

## Climate activism: afterword

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*Abstract:* A short ‘Afterword’ commenting on the multidisciplinary nature of the articles, and their appropriateness to the multi-purposed orientations to be found in climate change activism. It touches on the importance of diverse frames of thought: one crisis is also many crises.

*Keywords:* Multidisciplinary, multi-purpose orientations, climate change, activism, crisis.

*Note on the author:* Dame Marilyn Strathern is Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge. Her research career began in Papua New Guinea, with work on law, kinship and gender relations. Subsequently involved in anthropological approaches to assisted conception, intellectual property and audit cultures, she is most well-known for *The gender of the gift* (1988). A recent book is *Relations: an anthropological account* (2020). She declares an interest as an XR supporter. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1987.

A notable feature of climate activism, at least as it has unfolded over the last two or three years, is how multi-purposed it is. Activists find themselves envisaging new forms of governance, and in the idea of citizens' assemblies new modes of decision-making, not just in relation to specific climate targets but by taking on general issues of equality, justice and the nature of society. There are many obvious reasons: the crisis is not containable in the singular – its ramifications are affecting or will affect every corner of people's lives; demands for action accompany visions of remedies, and these are required on innumerable fronts; above all is the acceptance that human activity is at the heart of it and somehow human beings must change their priorities in how they conduct themselves. Otherwise put, if the single object is the planet's future as a habitable future for all kinds of life, then that encompasses everything, including all kinds of human inventions, cultural, ethical, technological and economic.

It is good to see the British Academy focusing on activism as a phenomenon, and as a subject for research and funding. It is particularly germane to be reminded of activist contributions in the crucial year of COP26, given that its deliberations are likely to be diminished because of global Covid restrictions as far as adjunct meetings and popular participation by NGOs and informal political bodies are concerned. Action in respect of climate change needs advocates of all stripes. I take the four articles presented here for the very interesting way in which they highlight different facets of a phenomenon that takes its many shapes from what is also a common cause.

Climate activism would not exist if there were not certain pre-existing conditions, among them if it could not tap into a reservoir of responsiveness towards and concern over what people understand as their environment. This is what is described in the first article. Artists' engagement with matters that are otherwise supposed to be the province of policy or science or medicine are so often tacked on to the end of other of other modes of argument, it is distinct pleasure to begin with *Ed Wall's interview with the American landscape sculptor Mary Miss* (Wall 2021). Art is too restrictive a term for her encompassing 'project of projects', *City as Living Laboratory*, which in the spirit of activism aims to connect environmental issues, as they are experienced within communities, with the climate crisis, urban equity and health. Climate change has a locus in cities as much as anywhere else, and has been in the sights of urban planners and architects for many years. Some of what was being put in place over those years emerges from the way Mary Miss talks of the details of her earlier environmental visions in relation to diverse schemes for local development. She speaks of the possibility of integrating projects across a city, and thus bringing to people's attention – and thereby connecting them to – the integration of natural systems and infrastructures. We shall come back to infrastructure. The point is the stimulating and nurturing of certain sensibilities that would be open (in her words) to alternative development scenarios.

When sensibilities are open to the gross and ugly implications of climate change, the scaling up can also be terrifying. *Lisa Jones and her colleagues* are eloquent on the vision of a fairer and greener society that many in the UK envisaged after COVID-19, and the collective grief it generated (Jones *et al.* 2021). In fact they argue that its intervention may have been a wake-up call for people to realise how much is lost, and will be lost, through climate change. Turning a generic grief for the earth's degradation into personal expressions of grief is at once a motive for taking action, and (evident especially in the organisation of pre-Covid Extinction Rebellion [XR]) must be channelled to avoid being overwhelming. In making a connection between 'collective' demands for climate justice (including for the Global South) and 'individual' orientations towards actions that will make a difference, the authors argue (after McAdam) that the heightening of emotions plays a crucial role. Here they draw on the diverse stages of grief as they have been analysed for the process of mourning, from negative to positive stages culminating in the person suffering loss being ready to take action for change. Over a multitude of issues – and global situations – this wide-ranging paper offers a point-by-point commentary of activists' emotional journeys in a context where the majority of the Global North is by and large inactive.

Although an individual may indeed move between emotional states, a society will consist of people in diverse stages all at once. What the previous paper calls 'social action', mobilising institutions and communities, is in effect the arena taken up by *Andrew Kythreotis and his co-authors* (Kythreotis *et al.* 2021). They specifically argue that, as a civil movement, climate activism needs to be manifest as a plurality, that is, carried forward through manifold bodies and types of social agency. It is in variously holding existing forms of government and institutionalised interests to account that they will be playing a governance role. That said, there is a particular tension between the formal policy processes of international negotiation and urban scale activism that puts pressure on local – and national – government, especially city councils, which is the present focus of enquiry. (Urban councils have been readier than rural ones to declare a climate emergency.) While here the civil actors are among themselves diverse and entertain diverse visions, and while the authors detail the relatively long history of environmental protest and politics, it is interesting that the same examples of recent climate activism keep reappearing across the different UK interviews, notably the Youth Strike for Climate and XR. These specific movements have provided, the authors suggest, a vocal platform for accountability, and contribute to evolving forms – changing geographies – of citizen-state relations. Indeed, they see a role for symbiosis here.

We return to what we might imagine as infrastructures in *Paula Serafini's* examination of underlying causes (Serafini 2021): she matches the singular concept (albeit pointing to 'multiple outcomes') of climate crisis with a singular diagnostic

(albeit pointing to ‘multiple causes’), the violent extractivism that lies behind a phenomenon such as global warming. The intention is to focus on aspects of production that hasten the impact of environmental destruction. These are based on social and economic models for growth, resource deployment and land use, under the aegis of modernisation, common to thinking across the globe, even while many in the Global South have particularly suffered its manifestation as colonialism (after Mbembe). It is not just a matter of economics: extractive violence is deeply embedded in the many ways in which (we)people conceal it from (our)themselves. As an antidote Serafini dwells on resistance that mobilises the affect and practice of care, as it has emerged out of feminist theorising; drawn so to speak from the infrastructure of acknowledged human interdependency, its promise is sensitising people to a broad ethic of concern, and in human and other than human situations alike. English speakers take both caring about and caring for [someone / something] as signs of responsiveness. So we return also to sensibility as activism, as we do to several other of the themes that these papers have raised.

My reference to English-speaking picks up from the last paper the reminder that how we frame the issues participates in how we deal with them. Having access to diverse frames of thought is of course crucial to visualising what is seen as necessarily multi-purposed. In this vein, describing different movements in parallel to one another depending on whether they are focused on climate justice, social justice or racial justice, the second paper (Jones and colleagues) further touches on cross-cultural forms of learning and the particular situation – encompassing many situations of course – of what are generically called Indigenous peoples. With respect to such people, one wonders about registers of emotion and the forms that action take, as one wonders too about the basis of conceptual constructs. Here we might note that Serafini’s several exemplifications come from Latin America, including from Indigenous sources there, and she records the conceptual work thereby generated: particular people and places comprised her initial locus for thinking about interdependency as well as formulating the very notion of extractive violence.

These articles are drawn from different disciplinary domains of work, research and reflection, and they offer no closure. But it is in a very positive sense that they have opened up questions about action and inaction in relation to what should be thought of simultaneously as one crisis and many crises. They have also enhanced appreciation of the role of those who take protest – after so many years ineffective years – into the realm of real-time irritation (creating inconvenience) and confrontation (civil disobedience).

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