

**RADICAL TRANSFORMATION: HOW CLIMATE
REBELS ARE FACILITATING THE IMAGINATION AND
TRANSITION TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE**

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Environmental Studies
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Science
May 2021

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Wally McAllister for the degree of Bachelor of Science
in the Department of Environmental Studies to be taken June 2021

Title: Radical Transformation: How Climate Rebels are Facilitating the Imagination and
Transition to a Sustainable Future

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This thesis addresses the role that climate activism plays in the transformation to a sustainable future. It looks at radical movements on the different levels of change, with a particular emphasis on the imaginary. It addresses fossil fuels and capitalism, a tight-knit relationship that goes back centuries. Using the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion as a case study, this thesis outlines their strategies and intentions to mobilize 3.5% of the population. It provides a framework for how to create efficiency in the policy-making process with the proposal of citizens' assemblies. This thesis also discusses the lack of inclusivity inherently created by the whiteness of the environmental movement and media bias. Finally, it ties in the work of youth activists to represent that global problems require people of all demographics. It concludes that the climate movement requires the attention of everyone, along with their collective imaginations, if meaningful change is going to occur.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Barbara Muraca for allowing me to pursue a thesis that allowed me to touch on so many different topics. As I have continually researched and discovered the vast realm of climate activism and its impact on creating change, Barbara has been a source of inspiration, as well as rationality. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee, Professors Stephanie LeMenager and Brian McWhorter, for their patience in working with me on this paper. The added challenge of working through a pandemic has made this process a unique experience and my committee has been extremely supportive in the development of this thesis.

Thank you to the Clark Honors College for an unforgettable four years in which my ability to learn has grown, adapted, and persevered. I want to thank Professors Marc Schlossberg and Rebecca Lewis for the adventure of a lifetime learning about bike transportation in Denmark and the Netherlands. Thank you to Professor Mark Carey and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program for a remarkable experience learning about climate justice within the walls of the Oregon State Penitentiary. I would like to thank Professor Katie Lynch and Katie Russell for their guidance in teaching fifth grade students about migratory birds through the Environmental Leadership Program. These courses, among many others, have been a source of an enormous amount of inspiration.

I would like to thank my parents for their constant love and support. Their belief in me as a student and as a human has made it easy to write about what inspires me. Finally, thank you to my roommates and friends for their understanding on the days I spent in the library instead of with them. The people in my life motivate me to be the best version of myself and follow my passions, wherever they may lead me.

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Introduction

The climate crisis is upon us and has quickly become the largest threat to life itself in the history of humankind. There are individuals like Greta Thunberg, nonprofits such as Greenpeace, and activist groups like The Sunrise Movement that are attempting to tackle the issue head-on and find solutions to a global problem. To understand how activist groups are helping in guiding the transformation [see appendix] to a better world, I propose to look at one of the most extreme and successful of them all: Extinction Rebellion.

In this thesis, I hope to spark the imagination of my readers by developing an argument centered around different dimensions of change. Through analysis of the climate activist group Extinction Rebellion, I will attempt to evaluate how change occurs and the barriers holding back change from happening. I will criticize the current economic and political systems of world leaders and argue for the development of citizens' assemblies. Finally, I will look at racial issues among our policing system and the inclusivity of climate activism to address the disparities in our collective ability to fight for a better future. I do not expect to find all the answers to my questions, nor will I ever feel my research is complete. I do, however, expect to bring awareness to the fact that there are individuals, groups, and movements that are helping to transform the way we think about and approach the climate crisis.

Section 1: Radical Transformation

Dimensions of Change

To address the concentrations of analysis within this research, I will use four levels: micro, meso, macro, and imaginary. The micro level focuses on individuals, many of whom I will address throughout the paper. Extinction Rebellion, or XR, will be my main subject for the meso level, which centers around groups and organizations. The macro level tackles political and cultural issues, such as national systems, regulations, and standards. Finally, I will emphasize the imaginary in this paper to address the way we can visualize a future rooted in justice and sustainability.

Before diving into the research surrounding the path towards transformation through the different levels of analysis, I want to discuss the term ‘radical’ and the way it has been portrayed by society. ‘Radical’ is often used, dauntingly, to express someone or something that has strayed from social or political norms. Sometimes individuals or groups are deemed radical by the media, but do not use that terminology themselves. This is the case for Extinction Rebellion. Others, such as the authors that will be referenced when discussing the imaginary, prefer to use the term ‘radical’ copiously.

Historically, the term “Radicalism” has been used in many political and social movements and can be traced back to the end of the 18th and beginning of 19th centuries as a precursor to social change advocates (The Editors of Britannica). There have been “radical” political parties in many European countries over the last three centuries, including the UK, France, Spain, and Italy. The term has mostly been used as a socialist left radicalism and continues to mainly be used by progressive parties, but it has also been used in far-right ideologies in some instances.

In the United States today, the “radical right” is used to describe people that lean towards extreme conservatism. This ideology is often rooted in ethnic supremacism and conspiracism. A relevant conspiracy of the radical right is that climate change is a hoax. On the other side, the term “radical left” describes many Marxist, anti-capital, and anti-fascist ideologies. Rooted in socialism, the radical left is frequently described as communist and anti-globalization.

The point here is that the term “radical” is used to define the far ends of the political spectrum. It is used for people and groups that argue for a fundamental shift in the regulatory ways of doing things. Radicalism is both dangerous and necessary. Search Google for just about anyone that has made a significant impact on society, follow it with the term “radical” and it is nearly inescapable to find at least one article that deems that person a radical.

Is the term overused? Definitely. But it is also an easy way to describe thinking that is way outside of centrist views. I am using it in this thesis because of the need for a significant change in the way society functions. Viewing climate change as a crisis is not radical but understanding that we must make rapid sweeping changes to the current system to combat climate change is radical.

In this thesis, I will use the term ‘radical’ in several different contexts. For Extinction Rebellion, the term is not used on their website except occasionally in press releases, posts, and events. They have specifically chosen to use terms like “rebel” and “transform” to show they are different in their attempt to create rapid change (Extinction Rebellion, “Join the Fight”). But even if the movement itself is not using the term ‘radical,’ that does not hold the media back from using it. From being referred to

as “The New Eco-Radicals” by Rolling Stone and listed as an “extremist” group by the UK counter-terrorism police, XR has its fair share of nicknames coming from outside sources. For this reason, I will not use the term ‘radical’ when I am referring to Extinction Rebellion specifically. However, I will use the term when discussing climate activism as a whole. In this case, the term radical is used as a reference to people who are in favor of rapid and transformative changes in both political and social spectrums. I will also use the term when discussing the ideas of authors that use the term in their books.

Radical ideas can help in all four dimensions of change. In this thesis, I will explore the radical ideas of individuals, organizations, governments, and imaginations to further conceptualize what it means to be a radical and how radicalism is required for transformative change.

Transforming the Imaginary

Transforming one’s own imagination may be the most radical dimension of change, which also makes it the most important. To visualize a future of hope, I turn to what Alex Khasnabish and Max Halven call *The Radical Imagination*. The authors outline this idea as “the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be” This idea is about recognizing that the world can and should be changed, and there is a certain amount of courage one must have to address it. Khanabish and Halven say that it is not just reimagining the future, but it is “about bringing those possible futures ‘back’ to work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today” (3). Instead of attempting to solve all the world’s

problems with the uncertainty of today, imagine how you want the world to be, and then work backwards.

The radical imagination is not just about imagining a future world but reimagining the present. It is a collective process of empathy in which individuals come together to create coexisting landscapes of commonality and shared understanding. Drawing from the past, the radical imagination allows for a remembering of how the world came to be the way it is. We can use our own imagination individually and collectively to spark a climate revolution.

The imagination is the first step towards transformation. Carving out time to imagine a better world motivates one to develop passion towards their own future. It inspires them to act at the micro level. One then goes to a friend, colleague, or family member to share their imagination. Now, there is a pair of individuals that are imagining a better world together, with separate but equally valid ideas to their collective future. Those two people share it with two more. The cycle continues until there is an entire community of imaginers. The creation of a group at the meso level has formed. This group, through collective action, can generate change at local, state, and national levels through coordination and dedication to their ideas. They begin to influence the macro level because, in a democracy, change occurs where the most people are rallying behind the same idea. All of a sudden, radical transformation is ready to occur. The imaginary becomes the root of change, something that is desperately needed in the time of crisis.

This example does not mean that the imaginary is always the spark to ignite change. Rather, the dimensions of change are complex, dynamic systems that work

collectively to influence one another. A group can inspire an individual and an individual can impact a government. Or an institution can stimulate the imagination of an individual within it, resulting in the formulation of change at whatever level the individual chooses. All levels are vital to the development of change, but it is the imagination that transcends through each level and represents the collective power of transformation.

Eric Holthaus' *The Future Earth*

To understand what is needed for transformation, we must ask the questions that provide context for a sustainable future. Eric Holthaus, in his book *The Future Earth*, outlines some of these questions. Ideas like “how will we remake the world’s food systems? How will we reimagine transportation in a world where fossil fuels are being rapidly phased out? And how will we transform our global economy to be regenerative rather than extractive?” (Holthaus 68-9). These are questions that cannot be answered easily, but if we all start to ask them and we get to the point where 3.5% [see further section “Mobilizing 3.5%”] of the population is asking these questions and acting upon them, we may start to see the formation of a path. If we have the ability, as a species, to completely wipe out grand populations of life forms on the only planet we know to sustain life, we certainly have the ability to rebuild it.

Eric Holthaus, in the epilogue of his book *The Future Earth*, has outlined An Imagination Exercise. Because “it too often feels easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine a world/worlds beyond our current system of extraction and exploitation” (217), we must look at what Holthaus calls the “Principles for Imagining a

Future Earth.” These include starting small, beginning with the end in mind, and envisioning a future in which collaboration is put before competition. Perhaps the most important of them all though is to iterate, iterate, iterate. Holthaus explains that there is no “right” vision. If we are able to visualize futures based off the influences of others and let them build upon one another, while attempting to learn and create with people of all walks of life, there is an infinite number of possibilities for our future.

Capitalism and the Climate Crisis

At this point in the thesis, I have outlined what it means to be a radical and how the imagination can help in getting us to the point of transformation. Transformation and the radical ideas of people like Eric Holthaus are needed because of the current state of our planet. To discover a world that is free of injustice and inequity, we must address the system itself.

If we use our imaginary to visualize a world that is fully sustainable, there is no room for capitalism. The accumulation of capital is rooted in the drive for profit. It is based in a competitive market that inherently creates more enemies than it does friends. However, it also allows for self-regulation, innovation, and freedom, ensuring an efficient way to manufacture and promote growth. The highs and lows of capitalism have been debated and written about for as long as the system has been in place, but to jumpstart to the only question that really matters, we must ask: is it sustainable?

Sustainability is a concept that is used in many different contexts and is often used to describe the ways humans need to avoid the depletion of our planet Earth’s natural resources. For the purposes of this thesis, sustainability means maintaining the

nine planetary boundaries, outlined by Swedish Professor Johan Rockström et al. These boundaries, as seen in Figure 1, work within the biophysical processes of the planet and define the thresholds of safe operating spaces for humankind. For something to be deemed sustainable, it must operate within the planetary boundaries. The concern for our current economic system is that the boundaries for three of these systems (rate of biodiversity loss, climate change and human interference with the nitrogen cycle) have already been exceeded.

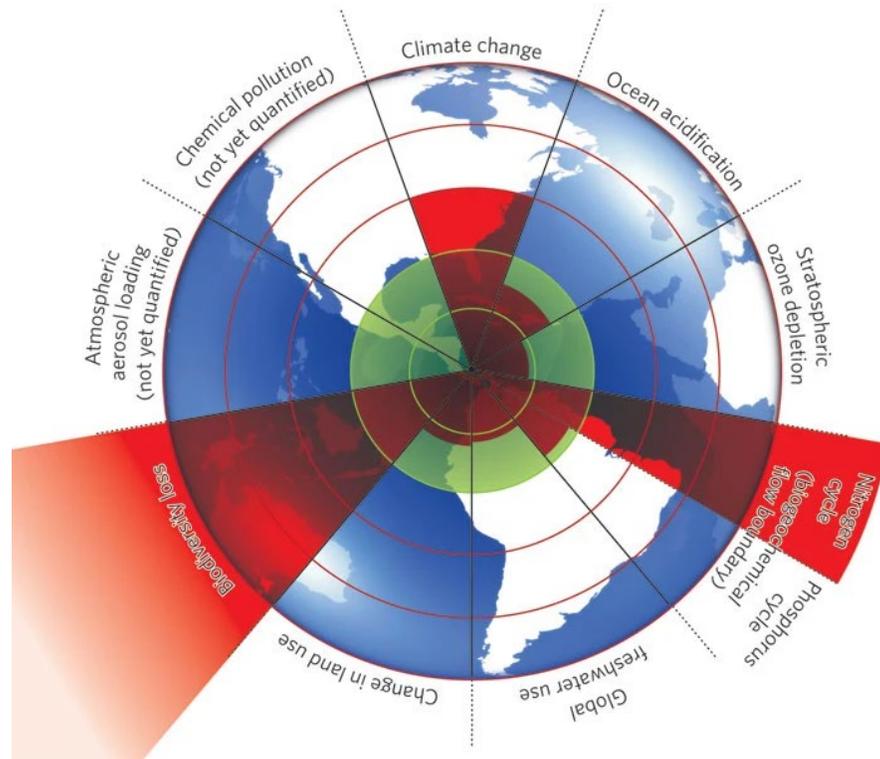


Figure 1: Planetary Boundaries (Rockström et al.)

“The inner green shading represents the proposed safe operating space for nine planetary systems. The red wedges represent an estimate of the current position for each variable. The boundaries in three systems (rate of biodiversity loss, climate change and human interference with the nitrogen cycle), have already been exceeded” (Rockström et al.).

Global capitalism has forced us to exceed the boundaries in three areas, inevitably creating feedback loops that put the other boundaries at risk. The relationship between capitalism and surpassing our planetary boundaries is examined well by Ian Angus in *Facing the Anthropocene*. Angus discusses the relationship between innovation, human dependence on materialism, and fossil development. A few advancements in the 19th century changed the entire working of the economy, deeming them epoch-making innovations. Three key developments: the steam-engine, the railroad, and the automobile, brought technology based on the burning of fossil fuels and solidified the

existence of a fossil economy. These advancements gave people access to travel longer distances in shorter periods of time than ever previously before. In the time following World War II, from 1946-73, world oil production would grow 700%. Often referred to as the Golden Age of Capitalism, this time period became “a qualitative transformation in the level of human destructiveness” (Angus 151). Innovation in transportation technologies and access to cheap oil soon turned the global capital system into a haven for fossil-based production.

With fossil fuels on the hip of global capitalism, it is safe to say that the current economic system is not able to sustain us safely within the planetary boundaries. Rather than emphasizing growth and centering the entire economy on profit, we can look to a community and ecological-centered economy. Angus calls it ecosocialism, a movement “grounded in a transformed economy founded on the non-monetary values of social justice and ecological balance” (203). This idea implies that there is collective decision making and ownership of the means of production. It calls for transformation of social and political structures to rethink the energy, transportation, and food systems. With an emphasis on community control, the ecosocialist agenda is a call to a sustainable alternative economic system.

Capitalism has been the economic system of the most prominent countries on the planet for hundreds of years. It is the reason Americans emphasize their desire for money in their pockets. It has perpetuated the ongoing inequalities in wealth distribution and destroyed the environment in the process. It is, in the words of sociologist Rob Wallace, “a many-headed hydra, appropriating, internalizing, and ordering multiple layers of social relation” (56). It is widely recognized by sociologists,

environmentalists, and others that the capitalist system is no longer viable for the sustaining of our planet. But, while the wealthy obtain more wealth and politics remain a power game instead of a policy one, the rest of us are stuck asking what to do about it.

Many people are indeed taking action to guide us out of fossil capitalism at the micro, meso, and macro levels. In the next section, I will analyze Extinction Rebellion, a meso level climate activist group, to understand their role in transformation. Their desires to imagine a better future are influential and necessary, but they also have limitations to their own growth. If we are to radically transform our imaginations to radically transform the systems of the world, there is no better place to start than “The New Eco-Radicals” (Eells) themselves.

Section 2: Case Study: Extinction Rebellion

The meso level of analysis takes on groups and organizations that are guiding transformation. For this, I have chosen to evaluate Extinction Rebellion, known for their extreme activism that attempts to motivate governments to act on the climate crisis. I will look at their strategies and requests, their relationship to the micro and macro levels of climate activism, and the inclusivity of their movement to better understand their role in both transition and transformation.

Strategies of Action

According to their global website, “Extinction Rebellion is a decentralized, international and politically non-partisan movement using non-violent direct action and civil disobedience to persuade governments to act justly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency.” Originating in the United Kingdom in May 2018, Extinction Rebellion, has used nonviolent disruptions to spread their urgent message and express their desires. The group has three demands for the UK government: tell the truth, act now, and go beyond politics. XR wants cabinet members to declare a climate and ecological emergency, while communicating with other institutions to create the urgent change that is required. Acting now means a 2025 benchmark for carbon neutrality in the UK, something that has only been mentioned near the 2050 mark by members of parliament. Finally, the Rebellion wants to form a Citizens’ Assembly to lead the way in reshaping an economy centered around protecting the planet (Extinction Rebellion, “What is XR”).

Scientists for Extinction Rebellion have their own website that aim to back up the actions and intentions of the group. In a list of nearly 1700 scientists and professors

from across a wide array of disciplines, Scientists for Extinction Rebellion have declared “Support for Non-Violent Direct Action Against Government Inaction Over the Climate and Ecological Emergency.” With the help of many of these scientists, the website has compiled a lengthy list of articles and resources for why these scientists have endorsed XR (Extinction Rebellion, “Welcome to XR Scientists”). This includes any climate science that is needed to support my arguments in favor of activism and transformation. There is a massive amount of evidence that our planet is warming, humans are causing it, and the conditions of living will continue to worsen if nothing is done. The lack of action on the crisis by government is known as “business as usual”.

Extinction Rebellion’s first organized assembly was on October 31st, 2018 when more than a thousand people gathered in Parliament Square in London for the “Declaration of Rebellion.” Just two months after her first school strike for the climate, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg was one of several speakers to grace the podium at the very first XR protest. The name “Extinction Rebellion” can be summed up from their declaration released on the same day: “This is our darkest hour... The science is clear—we are in the sixth mass extinction event and we will face catastrophe if we do not act swiftly and robustly.” 15 activists would be arrested on this day for blocking the roads outside of Parliament with a sit-in (Germanos).

Within two weeks of their declaration, more than 60 people were arrested in acts of civil disobedience organized by XR (Taylor and Gayle). They blocked major roads, glued themselves to government buildings, and unveiled a banner that read “Climate Change... We’re Fucked” over Westminster Bridge (Doherty et al.). On November 17th, 6,000 people took part in blocking the five major bridges over the River Thames in

London in an event called “Rebellion Day.” The major disruptions to traffic resulted in eighty-five arrests, deeming it “one of the biggest acts of peaceful civil disobedience in the UK in decades” (Taylor and Gayle).

With clear-cut initiatives and tactical flexibility, Extinction Rebellion has been able to provide nonviolent direct action on several levels. One of the main tactics of Extinction Rebellion is to encourage mass arrests and they even hold training for how to get arrested (“Arrestee Welfare”). They have learned from previous movements to act creatively and intuitively, gaining media attention to spread their mission.

The first few weeks of organized disobedience by Extinction Rebellion proved the seriousness of their movement. Surveys suggest that the public has recently become more aware of climate issues. 85% of adults across Great Britain in 2019 stated that they were concerned for climate change, compared to just 60% in 2013 (Cecil). The rise of climate activism has boosted awareness and resulted in the progression of transition [see appendix].

Within six months of the Declaration of Rebellion, XR achieved the first step in their first demand: Parliament declaring climate change an emergency. In May 2019, the UK Labour party tabled this motion, but it did not legally compel the government to act in any way (“UK Parliament Declares Emergency”). Extinction Rebellion’s influence resulted in the government finally telling the truth on the issue, but it would take actual targets, changes in policy, and widespread shifts in consumption and mitigation to create meaningful change.

In April 2021, the UK government announced commitments to cut carbon emissions by 78% by 2035. But with Boris Johnson and the Conservative party in

power, the Labour party urged the government to match “rhetoric with reality” (Harrabin). To meet these 2035 levels, greater progress and investments must be made in renewable energy, electric vehicles, low-carbon heating, and cutting down on meat and dairy. The UK, like many other progressive countries and cities around the globe, have announced these targets, but have failed to develop the complete steps in how to get there. Governments are behind in acting on this crisis, but at least they are doing something. After all, the first step in transformation is imagining the future we want to live in. Working backwards and implementing the changes needed is the hard part.

Fundraising over the first year and a half grew to show that this was a “grassroots movement funded by grassroots people.” With a first spike in funding occurring after the first International Rebellion in April 2019, XR was able to support the hundreds of volunteers in reaching out and scaling up. The demonstrations over the month of April led to over 500,000 pounds in total income. This would be followed up later that year after the Autumn Rebellion and the largest climate strikes in human history brought millions to the streets at the end of September. October crowdfunding alone for XR topped nearly 600,000 pounds, with total revenue coming in at over a million (Extinction Rebellion, “XR UK Fundraising”). For an activist group to help stage a worldwide protest and bring in over a million pounds in a month, just a year after their Declaration of Rebellion, is astonishing.

Mobilizing 3.5%

The tactics of Extinction Rebellion to bring their group to the limelight are embedded in nonviolent civil resistance. To analyze these strategies and their influence on political change, I turn to the research done by political scientists Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth. They define nonviolent resistance as “a civilian-based method used to wage conflict through social, psychological, economic, and political means without the threat or use of violence. It includes acts of omission, acts of commission, or a combination of both” This includes “symbolic protests, economic boycotts, labor strikes, political and social non- cooperation, and nonviolent intervention” (Chenoweth and Stephan 9-10). Their article *Why Civil Resistance Works* outlines the success [see appendix] of these nonviolent campaigns.

Chenoweth and Stephan’s research shows that if 3.5% of a population participates in a fully peaceful protest, serious political change is likely to happen. They have looked at all aspects of protests in human history, from a few people participating in peaceful protests to millions of people participating in a full-on revolution. When there are extensive campaigns of large-scale nonviolent direct action, it is almost inevitable that there is some sort of political and/or social transformation. “Major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns” (8). Such a difference in numbers makes this research relevant for any sort of civil resistance. Extinction Rebellion uses Chenoweth and Stephan’s work considerably in advocating for their use of nonviolent civil resistance.

In a Ted Talk from 2013 titled *The success of nonviolent civil resistance*, Chenoweth discusses their research and comes to the idea that “the visibility of civil resistance actions allows them to attract more active and diverse participation from these ambivalent people and once they become involved it’s almost guaranteed that the movement will then have links to security forces, civilian bureaucrats, economic and business elites, educational elites, state media, religious authorities, and the like, and those people start to reevaluate their own allegiances.” 3.5% of the population is a very large chunk to get behind the same movement, but as Chenoweth states, the connections being made at that high of a percentage of the population is undoubtedly influential.

What Stephan and Chenoweth fail to do is provide a clear definition of violence. They have developed a method in which they have statistically categorized the success or failure of nonviolent versus violent civil resistance, but never address what makes a campaign violent. When discussing their corroboration of data, they suggest “campaigns that committed a significant amount of violence are coded as violent” with several sources of violent campaigns (Chenoweth and Stephan 16-7). It could be assumed that their definition generally reflects that of the Violence Prevention Alliance [see appendix], but because they do not address it, there is a large incongruity in their research.

Oscar Berglund, a lecturer at the University of Bristol, says that the tactics of Extinction Rebellion are based on how dictatorships have been toppled, not how policy is changed in liberal democracies. Rooted in the work by Chenoweth and Stephan, Berglund states that XR’s activism is “based on how to achieve revolutions, not on how to get governments to respond to the will of the majority”. Berglund is not wrong; the

three case studies used to show the success of nonviolent campaigns come from East Timor, the Philippines, and Burma. These campaigns were prompted by independent statehood from Indonesia, a dictator that had enforced martial law, and a highly repressive military coup, respectively (Chenoweth and Stephan 25-40). They were movements generated by a will for independence and freedom from tyranny.

There are flaws in Chenoweth and Stephan's work, which inherently means there are flaws in the way Extinction Rebellion protests. XR refers to needing "the involvement of 3.5% of the population to succeed" (Extinction Rebellion, "Act Now"). They mention this benchmark all over their website and rely on Chenoweth and Stephan's research in the frequently asked question, "why do you think nonviolence is important?" (Extinction Rebellion, "FAQs"). Their activism is embedded in this research, but without clear definitions of violence and examples coming from drastically different political systems, *Why Civil Resistance Works* can only be used to show that it is likely, not guaranteed, for serious change to happen if enough people are on board.

There are countless examples of XR and off-branching groups that have successfully staged acts of nonviolent civil resistance. They have walked through the streets and blockaded places like Parliament, slaughterhouses, and forests. In less than three years, they have established 1178 groups in 78 countries (Extinction Rebellion, "Find Your XR Group"). They were an important piece in the climate protests of September 2019, spearheaded by Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future (Taylor and Watts). They have brought millions of people together to peacefully protest and create civil disobedience in the wake of an ecological crisis. Their influence on the general

population creeps closer to 3.5% as they continue to bring awareness to the glaring holes in our current systems.

Citizens' Assembly

One way to help transition our systems into sustainable ones is the formation of a citizens' assembly, as outlined by Extinction Rebellion. To empower individuals, communities, and entire countries, citizens' assemblies are innovative processes that are fair and rooted in democracy. XR wants to create a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice that would work in a similar way to jury duty. In it, "assembly members will hear balanced information from experts and those most affected by the emergency. Members will speak openly and honestly in small groups with the aid of professional facilitators. Together they will work through their differences and draft and vote on recommendations" (Extinction Rebellion, "Citizens' Assembly"). There are many examples of the successes of citizens' assemblies as they can be used to address important issues that politics cannot always fix.

In Ireland, the success of a citizens' assembly can be seen as they have recently broken a political deadlock on two controversial issues: same-sex marriage and abortion. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, comprising of 99 citizens, recommended a referendum on same-sex marriage to the government in 2014 that was then passed in May 2015 by a 69 percent majority. As for abortion, an April 2017 recommendation by the Assembly stated that the Eighth Amendment on abortion be removed all together. 66 percent of the population later voted to repeal the amendment in the knowledge that the government intended to introduce new legislation (McGreevy). Again in 2017, the

Assembly met to discuss climate issues and came to recommend 13 separate items, including one in which 80% of members were willing to pay higher taxes on carbon-intensive activities. The Irish Government's Climate Action Plan, published in June 2019, was directly influenced by the recommendations from the Assembly. This plan incorporated an acceleration to integrate electric vehicles and quadrupled the carbon tax, progressing Irish climate action immensely (XR Working Group 20).

It is not just Ireland that has found success in citizens' assemblies. In Poland, the city of Gdansk was hit by major flooding in 2016, causing millions in euros of damage. The mayor agreed to organize a citizens' assembly of 60 residents to propose ideas and prepare the municipality for future floods. A year later, in 2017, the city flooded again, but the city was prepared and responded effectively due to the resolutions passed by the assembly. Now, the 350,000 citizens of Gdansk can request a citizens' assembly on any political topic with 1,000 signatures; the mayor is obliged to run an assembly if the proposal reaches 5,000 signatures (21).

This is the sort of change that can happen when enough people organize. The city of Gdansk is an example in which transition occurred in less than a year's time. People come together and demand change, and the results are staggering. A little bit of coordination, along with the help of experts and stakeholders, can create a united group of citizens that enforce the change needed on both local and national levels. Canada, India, Poland, Belgium, and Australia have all also used these groups to help guide their countries' path towards both transition and transformation (22-25).

Questionable Actions

Assembling enough citizens who all agree is a difficult thing to do. It becomes more difficult when outliers within the group use the platform in a problematic way. In October 2019, an incident occurred at Canning Town station in London. Protesters, with the support of Extinction Rebellion, climbed on top of a train, held up a sign that said: “Business as usual = Death,” and held up hundreds of anxious Londoners waiting for the train to depart. Protesters were quite literally dragged off the train and kicked repeatedly by passengers awaiting the departure of the train (“XR Protesters Dragged from Roof”). The angry mob of everyday working people were fed up with the protesters negatively affecting their day to bring light to an issue to people that are not the problem. This is an example of activism gone wrong, which can be further analyzed for its initiation of violence and strategic purpose.

Given the definition of violence outlined by the Violence Prevention Alliance, the video of the incident shows there was clear intent of harm to the protesters themselves. Certainly not death, but injury or psychological harm could very well have been given to the protesters after this incident. The protesters themselves, however, did not seem to inflict any violence. They caused a civil disturbance that resulted in violent acts against them, but the violence would not have occurred if they were not there to incite it. In this case, it can be concluded that the violence came from an outside source of the protest but was directly tied to it.

Strategically, this incident was not well thought out and lacked foresight in the reactions ultimately made by the train-goers. Their protest backfired as a poll taken resulted in 72% saying they were opposed to any action against Tube trains. Commuters

also referenced the fact that public transportation is one of the most sustainable ways to travel and were baffled by the idea that XR would target people on their way to work (“XR Protesters Dragged from Roof”). This was a contradictory protest that brought more people against the group than it did for them.

The XR protesters, in this scenario, are disrupting the flow of working people, while attempting to gain support from everyday people and attention from the media. Instead, they need to be getting the attention of big business, billionaires, and politicians. One way to do this, through peaceful protesting, is for them to gain the support and sympathy of a wider population. But the same people they are attempting to bring to their side are the ones they are disrupting the lives of. Studies show that nearly two-thirds of Americans believe major changes need to happen to combat climate change, but 4 out of every 10 people are not willing to make major sacrifices to create that change (Dennis). The XR protesters on top of the train are attempting to spread awareness to an issue people already know about. People recognize that we are in a climate crisis, they just do not know what to do about it. Because when it comes down to it, it is the system that needs changing, not the people.

Questionable Language

Extinction Rebellion is most prominent in Europe, the United States, and Australia where governments are using certain terminology to address climate activism and climate policy. As they go against the status quo, XR rebels have become antagonists in a multiple century-long story of the growth and development of humankind. Those in power wish to keep it and have gone to extended lengths to curb

the rebels. To address the actions that governments are taking, the language they use in addressing both XR and their own policy can be further investigated.

In a November 2019 official document from the UK counter-terrorism police titled *Safeguarding young people and adults from ideological extremism*, Extinction Rebellion was included as an “extreme or violent ideology” alongside neo-Nazism, Satanism, and animal rights extremism. The document asks why they are a threat, which is answered with “An anti-establishment philosophy that seeks system change underlies its activism; the group attracts to its events school-age children and adults unlikely to be aware of this. While nonviolent against persons, the campaign encourages other law-breaking activities” (Counter Terrorism Policing 9). Extinction Rebellion activists are not alone in seeking some sort of system change. And while it may be fair that children do not fully grasp the concept of an anti-establishment philosophy, I would like to think that they are capable of having concern for their own future. Finally, XR does encourage some law-breaking activities, but barricading roads, die-ins, and lock-ons¹ can hardly be classified as terrorism. Rather, these actions should be understood as civil disobedience with the intent of gaining attention from government and big business.

In Australia, Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor has criticized the intimidation tactics of Extinction Rebellion, as a spokesperson for Taylor stated, “All Australians have the right to protest peacefully, but the track record of groups like Extinction Rebellion is disgraceful.” The spokesperson said Australians are “appalled by what they have seen from these extremists” and that Australia is

¹ Die-ins and lock-ons are strategies used by activist groups to cause civil disobedience. A die-in is a simulation of being dead, usually in the form of lying down in busy public places. A lock-on is a technique that makes it difficult for activists to be removed from something, often using handcuffs.

supporting global emissions reduction with a “technology-led plan” (Staff). Angus Taylor is a representative of the Liberal Party, Australia’s major center-right political party. Their technology-led plan to combat carbon emissions means investing in “clean hydrogen; electricity storage; low emissions steel and aluminium production; carbon capture and storage; and soil carbon sequestration.” They have targeted to reduce 2005 level emissions by 26-28% by 2030 (“Protecting Our Environment”). For contrast, The Paris Agreement expects Australia to reduce emissions by 40-60%. The Greens in Australia want to be in the 63-82% range by 2030 with an expectation to be net-zero by 2040 (Dooley).

The Liberal Party of Australia has outlined goals in protecting the environment beyond reducing emissions, but their main argument is to lead with technology. Technology has done many wonders in allowing humans to study and evolve the resources that Earth has provided us with. For climate purposes, green energy technology can and will provide us with renewable sources of electricity, which are essential in phasing out fossil fuels. This is needed in our development of a sustainable future. However, my argument here remains in the root of the system, the central idea of what it means to be “technology-led,” and how latching on to past successes have not led us to current justices. Technology cannot be what leads us out of the capitalist agenda. A drive for growth in technology is embedded in the race to accumulate profit. Governments constructing their climate agendas on profit-based policies is extremely contradictory. Australia’s Liberal Party is attempting to help solve a global issue with terminology that only includes a few tech guys and a meme generator.

I hesitate to use United States President Joe Biden as an example in this scenario, but the language he has used in addressing his current climate agenda is what is needed for all climate action plans. “The Biden Plan for a Clean Energy Revolution and Environmental Justice” is built upon an ambitious idea for reshaping the American economy and standing up to the abuse of power by major polluters. It involves net-zero emissions by 2050, developing climate resilience plans at home and abroad, and uplifting workers and communities who have been the backbone of U.S. industry (Biden for President). Joe Biden and the Democrats have succeeded in the first step of transformation: the imaginary. This plan has imagined an America that is rooted in revolutionizing the economy and bringing justice to the underrepresented.

But the imaginary is only the first step. Biden has rejoined the Paris Agreement, said he will aim to cut emissions in half by 2030, and introduced a climate-oriented infrastructure plan (Dennis and Eilperin). Unfortunately, it does not mean anything if legislation cannot be passed in Congress, and not a single climate bill has been since Biden was sworn into office on January 20, 2021 (“US Congress Legislation”). Time will tell if the Democrats can create the radical change needed to address the climate crisis, but at the moment the United States remains trapped between a sustainable future and an “exceptional”² one.

The right terminology also does not mean it is the right policy. While Biden has imagined the stage for climate action, Extinction Rebellion thinks his climate plans do not go far enough. On Earth Day, XR activists wheeled and dumped pink wheelbarrows

² The Republican Party Platform’s first line in their Preamble states “We believe in American exceptionalism” (Republican National Committee).

of cow manure onto a street next to Lafayette Square in DC. A sign stuck out of the pile that read “Stop the Bullshit,” as protesters argued that Biden lacked the urgency needed for the crisis (O’Bryan). The problem with trying to deal with climate rebels is that they are not going to stop until their demands have been met, which means reducing carbon emissions to net-zero by 2025. Thus, Extinction Rebellion will continue to have their voice heard and have no plans on relaxing their requests anytime soon.

In summary, there is an attack on XR ideology by UK counter-terrorism police, a party in power that thinks they can tackle the climate crisis with technology, and a stalemate for legislation in a country stuck in their glory days. These are three drastically different scenarios, but they share the importance of language in how we address certain policies. If the goal of climate activism and its role in transformation is to imagine and create a better world, a shared understanding of how that is going to happen is crucial.

Inclusivity of the Rebellion

As previously mentioned, it is quite common for Extinction Rebellion protesters to get arrested. The group stages protests that specifically include arrestable actions and occasionally encourage activists to get arrested if they are willing and able. This has been condemned by those who are aware of the injustices within the policing and criminal systems in the UK, the U.S., and Australia. Black and ethnic minority groups especially have critiqued the group as a preservation of white privilege, with its tactic of encouraging mass arrests ignoring the reality of police racism (M. Taylor).

For these reasons, race issues within the motives and actions of Extinction Rebellion are important to consider. Let us look at the recent Autumn Rebellion put on by XR in Melbourne, Australia that occurred in the week of March 22, 2021. In a timetable of events scheduled by the protesters, there were three categories to action. The majority of these actions (20+) were classified as “community building,” while just five were “creative action.” 10 events over the course of the week were categorized as “optional arrestable actions.” This included a “rebel ride”, starting at 7:30 every morning and other “mass disruption actions” that could potentially lead to arrests (“Melbourne Autumn Rebellion”). One can be involved in XR events without getting arrested, but the emphasis put on actions with the potential of arrest create a segregated environment in a time where getting arrested as a white person and as a person of color means two different things. Extinction Rebellion has built a platform on white privilege, encouraging mass incarceration on the basis that it will garner the most attention.

Statistics in Australia, the UK, and the U.S. can back up the relations between race and incarceration rates. In Australia, 3% of the total population is indigenous, while 29% of the Australian prison population is indigenous (“Estimates...”; “Prisoners...”). In the UK, 27% of the prison population identified as an ethnic minority, compared with 13% in the general population (Sturge). Finally, African Americans make up just 13% of the general population in the United States, while white people with no Hispanic origin make up 60% (“U.S. Census”). Yet somehow, there are more black people imprisoned in America than there is white (Carson). And in terms of the length of prison sentences: “Black male offenders received sentences on average 19.1 percent longer than similarly situated White male offenders” (“Demographic

Differences”). Black people do not participate in climate protests that aim to get arrested because they are literally going to suffer higher consequences than any of their fellow white protesters. The statistics from these world leaders are staggering and yet, not surprising given their history of racism and white supremacy.

On their UK website, XR outlines their understanding of the structural racism in the policing system. “People of colour (PoC) have been more at risk for generations in defence of the environment and their lands, both here in the UK and around the world. It is time to for white people to take this risk too so that PoCs, who are threatened by structural racism, don’t have to” (Extinction Rebellion, “FAQs”). It makes sense on the surface to encourage white people to use their privilege, but at the same time it makes the movement even less inclusive, making it extremely difficult for black people to fully participate in their protests.

Because they believe it is most effective, it is deeply rooted in Extinction Rebellion’s system to cause civil disobedience, and therefore get arrested. But it is also deeply rooted in the policing and legal system to exploit people of color. Extinction Rebellion has made it clear that their needs to be a massive shift in the system itself but has made suggestions of their own that inherently replace the old system with a new one. In the hypothetical scenario that XR achieves their goals and motivates governments to act before the policing system is restructured, the issue of race remains because of the segregation of protesting. When all the frontline activists are white and the government has been forced to rapidly act upon the climate crisis, the underlying racism will perpetuate as it has for millennia.

Extinction Rebellion is not the first environmental group to be called out for their whiteness. The environmental movement itself has been predominately white since Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, which is often referred to in describing the origins of the modern movement. As environmentalism gained more attention over the following decades, conservation and preservation organizations in the United States developed into multi-million-dollar non-profits. Nonetheless, the diversity amongst these organizations remained deficient.

Professor Dorceta Taylor, an environmental sociologist at the University of Michigan, authored a report in 2014 titled *The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations*, which highlighted the lack of diversity among these groups. The gender diversity was troubling enough with men accounting for more than 70% of the presidents and chairs of the board of conservation and preservation organizations. The racial discrepancies were even worse with the percentage of minorities on the boards or general staff of environmental organizations being just 16%. Minorities made up 38% of the U.S. population at the time of the study. To make matters worse, not a single president of a conservation or preservation group with a budget over \$1 million was an ethnic minority (D. Taylor 3-4). It is statistics like these that show how environmentalism has been a predominately white movement since its origins.

Instead of placing all the blame on environmental organizations that generally seek to preserve the Earth, perhaps the media can be called out for who they are giving attention to. Bringing it back to the present day, the current U.S. and UK media tend to focus their top stories on white environmental groups. Maybe it is because the UK, US, and Australia are predominately white countries. Or maybe it is because the attention-

seeking climate activists, such as Extinction Rebellion, are able to glue themselves to buildings and disrupt traffic because they are white and have a statistically lower chance of going to prison. Either way, there is a definite discrepancy in the ability for white people to protest and for minorities to protest. This lack of exposure to activists of color is disheartening, and the following shows where the media is going wrong.

Newsweek wrote an article in September 2020 with the title “Why is the Climate Change Movement so White?” In it they talk to Suzanne Dhaliwal, director and co-founder of the U.K. Tar Sands Network which campaigns against U.K. corporations and financial institutions invested in the Alberta Tar Sands in Canada. Dhaliwal accuses Extinction Rebellion of being a PR brand, stating “it’s as though Greta Thunberg invented climate change”. She goes on to say that the media only report on white middle-class folks and that “we’ve gone backward where people now think that because it gets good content, it’s about sustainable fashion or personal waste reduction, it means that instead of the climate crisis being about humanitarian disasters or indigenous rights, there’s this kind of dumbing down.” Dhaliwal expresses the environmental movement has created a climate illiteracy because media outlets go for content instead of facts.

Dhaliwal continues as she describes XR as “naïve,” “performative,” and that they have re-written climate movement history because they popularized it. She is right in the sense that XR has invented a way to make its rebellion a community of entertainers. Extinction Rebellion has grown because of their attention-grabbing ability in fighting for justice. This creates great content for media outlets, but it also makes it difficult for other groups to find space on the front page. The creative ability of XR is condemned by Dhaliwal, but she blames the media for making them the center of

attention instead of climate movements elsewhere, mentioning a protest in India to protect trees and a crisis in Sudan where half a million people were displaced (Mahmood).

Dhaliwal blatantly called out the media in this article, so I decided to see if the source listened to her or continued to promote predominately white activism. I searched the Newsweek website for “U.K. Tar Sands Network” to see if they had written about Dhaliwal’s group: nothing. I tried “frontline climate activism”, first result: “Greta Thunberg Turns 17: A Look Back at Her Year” third result: “Can Christianity Save Us From Climate Change?” Does the media not know that when someone says “media” they are talking about them? Dhaliwal clearly states that the media is not giving marginalized groups enough attention. It is appalling to think that this article can get published only for the same newspaper to not understand the root of the issue. The issue being them.

The Guardian, once the UK’s most popular online newspaper and a source for many of the Extinction Rebellion articles in this paper, has their own media bias. In an article rating the success of recent XR protests, they throw in a small section on environmental justice. The article reads: “Black environmental activists outside of XR say the movement was making some progress but urged the media to highlight the work of other grassroots groups who are focusing on climate and racial justice” (M. Taylor). This is literally the media writing about a group that their focus is not on to highlight the fact that the media is not highlighting them. It certainly does not help the media’s case when they call themselves out without realizing it. There is no mention of who these black environmental activists are or any names of other grassroots groups.

Justice Served

To highlight what the media and the mainstream environmental movement have failed to do, I have briefly researched the work of young minorities that are acting out and speaking up on climate issues. Here are three activists determined to see a better future: Vanessa Nakate, a 24-year-old Ugandan, was cropped out of an Associated Press tweet with four white female activists, including Greta Thunberg, at a press conference in Davos, Switzerland in January 2020. Nakate is the founder of Youth for Future Africa and the Rise Up Movement, both of which are taking action to combat the climate crisis. She has led protests outside the Ugandan parliament and campaigned for climate initiatives across Africa, including protecting rainforests in the Congo (Evelyn).

Ridhima Pandey is an 11-year-old activist from India who was among 16 activists who filed a lawsuit in 2019 against Argentina, Brazil, Germany, France, and Turkey, accusing the countries of violating the Convention on the Rights of the Child³ by failing to address the climate crisis adequately. Pandey also filed a suit against the Indian Government, stating “my government has failed to take steps to regulate and reduce greenhouse gas emissions...this will impact both me and future generations”. She has also called for a complete ban on plastic and for India to do more in cleaning up the Ganga River⁴ (“Who is Radhima Pandey”).

Xiuhtezcatl Martinez is a 20-year-old American of Aztec descent who has spoken up about the effects of fossil fuels on indigenous and other marginalized

³ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international treaty that was signed in 1989 that sets non-discriminatory and inclusive human rights for all children (“Convention on Rights”).

⁴ Running 1,560 miles through India and Bangladesh, the Ganga River is a vital resource for all of Asia, but it is also one of the most polluted as disposal of human, animal, and industrial waste occurs often (Ahmad).

communities (Eyen). He is one of 21 plaintiffs involved in the Juliana v. United States lawsuit⁵, which has become a prominent court case in the youth climate movement against the U.S. government (“Juliana v U.S.”). He has spoken at the United Nations, filed a lawsuit against the state of Colorado⁶ for their lenience on fossil development, and has written two books on building a movement towards climate action (“Colorado”; “Xiuhtecat!”) He is also a co-founder of Earth Guardians, an organization that aims to “inspire and train diverse youth to be effective leaders in the environmental, climate and social justice movements... through the power of art, music, storytelling, civic engagement, and legal action” (“Earth Guardians”).

Activism is not just a white phenomenon. Extinction Rebellion is not entirely a white movement, even if one of their central tactics to get arrested is rooted in white privilege. Individuals of all backgrounds at the micro level are creating groups at the meso level to tackle issues at the macro level. These individuals are inspired by their own imagination and are firm believers in the change that is needed for their own futures. I am humbled and inspired by the work that these young people are doing in their fight for a better planet. I have only mentioned three, but there are a countless number of others in every city on the globe. Their activism goes unnoticed by most, but their message and their movement remain strong.

⁵ The plaintiffs in Juliana v. United States are represented by Our Children’s Trust, a nonprofit based in Eugene, Oregon. In this lawsuit, the plaintiffs assert that the government has knowingly violated their rights by encouraging the combustion of fossil fuels. The case was denied dismissal in 2016 in the U.S. District Court of Oregon before it was reversed and dismissed in 2020 by the Ninth Circuit panel (“Juliana v U.S.”).

⁶ Our Children’s Trust also represented Martinez in Martinez v. Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission. This case was dismissed in January 2019 with the reasoning that all fossil development in Colorado was following the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Act (“Colorado”).

As we move further into an apocalyptic future, those fighting for justice are continuing to rise above the ashes. It must be a message of perseverance to all of us while the structural support beams of our system continue to rot and crumble in front of us.

Section 3: Reflection

When I started writing this thesis, I did not think it would take me down a path of environmental justice. But I should have known at this point in my studies that every climate issue is also a race and class issue. The socioeconomic discrepancies in our capital system have muted the work of minority activists. And while my initial research was rooted in the radicalization of climate activism and led me to the work done of a predominately white group in the UK and authors that are white men, it has come to my attention that even those with the greatest intentions to help in radically changing the planet are able to do so because of the color of their skin.

Through further research, I am sure that I would be able to find plenty more work done by climate activists of color. However, what does it say about my own undergraduate thesis research that I settled upon Extinction Rebellion? Did they speak to me because of their radicalization and ability to create a scene in one of the world's most prominent cities? Or was it the media attention and global support they have garnered over the last few years? Or maybe it was simply because their website was well designed and easy to navigate. For whatever reason it was, I was drawn to what felt comfortable, to what felt right, and to what felt like I was highlighting a group that was doing good.

The amazing part of this thesis is that I began my research by looking at Extinction Rebellion, a predominately white activist group, as well as white authors like Eric Holthaus and Erica Chenoweth. As I developed the paper into what it is today, I have found myself including the work of minority authors and activists from around the globe. Dorceta Taylor, Suzanne Dhaliwal, Vanessa Nakate, Ridhima Pandey, and

Xiuhtecatl Martinez are all making major impacts that not only serve the environment but are providing a platform for the vulnerable communities that are disproportionately impacted by the climate crisis.

As I move forward with any future research on climate activism, I hope to learn more from the community-empowered grassroots movements that focus on justice, inclusion, and the climate. The more I study the environment and the people that have both suffered from environmental injustice and acted for environmental justice, the more I understand the interconnectedness of human systems within the Earth system. I am a firm believer that there is a system that can allow humans and the society we have created to live sustainably, just not enough people have imagined it quite yet.

Conclusion

I began this thesis by exploring the dimensions of radical change needed in our path towards transformation. With the help of Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven's *The Radical Imagination* and Eric Holthaus' *The Future Earth*, I discussed the importance of imagining systems for the sustaining of our planet. The work of Johan Rockström et al. provided how our current systems have exceeded the boundaries of the planet. Next, Ian Angus' *Facing the Anthropocene* showed why fossil capitalism is the reason we have gotten to this point and proposed a look into ecosocialism. Transitioning away from the conceptual ideas of what is needed for radical transformation, I brought in a case study on the climate rebels of Extinction Rebellion.

The growth and reach of Extinction Rebellion proved their influence on transforming the unsustainable nature of our current systems. Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan's *Why Civil Resistance Works* showed that success often comes to those who can create largescale nonviolent civil resistance. The proposal of citizens' assemblies and the successes of them in Ireland and Poland have proved the validity of a fundamental shift in the way our societies develop and implement policy. Their influence has already been felt, as XR has pestered the macro level with their "extreme ideology" and undoubtedly helped in the changing of terminology used by politicians to address the climate crisis. But there are also flaws in the very nature of their movement. Issues on inclusivity and inept strategy have disrupted their mission and reduced their growth. The inclusivity of the climate movement itself falls partly on the media, as they have given XR many of their headlines when it comes to climate activism. To address the micro level, I referenced three youth activists of color: Vanessa Nakate, Ridhima

Pandey, and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez. These individuals have guided their imagination to create grassroots change at local and national levels, acting as major influences to the climate movement.

Climate activism itself is critical to the transformation of our societal systems. Extinction Rebellion is playing a major role in this movement, but they are not the only ones sparking change. It is individuals, organizations, and governments that will have to collectively create the transition of communities around the globe. It is our imagination where ideas are born, and change begins. It is the radicalization of the micro, meso, macro, and imaginary that will guide global transformation. When can we start?

Appendix

Success: *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan provides a definition of success for activist campaigns: “The outcomes of these campaigns are identified as “success,” “limited success,” or “failure.” To be designated a “success,” the campaign must have met two criteria: (1) its stated objective occurred within a reasonable period of time (two years) from the end of the campaign; and (2) the campaign had to have a discernible effect on the outcome. A “limited success” occurs when a campaign obtained significant concessions (e.g., limited autonomy, local power sharing, or a non-electoral leadership change in the case of dictatorship) although the stated objectives were not wholly achieved (i.e., territorial independence or regime change through free and fair elections). A campaign is coded a “failure” if it did not meet its objectives or did not obtain significant concessions” (Chenoweth and Stephan 17).

Transformation: Transformation is used as a radical term for going about the systemic change needed for humankind to sustainably exist on a planet with limited resources.

Transition: The term transition is used similarly to transformation, but at a smaller scale with incremental changes to specific ideas or places.

Violence: When I refer to the term “violence,” it is referring to the definition outlined by the Violence Prevention Alliance, a network of states working to prevent violence under the World Health Organization. They state that violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (WHO).

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