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# "You are stealing our future in front of our very eyes." The representation of climate change, emotions and the mobilisation of young environmental activists in Britain

Sarah PICKARD

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 "Climate emergency" was the 2019 "Oxford Word of the Year." In 2018, it had been "Toxic" and in 2017 "Youthquake," which was defined as: "a significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people" (OUP 2017). The "Oxford Word of the Year" is a word or expression "shown through usage evidence to reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of the passing year, and have lasting potential as a term of cultural significance" (OUP 2019). Together, "climate emergency," "toxic," and "youthquake" capture recent changes in Britain: the acknowledgement, representation and understanding of climate change, especially among an increasingly politically active cohort of young people within an oftentimes toxic domestic political context.
- 2 Indeed, in Britain, the political socialisation of the current generation of young people has taken place during a period marked by diverse crises, which together have resulted in ongoing austerity, precarity and uncertainty, and a detrimental impact on many aspects of young people's lives (Pickard and Bessant 2017). At the same time, this young generation's digital connectivity has enabled them to get informed and inform within a globalised world more than was previously possible (Boulianne and Theocharis).

Researchers have noted among the current young generation a shift towards more post-materialist and socially liberal values compared to older generations and former young generations (Norris and Inglehart; Sloam and Henn). This is reflected in various international surveys and polls where "the environment" is cited as the "most important issue" for youth (Amnesty International) and a greater concern for them than older age cohorts (e.g., European Social Survey). In Britain, the environment came second only to Brexit (YouGov 2019a) in the run up to the December 2019 general election won by the Conservative Party.

- 3 The voter turnout of young people in the 2019 general election was greater than in all the others over the previous two decades (YouGov 2019b). In 2019, the Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn produced a particularly youth-friendly and environment-friendly manifesto. Significantly, while in the 2017 Labour general election manifesto there were one and half pages at the end on the "Environment" (Labour 2017, 93-94),<sup>1</sup> just 18 months later, in the 2019 edition, the very first chapter consisting of 15 pages was entitled "The Green Industrial Revolution" (Labour 2019, 9-26). It stated the importance of acting on "the climate and environmental emergency" to "protect future generations from an uninhabitable planet."<sup>2</sup> Placing the environment at the start, the 2019 manifesto reflected the upsurge of interest in climate change over the previous year, especially among young people; portraying climate change as an emergency reflected terminology used by youth-led and youth-supported environmental movements; referring to future generations underlined the generational responsibility of politicians. Electoral data for the December 2019 ballot reveal a clear generational divide in voting patterns: contrary to older age groups, 18 to 24-year-olds voted mostly for the Labour Party (YouGov 2019b).<sup>3</sup>
- 4 As well as turning out to vote more in recent years and voting more for political parties saying they are committed to taking action on climate change, young people in Britain have also been protesting more in social movements that aspire to internal democracy and horizontalism (Grasso). The increase in mobilisation has been noticeable within existing national youth-led environmental organisations, such as the United Kingdom Youth Climate Coalition, "a group of motivated young volunteers (that) work together on a variety of environmental campaigns to try and promote a youth perspective on the importance of tackling climate change" created in 2008 (UKYCC 3). It has been more marked in two environmental movements that started in the second half of 2018: Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR). Subsequently, FFF and XR rapidly became global movements mobilising many thousands of young people across the world (Bessant, Mejia Mesinas and Pickard; Collin and Matthews).
- 5 Thus, young people's environmental activism reached an unprecedented scale in 2019 (Hayward; Collin and Matthews), particularly in Britain (Doherty and Saunders; Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2021) involving the newly launched United Kingdom Student Climate Network (UKSCN). The ongoing global wave of protest actions is significant due to the large number of young people and the range of ages involved (school students through to young adults), the wide repertoire of contention employed by activists committed to non-violent direct action (NVDA) (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020) and the attention it has garnered in the media and among politicians.
- 6 Youth-led and youth-supported environmental activism is also noteworthy for its terminology and imagery employed to represent climate change, and the framing of responsibility. First, the terms "environmental crisis," "climate crisis," "climate

emergency" and "ecological emergency" are used by Greta Thunberg, FFF and XR, and framed around a proposition that insufficient action from powerholders will lead to apocalyptic consequences. Such terminology already existed in the lexicon of environmental activism in the 1970s and 1990s by mostly young activists in smaller radical environmental networks (see Rootes; Seel, Paterson, and Doherty; Wall; Pickard 2020). However, these terms are now used much more widely and not only by young environmental activists; they are employed by international organisations, advocated by certain media (e.g. *The Guardian*) and adopted by certain politicians (e.g. in the aforementioned Labour Party manifesto). Second, there is an emphasis on generational responsibility, i.e. the onus on older generations for anthropogenic climate change and more specifically on politicians to quickly provide significant and sustainable solutions. This is in order to fulfil their generational responsibility, i.e. the social contract of passing down or leaving behind a better world as a legacy to young and future generations (O'Brien, Hayward and Berkes; Pickard and Bessant 2017).

- 7 This article addresses these two prominent strands in the representation of climate change in the discourse, framing and narrative systems used by contemporary youth-led and youth-supported global environmental movements, so as to understand the upswing of young environmental activism particularly in Britain. It draws first on the words and actions of Greta Thunberg, Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion, and then on interviews with young environmental activists, which provide valuable qualitative insights into their mobilisation that cannot be gleaned from survey data.
- 8 I argue that the representation of climate change as an "emergency" and a "crisis" by Greta Thunberg, Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion, as well as the emphasis on generational responsibility have had a crucial impact on the massive mobilisation of young people in Britain and more widely, in part due to the emotional responses shaped by this representation. Moreover, much of youth environmental activism can be understood as Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) politics (Pickard 2019a, 2019b), whereby young environmental activists feel the need to "do something" together to make powerholders from older generations "do something" significant and sustainable for the planet and future generations. British politicians are increasingly acknowledging climate change and taking action in response to young environmental activists demands.

## 2. Representations: crisis narratives and generational responsibility

- 9 There are many accounts in the media and academia about the start of the School For Climate strikes, Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion. Some contain basic inaccuracies concerning dates, the chronology and even the age of Greta Thunberg at the time. With particular reference to events in Britain, this section documents the beginnings of these environmental movements and their representations of climate change, both as a crisis and an emergency, in combination with generational responsibility and the social contract right from the outset of their launches.

## a. The publication of the IPCC report and launch of FFF and XR

10 The *Paris Agreement* on climate change mitigation, adaptation and finance was adopted on 12 December 2015 at the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It was officially and symbolically signed by the United Kingdom, as well as almost 200 other countries, on 'Earth Day,' 22 April 2016. The overall aim of the agreement was to reduce climate change by:

[...] holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC)<sup>4</sup>

11 Nearly three years later, on 8 October 2018, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2018a) published its Special Report (SR15): *Global Warming of 1.5°C*. In it, we read the targets set by the *Paris Agreement* were insufficient, significant measures were needed and that "limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" within twelve years to prevent "irreversible" "transformation," "loss" and "extinction" (IPCC 2018b).

12 A fortnight after the publication of the IPCC report, a letter was published in the British newspaper *The Guardian* on 26 October 2018.<sup>5</sup> In it, scientists, academics and opposition politicians underlined, in stark and vivid terms, both the scale of climate change and the UK Government's short fallings on addressing it, particularly with regard to the consequences for young people:

[...] We are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction, with about 200 species becoming extinct each day. Humans cannot continue to violate the fundamental laws of nature or of science with impunity. If we continue on our current path, the future for our species is bleak. [...] When a government wilfully abrogates its responsibility to protect its citizens from harm and to secure the future for generations to come, it has failed in its most essential duty of stewardship. The "social contract" has been broken, and it is therefore not only our right, but our moral duty to bypass the government's inaction and flagrant dereliction of duty, and to rebel to defend life itself [...] (Green et al.)

13 The 94 signatories declared their support for Extinction Rebellion (XR), which was officially launched five days later by former activists in the environmental group RisingUp.<sup>6</sup> A week later, on 31 October 2018, the new environmental movement issued a "Declaration of Rebellion" in Parliament Square, Westminster, London.<sup>7</sup> Speakers at the rally included Caroline Lucas (Green MP, born 1960), Molly Scott Cato (Green MEP, born 1963) and George Monbiot (born 1963).

14 Also speaking to the crowds of thousands was someone born four decades later: Greta Thunberg. Significantly, she had held her very first school climate strike (*Skolstrejk för klimatet*) alone on 20 August 2018 *before* the publication of the IPCC report and the launch of XR. She had been inspired by the young American activists in the March for Our Lives movement on the other side of the world, campaigning for gun control after the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida (Bessant and Lohmeyer). That Monday, instead of attending compulsory school lessons, the student sat outside the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag*) and handed out leaflets, aimed at attracting the attention of politicians entering the building. On the flyers were printed the following words in Swedish:

We kids most often don't do what you tell us to do. We do as you do. And since you grown-ups don't give a shit about my future, I won't either. My name is Greta and I'm in ninth grade. And I refuse school for the climate until the Swedish general election (Thunberg in Olsson)<sup>8</sup>

- 15 The 15-year-old also tweeted and posted about her school strike on Instagram (@GretaThunberg), while encouraging others to do the same, in order to spread the word. Thunberg went back the next day and the next when she gave one of her first media interviews with the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the social network for climate action We Don't Have Time. She said: "I'm too young to vote. But Swedish law requires that I go to school. So I do this to make my voice heard and attract media attention to the climate crisis" (Olsson). From the very start of her school strikes, the climate crisis and reference to youth were at the heart of Thunberg's representation of climate change, which she continued each day for the next three weeks, until the Swedish general elections.<sup>9</sup> Thunberg then carried on every Friday, thus creating the offline and online Fridays For Future (FFF) movement, which led to her speaking in London a couple of months later at the XR rally. Here, activists used similar apocalyptic imagery built out of the IPCC recommendations.<sup>10</sup>

## b. Crisis and generational narratives aimed at activists and politicians

- 16 At the 31 October 2018 XR rally, Thunberg, gave her "Almost Everything is Black and White" speech (in English), depicting the urgency of the situation and calling for mobilisation in protest actions:

[...] There are no grey areas when it comes to survival. Either we go on as a civilization or we don't. We have to change. [...] What we do or don't do, right now, will affect my entire life, and the lives of my children and grandchildren. [...] So we can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change. And it has to start today. So everyone out there: it is now time for civil disobedience. It is time to rebel. (Thunberg 2019a, 6-13).

- 17 After starting her school climate strike in Stockholm using the term "climate crisis," Thunberg was now speaking a mere ten weeks later to crowds at the Extinction Rebellion rally in London. The young Swede talked about "commitments to Paris Agreement" and "climate justice," and represented the outcomes of climate change in terms of "extinction." She urged for activism, calling for the young generation to do something to make the older generation of powerholders take action.
- 18 Significantly, those very constituencies – the powerholders and decisionmakers – she castigated, and continues to call out, have repeatedly invited Thunberg to speak in front of them.<sup>11</sup> When doing so, she consistently represents climate change as a crisis or an emergency and underlines the generational responsibility in uncompromising ways, often reversing generational roles. For example, on 15 December 2018, at the United Nations COP24, the 15-year-old posited to the audience:
- [...] Even when the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden, you leave to us children. [...] You are stealing our future in front of our very eyes. (Thunberg 2019a, 15-16)
- 19 Similarly, just after she had turned 16, Thunberg addressed the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), in Brussels, on 21 February 2019. In her talk provocatively entitled "You're Acting Like Spoiled Irresponsible Children," she said:



[...] People always tell us that they are so hopeful. They are hopeful that the young people are going to save the world, but we are not. This is simply not enough time to wait for us to grow up and become the ones in charge. Because by the year 2020 we need to have bended the emissions curve steep downward. (Thunberg 2019a, 34-40)

- 20 Thus, once again, Thunberg took the opportunity to point out the urgency of the situation and the unrealistic or unfair responsibility of the young generation bestowed on them by older generations not fulfilling their generational responsibility.
- 21 At the time when Thunberg was speaking in Brussels, planning had already started for important FFF and XR events. First, the Fridays For Future climate protests held on 15 March 2019 that "mobilized more than 1.6 million people around the globe," thus "representing a historical turn in climate activism" (Wahlström, et al.). According to FFF, that day, there were 140 strikes in the UK involving tens of thousands of protesters.
- 22 Second, a month later, the Extinction Rebellion ten days of protest to take place 15-25 April 2019, in order to draw public, media and political attention to the climate emergency and the movement's three core demands. In London, Extinction Rebellion used what had already become their signature "disruptive" non-violent direct action (NVDA) and civil disobedience. XR activists of all ages staged various actions, including occupations, supergluing, lock-ons and swarming, drawing on former environmental movements' repertoire of contention. Significantly, there were also theatrical die-ins, funeral marches, the pouring of fake blood, as well as stencils and posters stating, for example, "ACT NOW," "REBEL FOR LIFE" and "TELL THE TRUTH," in order to draw activist, public, media and political attention to the apocalyptic consequences of inaction on climate change (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020). The actions disrupted transport and routines in London, leading to widespread media coverage.

### c. Crisis and generational narratives in Parliament

- 23 During Extinction Rebellion's ten days of protest actions, on the morning of 23 April 2019, Greta Thunberg took part in a roundtable at Westminster in the Attlee suite.<sup>12</sup> She was flanked by Caroline Lucas (Green MP), Jeremy Corbyn (Labour Party leader) and other politicians, but with an empty chair for Prime Minister Theresa May (Conservative MP) who did not attend. Once again, the school striker underlined to the politicians, young activists and journalists present the generational responsibility of politicians towards young people, while alluding to the harmful effects of neoliberalism, such as greed, individualism and never-ending growth:

[...] Many of you appear concerned that we are wasting valuable lesson time, but I assure you we will go back to school the moment you start listening to science and give us a future. Is that really too much to ask? [...] Now we probably don't even have a future any more. Because that future was sold so that a small number of people could make unimaginable amounts of money. It was stolen from us every time you said that the sky was the limit, and that you only live once. (Thunberg 2019a, 57-58)

- 24 The same day,<sup>13</sup> during a debate on "Climate Action and Extinction Rebellion" in the House of Commons, with Thunberg in attendance up in the gallery, Ed Miliband (Labour MP and former party leader) requested to put an "Urgent Question": "To ask the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth if she will make a statement on climate

action and Extinction Rebellion."<sup>14</sup> In her response, the minister, Claire Perry (Conservative MP), evoked the potential emotional impact of crisis narratives used by the movement (as discussed in the next section) that was protesting just outside Parliament:

[...] Watching the protests over the past few days, both here and globally, has raised slightly mixed emotions in me. [...] I worry that many of the messages we are hearing ignore the progress that is being made and, as such, make people fearful for the future, rather than hopeful. (Perry)

- 25 A week later, on 1 May 2019, Jeremy Corbyn, then leader of the Labour Party, tabled an "Opposition motion" to the House of Commons as part of an Opposition debate on "Environment and Climate Change" (House of Commons). He urged the Government to declare an environment and climate emergency. He asserted: "We are living in a climate crisis that will spiral dangerously out of control unless we take rapid and dramatic action now" (Corbyn 2019). He specifically praised "children," "young people" and the "young generation" involved in the school climate strikes, as well as Extinction Rebellion.
- 26 In an unusual step, the bipartisan Parliament of the United Kingdom passed the motion without division and without there being a vote. Thus, the Parliament of the United Kingdom declared an "Environmental and Climate Emergency" on 1 May 2019 – the first country in the world to do so.<sup>15</sup> However, there is no clear definition of what this official declaration actually means and it is not legally binding, i.e. it does not oblige the British Government to take action and make a more sustainable future for the young generation fulfilling the generational contract. The declaration is merely an aspiration, not an obligation. While limited, it is nonetheless an acknowledgement that climate change measures to date have been insufficient and identifies a more pressing need to act within a representative democracy, including for those not old enough to vote, but old enough to protest.
- 27 During the parliamentary debate, several politicians from different political parties referred to young environmental activists and asserted that their protest actions had led to the climate emergency being discussed. For example, Wera Hobhouse (Liberal Democrat MP) pointed out: "Let us remind ourselves why we are here: thousands, if not millions, of young schoolchildren protested on the streets, and that is why we are suddenly taking this issue seriously again." Faisal Rashid (Labour MP) affirmed: "The younger generations have exposed the abject failings of the world's decision makers." However, Huw Merriman (Conservative MP) commented in an ambivalent and ambiguous way:
- I want to send out the message to young people that, yes, they should be concerned, and that, yes, we should listen to them, but please let us start on the basis that this country has done more than most across the globe and has got itself into a better position. We will deliver more – we are committed to delivering more – but let us deal with the facts and not just the ignorance (Merriman).
- 28 While defending the government record and pledging to take further action, his comments could be interpreted as young environmental activists did not know what they were protesting about and lacked knowledge. This is a common trope in political discourse, along with affirmations that climate strikers are immature and that politics should be left to politicians. Such aged-based (and often gender-based) denigration and criticism of young people, represented as incapable of reasoning and immature, have been limited in Britain compared to other countries, for example, by Scott Morrison in

Australia and Donald Trump in the United States of America about climate strikers (Bessant and Lohmeyer; Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020), that young participants refute (Arya, Bowman and Pickard). They are common criticisms made of young people when they get involved in politics (Bessant; Pickard 2019; Young-Bruel) and Thunberg has consistently turned the tables in her framing of generational responsibility to bring about a more sustainable future (Henn and Pickard; Sloam, Henn and Pickard), as illustrated above.

- 29 Thus, at the outset, generational responsibility was present in the discourse of Greta Thunberg, FFF and XR, as well as in political responses, in five main forms: (i) the younger generation will live the longest with the effects on climate change, (ii) the younger generation criticizes older generations for creating climate change and not doing enough to address it, (iii) older generations of powerholders congratulate or criticize the young generation for protesting, (iv) older generations of politicians place hope in the young generation because of their activism, (v) young people are not considered mature enough to be involved in such matters.
- 30 I concur with the British MPs' affirmations that they were debating climate change in Parliament due to protest actions of young environmental activists. It is unlikely that the UK Government would have acknowledged the gravity of the situation and formally declared an "Environmental and Climate Emergency" on 1 May 2019 if FFF and XR had not been launched just a few months earlier, involving thousands of young environmentalist activists, mobilised by the framing of the context as generational responsibility and representing climate change as a crisis, as well an emergency.
- 31 Subsequently, Thunberg continued to campaign supported by a growing number of young environmental activists and prepared for the September Fridays For Future "Global Week for Future" school strikes from 20 to 27 September 2019 (Bowman 2019, 2020), while Extinction Rebellion prepared for the global "International Rebellion" from 7 to 19 October 2019 (Hallam). The next section documents comments made in interviews with young environmental activists during these two crucial protest periods that continued to represent climate change through crisis narratives and generational responsibility.

### 3. Young environmental activists reacting to the representation of climate change

- 32 There are relatively few qualitative studies on contemporary young environmental activists. As part of a research project with colleagues in Britain, I interviewed fifty young environmental activists between the ages of 12 and 34 in Nottingham, Sheffield and London in September and October 2019, before and during the FFF "Global Week for Future" and the XR "International Rebellion." Interviews prior to protests usually lasted one hour and those carried out in the field around 15 minutes; a majority of participants were female school or university students.<sup>16</sup> These interviews provide a greater understanding of how young protesters become mobilised.
- 33 The crisis narratives and generational responsibility articulated by Greta Thunberg, FFF and Extinction Rebellion, and then by politicians to represent climate change are clearly evident overtly and obliquely in the young environmental activists' voices. However, they do not simply repeat – parrot fashion – these themes. Rather, their own

thoughts reflexively reformulate these concerns. For example, Iris, aged 12, in Nottingham said: "Politicians who have a voice for us all are not doing enough to help the climate." When I asked 21-year-old Ollie in Sheffield what he would say to a politician about climate change if he met one, his reply clearly echoes the generational political responsibility that runs through the representation of action on climate change: "I'd say: What are you doing to protect the future of your children and grandchildren?" Amy (21) a climate striker in Nottingham underlined: "If we don't get this sorted by 2030 there will be massive disruption to the planet." Skye (20), had been camping out in London since the beginning of the XR fortnight in St James's Park and Vauxhall Park, but had been moved on by the police to Trafalgar Square.<sup>17</sup> She emphasised that climate change would have a dramatic impact on "kids": "They are the ones going to have to deal with it, especially in the Global South ... droughts... so many people are going to be killed."

- 34 Furthermore, the interviews reveal that the discourse and framing of climate change by FFF and XR as a crisis and an emergency with political accountability triggered strong emotions among these young environmental activists. These emotional reactions reflect two strands of collapsology theory.
- 35 First, the representation of climate change is experienced as so catastrophic and frightening, and such a huge effort is needed to deal with the situation, that one can think it is not even worth making the effort. This can be especially true in the case of young people (O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward). In turn, such overwhelming feelings can lead to individualism and "apathy." For example, Zoé (22, Sheffield) joined Extinction Rebellion in Sheffield as soon as the group was established in January 2019. When talking about climate change, she pointed out that certain youth when confronted with "the truth" feel overwhelmed: "Most young people are concerned. Some think it is 'too big a problem.' They don't know what to do. They feel there is nothing that can be done about it."
- 36 The second, alternative strand of collapsology theory is that the scale of the situation can act as a motivator and mobiliser, and make people come together in solidarity to do something collectively to make the world better for everyone. For example, Amy said: "I think the way to deal with the heaviness is just to do something rather than just lie in bed and think 'I can't sleep everyone is going to die!'. Like you are going to die anyway at some point ... But you can make things better before that, I think."
- 37 However, the interviews with young environmental activists reveal a host of emotions that go far beyond the binary explanation of collapsology theory, and these emotions reflect the representations of climate change in contemporary environmental movements. On analysing their words, three main groups of emotions and feelings were mentioned: 1) "fear," "anxiety," "sadness," "despair;" 2) "anger," "annoyance," "frustration," "rage;" 3) "solidarity," "elation," "joy," "hope."

### a. Fear, anxiety, sadness and despair

- 38 Many participants spoke of initially feeling a host of negative emotions and some were obviously emotional when talking. Bonnie (20), George (21), Nathan (21), Polly (16) and Zoé (22) were interviewed separately in Sheffield, they were all involved in XR and evoked negative feelings regarding climate change in ways it is represented by the movement. Bonnie commented: "I hope we can change things. That it is not too late."

We are running out of time." She spoke about the effect of "telling the truth" regarding climate change: "It's important to stress that it has an effect on mental health. But we can't hide the truth." Zoé emphasised that "we need to face the reality, the fear." This impact of telling the truth was also present in what Polly said: "In the beginning I could not sleep at night." She talked about a gamut of powerful emotions: "It's kind of mostly desperation, mourning (...) the sadness of it all," which evoke feelings of solastalgia. Both George and Nathan mentioned they "felt despair."

- 39 The individual interviews with Becky (32), Mitch (20), Oliver, (28), Skye (20) and Tommy (29) took place in Trafalgar Square, London. Mitch commented: "I looked into what was happening. It made me scared." Skye explained: "Before, I had a physiological reaction ... a pit in my stomach ... it felt heavy." While Tommy described how: "Initially ... after having realised that we are at the start of an existential crisis ... you feel loss for the life being lost." His comments are reflected in Becky's words "I felt upset, sadness, fear ... sadness," while for Oliver, "One of the reasons I'm here, is because I'd lost all hope. Almost a grieving process."
- 40 All these negative emotions and feelings prevented them from taking action beyond individual lifestyle politics, such as recycling, taking public transport, adopting a plant-based diet.

## **b. Anger, annoyance, frustration, rage**

- 41 However, participants went on to explain the next stage in their feeling: frustration, annoyance, anger about political inertia from politicians and generational responsibility.
- 42 For example, Mitch: "... and then I realised the government wasn't doing anything and it made me angry." Liam (21) a climate striker in Nottingham commented: "I'm annoyed. We shouldn't have to do this. We should be able to elect people to do this."
- 43 Such emotions are commonly felt by young people who become protesters (van de Velde and Pickard) and act as a mobilising force. This is shown in what Bonnie explained: "I felt frustrated. I felt angry." She had then co-created an Extinction Rebellion group at university in Sheffield, taken part in the XR rebellion in London earlier in the year and was about to go to London for the October International Rebellion.
- 44 Her journey from fear to anger to protest is typical of many of the interviewees, including Polly who made the decision to walk out of a lesson and take part in a Friday climate strike. She went on to become a core organiser for the Sheffield school climate strikes and got involved in XR too. Participants talked about wanting to counteract the inertia of older generations of powerholders, in order to "make a difference," "get involved," "do something," i.e. DIO politics (Pickard 2019a, 2019b).

## **c. Solidarity, elation, joy and hope**

- 45 From what the participants said, taking part in collective environmental protest actions and getting engaged in fluid, horizontalist environmental campaign networks were ways to build resilience to the crisis narratives and negative emotions. Bonnie attended XR meetings in town and found them "very welcoming." Many participants spoke of how getting involved was not only a way to bring about change, but also

experience the pleasure and support, not being alone. A typical example is Ollie: "There are many positives of being involved in Extinction Rebellion. There's a strong community ... everyone seems genuinely caring." Skylab (19) in London, emphasised the "kindness" she felt in XR: "We are radical in our kindness."

- 46 Nathan also talked about protest as being a way to overcome feelings of isolation "there's a lot of camaraderie ... we are in it together and not alone. We can make a change", as did Jay, 32, speaking in Trafalgar Square about how good it felt to see so many people protesting about the environmental emergency: "I've been waiting for this for ten years. It's taken me time to deal with the grief and feel like there are other people. I'm not alone." Similar comments were made by Curtis (21) also in London: "I'm proud that there are other people here who care about the environment and it's something important. It's comforting to know."
- 47 Beyond solidarity as a means of resilience, protesters also spoke about the joy and euphoria when protesting that is a typical emotion experienced by protesters (Jasper; Pickard 2017; Pickard and Bessant 2018). For example, Nathan: "In the climate strikes I felt elated, like I was bouncing off the walls [...]," and Mitch "in the march I felt a sense of joy ... in a time of such despair."
- 48 Clearly, participating provided the young environmental activists with a sense of hope, a crucial mobilising emotion (Ojala) as an antidote to fear and anxiety. This was particularly obvious among the youngest participants, such as 12-year-old Jasmine who was interviewed in Nottingham towards the end of the Earth Day school climate strike: "In the future, the world might collapse. ... I'm scared but hopeful that the government will realise it is a big issue and will do something. I hope the government is listening."
- 49 Thus, in very self-reflective ways, the young environmental activists explained how protesting was a way to counteract or cope with feelings of helplessness or hopelessness faced with crisis narratives and political inaction. It is obvious young environmental activists *hope* their peaceful protest actions will bring about systemic change – climate and social justice – from politicians that imbue the young generation with the responsibility of being the hope for the future, rather than alleviating their anxiety.

## 4. Conclusion

- 50 Since the launch of Fridays For Future and then Extinction Rebellion in 2018, these two environmental movements have consistently represented climate change as a crisis and an emergency in discourse, narratives, imagery and framing. They have also underlined generational responsibility and the social contract towards young and future generations. Young people's understanding of climate change has been largely fuelled by these representations. For some young people dystopian narratives that emphasise the scale of climate change and the measures to address it, as well as the urgency that if not addressed would lead to ecological catastrophe, act as a barrier to activism: often they feel the situation is too overwhelming. However, the young environmental activists interviewed commented while they initially felt negative emotions that acted as a brake to activism, once they discovered that older generation of politicians were not taking significant action and fulfilling the social contract of generational responsibility, other emotions emerged. These acted as levers to their protest actions as DIO politics: they felt the need to "do something" to make

powerholders from older generations "do something." The scale of protest actions they engaged in and their meeting with other young environmental activists brought about positive feelings of joy and hope.

- 51 The young environmentalists interviewed show they are deeply reflexive and emotional in their understanding of climate change and representations of it. They have been using their agency in peaceful protest actions and by doing so have put the crisis under the public and political spotlight, leading to the British government acknowledging there is a climate and environmental emergency, as well as the 2019 "Word of the Year" being "climate emergency." Young environmental activists hope that elected powerholders and decision makers, most of whom are from older generations, will act urgently and significantly for the planet, so the young generation and future generations are not burdened with anxiety, sadness and fear, or the future responsibility of the legacy passed down to them.
- 52 Moreover, local, national and international transformative change on climate justice and social justice will not only improve intergenerational injustices, but it will also go some way to restoring young people's trust in politicians, i.e. to provide more than just hope.

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## NOTES

1. In March 2019, the Labour Party launched its "Labour for a Green New Deal," channelling the youth-led Sunrise Movement and Democrat Party Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (born 1989) initiatives in the United States of America.
2. Almost a year after the Labour Party's 2019 manifesto, the expression "Green Industrial Revolution" was employed on 18 November 2020, by Conservative Party leader Boris Johnson: "The Prime Minister has now laid out his new ambitious ten point plan to create a Green

Industrial Revolution – which will create and support hundreds of thousands of jobs across the UK” (Conservative Party).

3. A greater proportion of young voters supported the Green Party in the May 2019 European Parliament elections than previously (YouGov 2019a; Schminke). The First-Past-The Post (FPTP) electoral system used in UK general elections is an obstacle to smaller political parties, such as the Green Party that has just one MP in the House of Commons.

4. For an examination of the United Nations literature on climate change and sustainability development, see: Nail, this volume.

5. The day before, on 30 October 2018, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) published *Living Planet Report: 2018 Aiming Higher* written by 59 scientists using similar crisis narratives: “Earth is losing biodiversity at a rate seen only during mass extinctions” (25). “We can see that current levels of decline and degradation are not normal – they increasingly resemble some of the catastrophic extinctions in the geological past” (86).

6. Extinction Rebellion was founded by former members of RisingUp! a radical environmental network created in 2016 mainly with environmental activists taking part in direct action and civil disobedience during the 1990s, as discussed in a face-to-face interview with a founder of XR, Ian Bray, in Nottingham, on 20 September 2019 (see also Read and Alexander).

7. A fortnight afterwards, on 17 November 2018, “Rebellion Day” was “the climax of Extinction Rebellion’s first week of civil disobedience against the British Government for its criminal inaction in the face of the climate and ecological emergency which we all face” (Extinction Rebellion 2018).

8. Original Swedish version: “*Vi barn gör ju oftast inte som ni säger åt oss att göra, vi gör som ni gör. Och eftersom ni vuxna skiter i min framtid, så gör jag det med. Jag skolstrejkar för klimatet fram till valdagen*” translated into English by Olsson. See photograph by Mårten Thorslund in Olsson, as well as Thunberg’s Twitter and Instagram accounts.

9. Two weeks after Thunberg started her school strike for the climate, *The Guardian* reported on her actions (Crouch), which illustrates how quickly she and her discourse became known beyond Sweden, especially in the UK.

10. Felix, 28, was interviewed by Matthew Taylor for *The Guardian*, he is reported as saying “The disruption we are causing today is nothing to the destruction that our governments are unleashing by not taking serious steps to stop the ecological crisis.”

11. The following are a small selection of official events at which Greta Thunberg spoke in 2018 and 2019:

(1) COP24, United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC), Katowice, 15 December 2018; (2) World Economic Forum (WEF), Davos, 25 January 2019; (3) European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), Brussels, 21 February 2019; (4) European Parliament, Strasbourg, 16 April 2019; (5) UK Parliament, London, 23 April and 1 May 2019; (6) French National Assembly (Assemblée nationale), Paris, 23 July 2019; (7) United Nations Climate Action Summit, New York, 23 September 2019; (8) COP25, United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC), Madrid, 11 December 2019.

12. Another influence on public opinion at that time was the broadcast on 18 April 2019 of David Attenborough’s documentary “Climate Change: The Facts” on BBC One television channel.

13. On the morning of 23 April 2019, Greta Thunberg (2019b) was interviewed by Nick Robinson, on the Today programme BBC Radio 4. She said: “You can’t be a little bit sustainable. Either you’re sustainable or you’re not sustainable.”

14. Full title: The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Minister of State (Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) (Energy and Clean Growth).

15. Within the United Kingdom’s devolved parliamentary system, a few days earlier, on 28 April 2019, the Scottish Parliament, led by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (SNP MSP), had declared a

“climate emergency” and the Assembly for Wales, led by Mark Drakeford (Labour AM), did the same the next day, on 29 April 2019.

16. Some of the young environmental activists interviewed were initially contacted via the websites and Facebook pages of regional Extinction Rebellion groups. Others were approached during school climate strikes or Extinction Rebellion protest actions. Climate strikers in Nottingham were interviewed by Dena Arya (Nottingham Trent University, UK) and I together as part of a research project in 2019 on young environmental activists with her and Benjamin Bowman (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK). Participants all signed ethical consent forms before being interviewed. For interviewees below the age of 16, prior signed parental consent was obtained. Some participants gave pseudonyms that do not always reflect their gender or ethnic background.

17. The next day the police removed all the tents and banned Extinction Rebellion from protesting using the Public Order Act 1984, a decision that was subsequently overturned by the High Court.

## ABSTRACTS

“You are stealing our future in front of our very eyes.” These words from Greta Thunberg encapsulate two prominent themes in the global wave of environmental activism since 2018 and its discourse. First, climate change is represented as a “crisis” or an “emergency” and placed within dystopian narratives. Second, older generations, particularly politicians, are urged to take swift and substantial action, to both fulfil their generational responsibility towards young and future generations, and to avoid ecological collapse.

This article discusses the impact of such discourse on the activism of young protesters. It draws on 50 semi-structured interviews with young environmental activists engaged in school climate strikes Fridays For Future (FFF) movement and Extinction Rebellion (XR), in Britain during autumn 2019.

The ways climate change is represented has instigated emotional responses. Initially overwhelmed, they then become angry and frustrated with politicians, which mobilised them in collective environmental protest movements that provide camaraderie, joy and hope. Such activism can be understood as Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) politics, whereby youths feel the need to “do something” positive together to make powerholders from older generations “do something” significant and sustainable for the planet and future young generations. Politicians are increasingly reacting to this youth activism.

« Vous volez notre avenir sous nos propres yeux ». Ces paroles de Greta Thunberg résumant deux thèmes prédominants au sein du discours employé dans la vague mondiale d'activisme écologiste depuis 2018. Premièrement, le changement climatique est représenté comme une « crise » et une « urgence » au sein de récits dystopiques. Deuxièmement, les générations plus âgées, en particulier les politiciens, sont exhortées à prendre des mesures rapides et substantielles, afin d'éviter l'effondrement écologique et d'assumer leur responsabilité générationnelle envers les jeunes et les générations futures.

Cet article traite de l'impact de ce discours sur l'activisme des jeunes manifestants. Il s'appuie sur 50 entretiens semi-directifs avec de jeunes militants écologistes engagés dans les grèves scolaires pour le climat du mouvement les Vendredis pour l'avenir (FFF) et dans Extinction Rebellion (XR),

en Grande-Bretagne à l'automne 2019.

Les voix de ces jeunes manifestants révèlent que ces représentations du changement climatique produisent une variété de réactions émotionnelles qui peuvent initialement décourager le militantisme, mais qui encouragent ensuite la mobilisation dans une action directe non violente collective (ADNC) qui procure camaraderie et espoir. Ce type d'activisme peut être compris comme une politique du « Do-It-Ourselves » (DIO), dans laquelle les jeunes ressentent le besoin de « faire quelque chose » de positif ensemble pour que les détenteurs du pouvoir des générations plus âgées « fassent quelque chose » de significatif et de durable pour la planète et les futures jeunes générations. Les politiciens réagissent de plus en plus à cet activisme des jeunes.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Extinction Rebellion, Greta Thunberg, grève scolaire pour le climat, jeunesse, jeunes militants écologistes, politique faite par nous-mêmes, manifestations écologiques

**Keywords:** Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) politics, environmental protests, Extinction Rebellion, Fridays For Future (FFF), Greta Thunberg, School climate strikes, young environmental activists, young people, youth

## AUTHOR

### SARAH PICKARD

University of Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle  
sarah.pickard@sorbonne-nouvelle.fr

Sarah Pickard (CREW, EA 4399), is an associate professor of British Studies at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris, France). In her research, she focuses on young people's political participation from a holistic perspective, reflected in her book *Politics, Protest and Young People: Political Participation and Dissent in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). She is currently working on Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) political engagement and youth-led environmental activism.