is in our view likely to lead to a slow decline in activists.

One of XR’s key demands is nonetheless a democratic one, namely a citizens’ assembly on the climate and ecological emergency to overcome
the inaction on climate change. The claim is that representative democracy has been co-opted by elites and has proven incapable of addressing the climate emergency that is threatening humanity and civilisation. The assembly would be put in place through sortition and reflect the demography of the population. The assembly would invite experts, listen to their advice and deliberate on solutions. Such assemblies have proven efficient in dealing with tough issues, such as marriage equality in Ireland, by being able to bypass strong opposition of powerful religious institutions. The idea of a citizens’ assembly rests on a rich scholarship on deliberative democracy. We have argued that both the demand of a citizens’ assembly and potential policy solutions that such assemblies may produce can be useful tools that render the climate change movement more legitimate. Nonetheless, a citizens’ assembly on climate change would have to have such extensive remit that it would come up against entrenched powerful interests at the heart of the global political economy. These interests are already what is stopping action on climate change and XR lack an explanation for how a citizens’ assembly would be able to bypass them. That is, if the assembly is set up within the current state system, there would be many mechanisms for interested parties to dilute the effect of the assembly. This may be through delegitimising its democratic credentials through a hostile media, lobbying assembly members, lobbying politicians not to adopt recommendations or challenging recommendations in the courts. As such, citizens’ assemblies would be more a tool in a broader political movement for action on climate change and climate justice than a solution in itself.

Lastly, we have critically interrogated many of the claims that XR make as part of their civil resistance model and show how these claims cannot be backed up by social science or any historical record. Struggles for social, political and economic justice permeate the history of humanity. Unfortunately for those seeking silver-bullet solutions for how to achieve radical change, the very different social, political and economic contexts of these struggles mean that it is futile to draw general lessons of what will work for social movements. We can and should draw inspiration from others’ experiences, but always in a way that is sensitive to our own context. There are two main problems with XR’s model and the way that it is derived from the civil resistance literature. The first is that it takes a dubious and poorly substantiated claim about numbers that are required to topple dictators in individual countries in the Global South
and applies this to the fight for climate action that is necessary in all countries, not least in the Global North. Differences between dictatorships and liberal democracies; national and global struggles; and pro-capitalist and anti-capitalist campaigns are all ignored in this leap. The second problem is that it constitutes a refusal to engage with the type of societal transformation that would be needed. It refuses to engage with the political economy of climate change and how that may be different or similar to what other social movements have been involved in.

7.1 Creative Tensions

In exploring these aspects of XR’s tactics, strategy, structure and political demands, we have identified four tensions that run through the movement. These tensions are to a varying extent also relevant to the broader and fast-growing climate change movement. The first of these is a tension between reformist and revolutionary aspects of climate change discourses. Is climate change activism about putting pressure on the state to mobilise and mitigate and adapt to a changing climate? Or is it to deeply transform, revolutionise or replace state structures because the existing ones are seen as unable to engage seriously in mitigation and adaptation? XR’s lawbreaking tactics and the demand of a citizens’ assembly can be interpreted as both reformist and revolutionary depending on who you ask and which aspects you look at. The civil resistance model, albeit flawed, is designed to be revolutionary, achieve system change and possibly replace the state as we know it, though it is uncertain with what beyond a citizens’ assembly. This tension is unnecessary to reconcile. Activists with a more revolutionary mindset will bring innovative approaches to the movements whilst it is important not to alienate potential activists who prefer a more reformist approach.

The second of the tensions that we identified concerned whether it is tenable for climate change movements to be solution agnostic. Through their citizens’ assembly demand, XR have to some extent locked themselves into a situation where they do not perceive themselves to be able to legitimately propose policy solutions. Unlike the school strikers who have embraced a Green New Deal, XR leave the climate change policy to a future citizens’ assembly. This makes it harder for the movement to contradict those who point to population control or stopping climate migration as solutions. XR in the US have adopted a demand of climate justice. Whilst XR in the UK also speak of climate justice and parts of
the movement speak of decolonising; climate justice and decolonisation are not as central to XR UK as they are to XR US or other climate change movements in the UK. The important question to ask here is ‘what demands can we legitimately make?’ Demand that arise from citizens’ assemblies do give legitimacy. But so do demands that are based on values of justice and equality. To be sure, XR do not stay away from policy recommendations. Banning airport expansions and fossil fuel divestment are prominent policies that XR support. At a local level XR engage even more in specific sustainable policy proposals. We appreciate that there is a reluctance to get behind policies that may be divisive. It can be difficult for an organisation that seeks to be a mass movement because it may limit the people that consider joining. However, agnosticism also carries risks. On the one hand, people may be reluctant to engage with a movement that lacks a more explicit policy agenda as it can seem politically vacuous. On the other hand, XR has become an influential voice on climate change and it is a missed opportunity not to use that voice to actively promote good and just solutions over bad and unjust ones. In a way, this tension plays out in every planned action and messaging and XR have certainly become less solution agnostic than they originally were.

The third tension that we have identified is very specific to XR and it concerns their adherence to a specific theory of change. As both Nafeez Ahmed (2019) and we have argued, there is not much substance to this theory of change. Many activists that we have spoken to have taken much of Ahmed’s critique onboard and it was a stated rationale behind XR Bristol’s own new strategy document (XR Bristol 2020). As social scientists who study social movements that seek radical change, we urge XR to stop peddling the 3.5% claim as well as claims that they have found a secret formula to how to achieve change. Instead we encourage XR to further develop their thinking of how they fit into the movement of movements of climate change activism. Moreover, we suggest that they broaden their reading beyond the US-based civil resistance literature and pay more attention to Gramscian ideas and critical political economy and social movements literature more broadly. The adherence to the theory of change is an increasing tension in XR, but not a particularly creative one.

Finally, the main tension that runs through all aspects of what XR and other climate change movements are about is the question of capitalism. XR are explicit about anti-capitalism and other ‘lefty-language’ being outside of their framing (XR 2020). It is common for social
movements not to declare themselves anti-capitalist or on the left even though it is evident that they campaign against capital and that they have left-wing values regarding equality and justice. The rationale for this is simple. There is no reason to alienate potential supporters and activists that do not inherently see themselves as anti-capitalist or explicitly left wing. For example, the Spanish anti-eviction movement PAH campaigns for the right to housing and against banks and financial institutions through various forms of civil disobedience, but stay away from branding themselves as left wing since this could stop right-wing voters who face eviction from joining (Suarez 2017; Berglund 2018). In this sense, being anti-capitalist should not be seen as a pre-requisite to join a direct action climate change movement. Nevertheless, for a movement that offers as much internal training as XR, more explicit engagement and education around the forces that climate change activists are up against would not go amiss. To conclude this book, we will therefore briefly explore why climate change activists ought to consider the relationship between climate change and capitalism and how XR currently relate to this relationship.

7.2 Climate Change Activism & Capitalism

The purpose here is not to set out a definitive relationship between capitalism and climate change. There is a vast literature on green political economy that does just that (e.g. Koch 2012; Wright and Nyberg 2015; Gough 2017; Raworth 2017). Instead, we highlight some ways in which XR already engage with key aspects of capitalism and how climate activists may want to consider those aspects further.

There is no lack of implicit critique of capitalism in XR’s discourse as these extracts from *This is not a Drill* (XR 2019) show:

our government has shattered meaningful democracy and cast aside the common interest in favour of short-term gain and private profit. (XR 2019, p. 2)

There are better ways to live, produce and to consume. (Shiva 2019)

The problem is Capitalism. The problem is Colonialism. The problem is Power. The problem is inequality. The problem is greed, and corruption, and money, and this tired, broken system. (Knights 2019, p. 12)
They talk about profit and specifically short-term profit. They talk broadly of how we produce and consume. And they connect capitalism, colonialism, power and inequality. Some of these issues are particular problems of the capitalism that we live in here and now whilst others are more general for capitalism on the whole. Take for example the short-term gain. This concern speaks directly to what has been called ‘shareholder value’. It has been identified as a key feature of the more financialised capitalism that has evolved over the last 40 years (van der Zwan 2014). It means that short-term share prices have become comparatively more important than long-term profits and business models for corporations that are on the stock market. Shareholder value does pose a particular problem for climate change since it favours the short-term interests of investors over the long-term interests of the business and certainly the long-term interests of the planet. Whilst the short-termism of shareholder value is a prominent feature of contemporary capitalism, it is perfectly possible to imagine a capitalist society where it plays a much more marginal role as it has done in most of the history of capitalism.

An often-repeated green critique of capitalism is that it relies on continuous economic growth and that such growth is impossible to sustain on a finite planet. This critique was first developed in the early 1970s and has since been updated (Meadows et al. 2005). At the time of writing, COVID-19 is starting to severely affect the global economy. It is paralysing much economic activity and leading to a global recession. The extent of the economic effects of this public health crisis will show many vulnerabilities in the highly globally integrated capitalism of the twenty-first century. It is already showing a decrease in many sources of CO₂ emissions. In that sense it shows aspects of the shock to the capitalist economy that addressing the climate emergency would entail. Trade and transport are big drivers of climate change and they would have to decrease sharply in an effort to address the climate crisis. Nonetheless, even though growth and increasing trade are central to contemporary capitalism, the economy would still be capitalist even if trade decreased and there was a prolonged recession.

Private profit, critiqued in the declaration of rebellion in the quote above, is a more essential part of capitalism in all its iterations. It is part of what makes capitalism a distinct mode of production. It is the mode of production that Vandana Shiva critiques in the other quote above. A mode of production is how we make, consume and trade things. In the Marxist tradition, what distinguishes capitalism as a mode of production
is that it has two classes (Wood 2002; Radice 2015). One class relies on selling its labour and tends to be called ‘labour’ or ‘workers’. The other, much smaller class, owns the means of production and tend to be called ‘capital’. That does not mean that capital is free to do what they want. For capital to survive, it needs to be profitable. To be profitable, it needs to be competitive. In order to be profitable and competitive, capital must exploit workers. Exploitation here is not necessarily as violent or abusive as it may sound. It merely means that capital has to get more value out of workers than it pays them in wages. Otherwise it would not be profitable, and it would lose out to other more profitable businesses. Therefore, if you oppose the right or the necessity of capital to make profit at the expense of workers, or indeed nature, then you can call yourself an anti-capitalist since you would prefer a different mode of production.

Property rights underpin capitalism as a mode of production. The expansion of property rights into more and more spheres of the social and natural world has been an important feature of how capitalism has developed in recent decades. Green political economy points to how increased property rights lead to over-exploitation and unsustainable resource extraction. The non-capitalist economies in Communist regimes were often no more sustainable than capitalist ones, showing that the state is not necessarily a more sustainable owner of resources and the means of production than corporations are. Elinor Ostrom, the only woman to ever win the Nobel Prize in economics, showed that common ownership, neither in the form of the state nor corporations, of resources leads to more sustainable practices (Wall 2014). Climate change activists may therefore consider what sustainable ownership ought to look like. Challenging property rights in such ways is certainly to engage with capitalism and the political economy.

In practice, XR and the broader climate change movement is already contesting the driving forces of climate change in contemporary capitalism. The demands to divest in fossil fuels is the prime example of this. In Europe, including the UK, climate change activists have achieved great things over the past two years. They have pushed climate change towards the top of the political agenda and increased awareness, concern and engagement amongst people. This has resulted in governments, international organisations and corporations talking a green language. This represents a victory but also the start of a new battle, namely, to reveal and contest when this new use of green language is merely greenwashing. Greenwashing is when practices or actors that are not sustainable are
presented as such. For example, an energy company that relies on 90% fossil fuels choosing to highlight its marginal investments in renewable energy in its advertising is greenwashing. As are governments that present themselves as green whilst not taking anywhere near sufficient measures. The European Green Deal is a case in point. Not least, regulations around what is officially considered as green or brown investments should be subjected to scrutiny and contestation by activists. In other words, contesting greenwashing has become an urgent area of contestation for climate change activists and no tactic is as efficient as civil disobedience when it comes to delegitimising the actors that engage in greenwashing. In conclusion then, it may be unwise for a climate change movement to declare itself anti-capitalist if it seeks a broad appeal. However, it is equally untenable for a climate change movement not to engage with capitalism and the political economy since this is where the driving forces of climate change can be found.

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