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New kids on the block: taking stock of the recent cycle of climate activism

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ABSTRACT

Since late 2018, a global wave of mobilization under the banners of Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) has injected new energy into global climate politics. FFF and XR took the world by storm, but have now been forced into (partial) latency as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. We believe this moment presents an opportunity for reflection. In particular, FFF and XR have been depicted as 'new' forms of climate activism. However, we argue that the extent to which these campaigns represent 'new' forms of climate activism is really a matter for closer investigation. In this Profile, we therefore reflect on the distinctiveness of the 'new climate activism' as compared to previous climate campaigns. Reviewing previous studies and our own research, we find that there are both elements of change and continuity in who participates and how, and that the main change appears to be the use of a more politically 'neutral' framing of climate change that is directed more strongly at state than non-state actors.

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Introduction

The year 2019 was extraordinary in terms of the unprecedented scale and coordination of mobilizations on the climate crisis. Alongside the more transgressive protests of *Extinction Rebellion* (XR) the enormous protest campaign *Fridays For Future* (FFF) succeeded to grasp the attention of the world and its political leaders. In 2020 this cycle of global street protests was broken by the societal lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though, for example, FFF climate protests have continued online, this arguably marks the end of the first chapter of the recent climate protest cycle, opening up a space for reflection. In this Profile, we aim to get closer to the distinctiveness of these campaigns through a historical comparison that situates them in their recent historical context of climate activism. This allows us to discuss both aspects of newness and of continuity. In the following, we draw on previous research, including our own, as well data from protest surveys of FFF and XR participants throughout 2019.¹ While more in-depth research is needed, we find that there are both elements of change and continuity in who participates and how, and that the main change appears to be the

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use of a more politically ‘neutral’ framing directed more strongly at state than non-state actors.

A brief history of the climate movement

Whereas global warming intermittently received attention as an urgent social problem in the 1970s and 1980s and led to major protests since the 1990s, the 2009 UNFCCC COP15 summit in Copenhagen can be considered a turning point for transnational climate mobilizing. Since the yearly international UN climate summits started in 1995, environmental movement organizations have been present at the meetings and have pushed for strong climate agreements. While initially modest, a lasting uptake in climate movement involvement started from COP6 in the Hague, in 2000, culminating in the massive mobilization around COP15 (Hadden, 2015). There were up to 100,000 demonstrators in Copenhagen, many simultaneous protest events occurred in other countries, and the diversity of organizations involved had increased (Wahlström et al., 2013).

This rise in climate activism had several parallel causes. First, there had been growing scientific evidence of the urgency of the issue, complemented with increased media attention, including the release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006. The Kyoto Protocol was also nearing its expiration date and the ability of COP15 to deliver an alternative – and possibly better – agreement was seen as tantamount to ‘saving the climate.’ Second, a process of ‘climatization’ had been taking place, whereby actors including NGOs increasingly realized that climate change was the talk of the town and presented a necessary hook to advance their causes (Aykut et al., 2017). Third and relatedly, in a process of ‘movement spillover’ the global justice movement – which had previously targeted more outspokenly neoliberal institutions like the WTO and IMF – became increasingly involved in climate politics, strengthening the emerging climate justice wing of the movement (Hadden, 2015).

As expected by some, and to the dismay of many, COP15 did not result in a new strong agreement – only an ‘accord’ that lacked sufficient support from participating countries. The Copenhagen climate mobilization had framed the meeting as a ‘now-or-never’ opportunity to address climate change, and with the widespread sense of failure also came demobilization (Hadden, 2015; de Moor & Wahlström, 2019). Climate activism continued, but at a smaller scale, especially in Europe, for instance, in the form of local direct action campaigns, Climate Camps, meetings around World Social Forums, prefigurative projects, and divestment campaigns.

Despite ongoing reservations to get involved in another climate summit, the 2015 Paris summit (COP21) was, due to its high profile, another opportunity to generate momentum and attention (Cassegård et al., 2017; de Moor, 2018). This was hard to resist even for the radical and direct-action oriented organizations. Yet instead of putting pressure on the negotiations, a large section of the movement prepared to forcefully condemn the anticipated insufficiency of the summit’s outcome, and to use the generated momentum to build a movement that would ‘take matters into its own hands’ in the summit’s aftermath. While the COP21 mobilization itself remained rather focused on the official negotiations, the post-Paris climate movement did increasingly shift attention to direct action campaigns against the fossil fuel industry (Tramel, 2016). Prominent examples include the recurring mass-direct action campaigns organized against coal

mines in Germany by *Ende Gelände*, and the global *Break Free* campaigns against the fossil fuel industry worldwide.

A 'new' climate movement?

Yet while post-Paris campaigns continued, a new set of climate movement actors took centre stage in late 2018 – most prominently FFF and XR. Initially acting alone, on 20 August 2018 the then-15-year-old Greta Thunberg skipped school in order to protest in front of the Swedish parliament until the parliamentary elections on 9 September. The protest rapidly attracted followers, and the hashtag '#FridaysForFuture' was coined by Thunberg on Friday 7 September. Her powerful display quickly won the attention of news media worldwide. Climate strikes have since mushroomed globally, sometimes under different banners, such as *Youth for Climate* or *School Strikes for Climate*, but always clearly tied to Thunberg's FFF campaign. On 15 March 2019, the first Global Climate Strike of FFF mobilized an estimated one million protesters. The third global event, known as the Global Week for Future during 20–27 September 2019, mobilized an estimated six million strikers.

Extinction Rebellion emerged slightly after FFF, when on 31 October 2018 its organizers announced a Declaration of Rebellion against the UK government. XR has since been drawing attention with its civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action to compel government action. Its protest actions are aimed at causing economic disruption to shake the current political system, and civil disruption to raise awareness. The action repertoire of XR is broader than the one of FFF, including, for example, blocking roads, planting trees in the middle of Parliament Square, and gluing oneself to entrances of various corporate and government buildings. The XR campaign has also grown globally, facilitated by its organizing structure that enables anyone to act as part of XR, so long as one agrees to a list of core principles.²

These two movements have been popularly interpreted as representing a 'new climate activism.' Yet as social movements do not emerge in a social or historical vacuum, closer examination is required to establish what is truly 'new' about them. Below, we therefore explore what can be seen as elements of newness and continuity regarding the 'who', 'how', and 'why' of climate activism.

Who participates: experience, demographics, and organizations

First, at an individual level, we can ask whether FFF and XR activists were new to climate activism or already involved in previous climate campaigns. Often, 'first-timers' tend to represent a small minority of participants in protest events (Saunders et al., 2012). However, the survey data from climate strikers in March and September 2019 show that many more respondents (especially among the young) had never demonstrated before (de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019). Hence, a notable impact of FFF lies in its ability to mobilize so many young people – especially girls and women – who experience activism for the first time, potentially putting them on track to remain politically engaged throughout their lives (Fisher, 2019).

Yet otherwise, little indicates that FFF and XR activists represent a deviation from the profile of the typical climate activist, especially in terms of education. Like most other

forms of political engagement (Dalton, 2017) and despite the common goal of climate action groups to reach beyond the constituency of usual suspects, environmental and climate activism has been dominated by well-educated individuals (Giugni & Grasso, 2015). FFF and XR have entered the scene with a clear aim to reach a broad constituency, yet as overwhelming majorities of protesters were found to have (parents with) university degrees, it seems that they have not been able to dissolve education as a major barrier to participation (de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019).

A potentially fruitful avenue for future research is to explore the ties that leaders in FFF and XR are able to establish with other movement organizations, as this may bring in new types of resources, participants, and mobilization strategies (cf. Hadden, 2015).

How they participate: tactics and targets

FFF's school strikes and XR's strategy aimed at mass arrests are certainly among their most recognizable features, but are strictly speaking, not new. Already in 2015, on the first day of COP21, students around the world joined a climate strike to demand government action³ and civil disobedience more generally has long been part of the repertoire of environmental and climate activists. For instance, part of the mobilization around COP21 was in transgression of a ban on protesting initiated after the 'Bataclan' terror attacks. FFF and XR also use a range of well-established public activities that resemble previous climate action, including marches and rallies.

Whereas previous years saw climate activism focus increasingly on 'do-it-yourself' forms of action such as developing grassroots solutions and taking direct action against the fossil fuel industry, we note that FFF and XR represent a 'return to the state.' XR's three central claims demand that governments 'tell the truth', 'act now', and 'create citizens' assemblies.' FFF explicitly demands that politicians 'listen to the science,' and 'follow the Paris agreement.'⁴ In our protest surveys we found that most people within the movement agreed that putting pressure on politicians was a key aim of the movement. This refocusing on the state should however not be attributed to a blind faith in politicians' ability to act, as we found that very few FFF and XR activists believe politicians can be relied on to solve the climate crisis. Moreover, many FFF and XR activists continue to engage in lifestyle politics and in fact give comparably strong support to the notion that individual responsibility taking can solve the climate crisis.

Why they participate: collective action framing

A final crucial dimension to assess the newness of FFF and XR is their collective action framing. We therefore consider how the campaigns address five essential framing tasks: to define the problem, to identify who or what is to blame, to present solutions, to identify who or what is responsible for solving the problem, and to elaborate a rationale for participation in collective action (Snow et al., 2018).

The main problem defined by FFF and XR is that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are causing global warming and they relate climate change to injustices across time and space. In this regard, their diagnostic framing resembles that of previous climate campaigns (Wahlström et al., 2013). However, FFF clearly emphasizes the generational aspect of climate justice more strongly than any previous campaign, and by focusing on

being ‘beyond politics’ it is often argued that XR and FFF deviate from the more oppositional framing of climate justice that has previously been used to depict a clear opposition between the movement and its ‘enemies’ (Evensen, 2019; Hadden, 2015; de Moor et al., 2018).

FFF and XR attribute blame to politicians, who have remained too passive in tackling global warming. This makes it different from the shift in focus away from the state and to the responsibility of citizens and companies in some recent climate mobilizations (de Moor, 2018). Many XR activists see no point in blaming at all, as one of their core principles states that ‘we avoid blaming and shaming. We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame.’

Regarding the prognostic framing, the solution is mostly presented in broad terms: for politicians to respect the climate-scientific consensus, and thus install policy changes that will effectively lower anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. When FFF is criticized for not proposing any clear-cut solutions to politicians themselves, activists argue that it is unfair to demand of (young) activist citizens to present ready-made solutions to wicked problems like the climate crisis.⁵ Although they urge politicians to ‘unite behind the science’ and a large majority of FFF protesters agree that ‘the government must act on what climate scientists say, even if the majority of people are opposed’, significantly fewer people agree that ‘we can rely on modern science to solve our environmental problems.’ (Wahlström et al., 2019). XR puts more emphasis on democratic input through its demands for citizen assemblies to inform climate policies, but otherwise does not tend to formulate concrete policy asks. Here we find again some discontinuity with previous campaigns that sometimes did rally around more specific demands for climate action, such as Friends of the Earth’s ‘Big Ask’ campaign that led to the UK Climate Change Act (Carter & Childs, 2018).

Although politicians are urged to act, Thunberg has stressed that it is the people protesting at the gates of institutional politics who make politicians act – which brings us to motivational framing. Similar framings were used by those wanting to put pressure on the official negotiations at COP21, but the focus on demanding government action was challenged as naïve by most groups involved in the campaign (de Moor, 2018). Both XR and FFF present a narrative that warns people of apocalyptic images of future catastrophes – necessitating action in the present. Additionally, XR occasionally introduces ‘postapocalyptic’ elements (Cassegård & Thörn, 2018) that frame the climate crisis as an already ongoing catastrophe. While this ambiguity seems to resonate with activists’ mixed sentiments of hope and despair, more research is needed to examine how these contradicting time frames can be reconciled in the long run.

Conclusion

Despite some continuities with prior climate mobilizing, FFF and XR do display some novel characteristics. First, the campaigns have mobilized a historically large number of people, particularly newcomers, school pupils, and girls. However, prior biases regarding participants’ education remain. Second, although the repertoire employed is not radically new, the emphasis on disobedient action forms seems stronger than in prior mobilizations. Third, both groups mainly target local or national governments. FFF and XR thereby break from prior climate mobilizations targeting transnational institutions or fossil fuel industry and emphasising ‘do-it-yourself’ forms of actions. Fourth, while FFF and XR are similar to prior climate campaigns in terms of what they are against, they

have opted for the rather vague prognostic framing of ‘listen to the science’. While such a frame is easy to accept, and therefore effective for including a large audience for a while, the long-term mobilization and political impact might require FFF and XR to, over time, develop stronger visions for the future. With the Covid-19 pandemic opening up discursive space for radical change, a key focus for future research is whether and how the new climate activists will manage to make use of that.

Notes

1. Details about the FFF protest survey, which includes interview data from more than 5000 interviewees in 25 cities across Europe, Australia and the US, can be found in our detailed reports (de Moor et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019). We also refer to protest survey data from around 230 interviews with XR activists who were interviewed in the UK using similar methods in April and October 2019. The latter data collection was led by Clare Saunders (University of Exeter), Brian Doherty (Keele University), and Graeme Hayes (Aston University), and details about this data collection can be found in the following report (Saunders et al., 2020).
2. <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/about-us/>
3. <https://www.climatestrike.net/climate-strike-in-paris/>
4. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/what-we-do/our-demands/>
5. <https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/about>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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