

Radical climate activism: motivations, consequences and approaches

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1. Climate change, public denialism, and governments' lack of responsiveness
 2. Climate activism, radical approaches, and their risks
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Abstract. *Environmental activism is crucial in increasing awareness of environmental degradation and preventing actions that harm the environment. A radical environmentalist movement has emerged within the community of activists. They advocate using illegal measures to attain their goals. This paper discusses these radical environmentalist groups' motivations, their actions and their consequences. Activities that many*

consider unacceptable, such as art vandalism and road blockades, may result in adverse outcomes and diminish public support for environmental endeavors. We propose an alternative solidarity approach whereby activists focus their efforts on disseminating information to the general public on climate change and other environmental issues, advocating for the adoption of eco-surplus culture, and fostering cooperation among governments, businesses, and individuals to develop effective solutions.

“Only by uniting the power of the entire village could they chase Snake away”

“Virtue of Sacrifice”; *The Kingfisher Story Collection* (2022)

1. Climate change, public denialism, and governments’ lack of responsiveness

In recent years, climate change has become a global emergency, as it contributes to accelerating rises in sea level, increasing uncertainties about weather conditions and frequency and intensity of natural hazards like hurricanes, tropical storms, and drought, and expanding detrimental effects on human welfare and socio-economic sustainability (McCrystall et al., 2021; Shivanna, 2022; Summers et al., 2022). Moreover, the biodiversity among terrestrial and aquatic species is also progressively endangered by climate change. By reviewing 519 observational studies, Maxwell et al. (2019) found that 57% of the studied groups (including amphibians, birds, fish, invertebrates, mammals, reptiles, and plants) exhibited negative ecological responses to extreme climate events, more than 100 cases experienced more than 25% population decline, and 31 cases faced local extirpation. Meanwhile, mass mortality events of aquatic species induced by climate change have frequently been reported in recent years, such as the emperor penguins in Antarctica (Fretwell et al., 2023), the coral reefs in the Caribbean (Chow, 2023), gray whales in the West Bank (Baumhardt, 2023), and dolphins in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest (The Associated Press, 2023).

Over the past year the world has experienced record-breaking heat for every consecutive month (Farhat, 2024), while the global average concentration of CO₂

in the atmosphere reached a new record in March 2024 (Milman, 2024). If the global temperature exceeds the 1.5°C threshold compared to the preindustrial period, this can trigger multiple climate tipping points that lead to abrupt and irreversible changes in the Earth's climate system and endanger humanity (Armstrong McKay et al., 2022). As anthropogenic activities (e.g., burning fossil fuels and land use change) are the main causes of climate change, decisive structural economic transformations and socio-cultural transitions towards sustainability are urgent.

However, despite the urgency of addressing the existential threats of climate change to humans and other species, public skepticism and denialism, coupled with governments' lack of responsiveness, remain critical issues hindering the necessary action for climate change mitigation. Although there exists highly consistent evidence and scientific consensus for climate change and global warming (Cook et al., 2013; Cook et al., 2016; Earth Science Communications Team, 2023; Met Office Hadley Centre, n.d.), a lack of understanding of reasons for and implications of human-induced climate change still persists among a large number of people in the society. A recent study by Gounaridis and Newell, using artificial intelligence and network analysis to analyze data from Twitter (now X), discovered that 14.8% of Americans did not believe in climate change (Gounaridis & Newell, 2024). This figure is relatively similar to the results of Vlasceanu et al.'s (2024) survey of 59,440 participants from 63 countries, that around 85.7% believed in climate change, meaning that roughly 14.3% did not believe in climate change. Such persistence of denialism is linked to political affiliation, educational level, COVID-19 vaccination rates, carbon intensity of the regional economy, social identities, absence of need satisfaction, and income (Gounaridis & Newell, 2024; Treen et al., 2020; Ucar et al., 2023; Wullenkord, 2022).

International organizations and governments have also struggled to balance policies and actions between competing priorities. The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a delay in the implementation of climate policies and prioritization of short-term economic recovery (Vo et al., 2023). In such a scenario, the growth-versus-environment debate has intensified and caused polarization between and within many countries, especially between the Democrats and Republicans in the United States, which can hamper international and national climate actions (Falkenberg et al., 2022; Vuong et al., 2023). Recent geopolitical conflicts have also exacerbated the climate crises directly by increasing greenhouse gas emissions and indirectly by creating additional

pressures on economic growth (Barbarà & Galea, 2024; Bun et al., 2024; Vuong et al., 2024).

Given these hindrances, climate activism has emerged as an endeavour to raise public awareness and push for economic and political shifts toward climate change mitigation resolutions (Hadden, 2015; Maher, 2021). Some members of the movement support radical activism methods. In this paper, we discuss the motivations behind these radical activists' actions and their possible consequences. Then, we advocate for a solidarity approach through which climate activists can facilitate the shift of underlying values in society, especially the business sector, toward an eco-surplus culture.

2. Climate activism, radical approaches, and their risks

Climate activism has experienced a considerable acceleration since the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly following the Copenhagen Summit in 2009 and the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2016 (Hadden, 2015; Maher, 2021). The movement can take different forms, ranging from behavior change promotion campaigns to actions within political and economic systems (e.g., litigation, shareholder activism, campaigns to pressure businesses, collaboration with the government) and actions outside the systems (e.g., boycotting, striking, protesting). While each form of activism has shown some positive outcomes on climate change mitigation efforts, activism outside the political and economic systems seems to be the most effective in mobilizing society for the cause. One typical example is the School Strike for Climate (a.k.a. Fridays for Future and Youth for Climate), initiated by the Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. The activism movement led to the September 2019 climate strikes, which were considered the largest climate strikes in world history, with the participation of an estimated 7.6 million people from over 185 countries (Della Porta & Portos, 2023).

At the same time, several groups of environmental activists have begun embracing radical activities, such as vandalism of artworks crafted by globally renowned artists, assault on business owners and people related to large corporations, and road blockades. They support using illegal actions to achieve their primary goal of environmental protection (Carson et al., 2012). The actions carried out by such radical environmentalist groups are not impulsive but rather part of a deliberately planned and organized following a long-term strategy.

Several reasons lead to embracing such actions. First, radical environmentalist groups wish to provoke large-scale interest from both the general public and the media, thereby stimulating greater awareness of the environmental issues they champion. Thus, they frequently target priceless artworks in museums or disrupt public activities and events to draw the focus of a large audience. In 2022, members of the Just Stop Oil group routinely carried out vandalism on priceless artworks by world-renowned painters, such as Horatio McCulloch, John Constable, Leonardo da Vinci, Vincent Van Gogh, Joseph Mallord William Turner, and many other artists, in museums and galleries across England (Alao, 2022). The Last Generation organization resorted to gluing themselves to the roads, causing blockages during rush-hour traffic on more than 30 traffic routes in Berlin on April 25, 2023, leading to severe traffic congestion on many major roads in the city and some neighboring areas. It was reported that up to 500 police officers were deployed on the city's streets to prevent and disperse these illegal traffic blockades (Armstrong, 2023; Grieshaber, 2023).

Radical activists also aim to pressurize governments and businesses to change direction by highlighting the environmental urgency their actions wish to make clear. If recent scientific evidence shows that several tipping points have been crossed and the most recent status update of the planetary boundary suggests that six out of nine safely operating spaces have been transgressed, including two core boundaries – climate change and biosphere integrity (Biino, 2023; Fretwell et al., 2023; Lenton et al., 2019; Purich & Doddridge, 2023; Richardson et al., 2023), then extreme measures are necessary to make this understood. The statement delivered by a member of Last Generation during the assault on *Monet's Haystacks* painting captures well this motivation of radical environmentalist groups:

“I'm afraid because science tells us that we won't be able to feed our families in 2050. [...] Does it take mashed potatoes on a painting to make you listen? This painting is not going to be worth anything if we have to fight over food. When will you finally start to listen? When will you finally start to listen and stop business as usual?”

Nevertheless, the effects of such actions can be seen as counterproductive, risking intensifying environmental tensions and conflicts, and diminishing trust in environmental protection endeavors. While activists undertake radical actions against artworks to communicate messages regarding climate change or other environmental concerns, these actions infringe upon the law and can be interpreted as undermining the cultural values they seek to preserve. Rather than promoting public support for environmental movements, such radical actions

often spark public indignation and encounter significant resistance (Davis, 2022; Gayle, 2022).

Although the activities of radical environmentalist groups are almost non-violent and aim at causing property damage rather than injuring or killing humans (Carson et al., 2012), there is a risk that they can escalate into violence and even result in fatality. The traffic blockage of activists can face many forms of confrontation from traffic participants and social media influencers (Chung, 2023; Mann, 2023). A case of traffic obstruction in Berlin blocked the way of an ambulance dispatched to save a severely injured cyclist, leading to the victim's demise (Connolly, 2022). In Panama, the violence escalation due to the road blockade was deadly since two climate protestors blocking the highway were shot dead (Neath, 2023). Ineffective and disruptive actions risk failing to attract the understanding and attention the environmental activists desire and instead tend to generate hostility and criticism and even endanger the safety of people involved and affected.

The potential negative outcomes of radical environmental activism can result in bad impressions and reasons that movement opposing forces can capitalize on to calumniate and defame the whole climate movement. A divide exists in the environmental movements between groups intentionally pursuing illegal and sometimes violent strategies and groups promoting non-violent resistance (Carson et al., 2012). Some view environmental groups that direct their resources towards direct action (e.g., destruction of assets as well as death threats and harassment) rather than lobbying and non-violent protest as 'eco-terrorists' due to their actual and potential threats to social safety and wellbeing (Barnum & Logan, 2023; Carson et al., 2012; Gruenewald et al., 2015). However, it should also be recognized that at times green activists conducting acts of non-violent civil disobedience have been accused of and even charged with terrorism by courts, simply for chalking slogans on the sidewalk (Potter, 2011). Thus, the risk that opposing corporations, politicians, and denialists utilize negative outcomes induced by radical activism to discredit the movement should not be eliminated.

In some cases, radical actions such as art vandalism might be at odds with the effectiveness of other forms of activism that use the same means of expression. For example, artivism, the utilization of artistic mediums such as paintings, music, and films in environmental activism, is increasingly recognized as a crucial tool in addressing environmental crises, particularly climate change, owing to its capacity for expression, communication, and mobilization towards transformative political action (Rodríguez-Labajos, 2022; Vuong & Nguyen, 2023). The vandalism of priceless artworks can be seen as devaluing their intrinsic

worth, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of activism. If the value of art cannot be capitalized for climate activism, it might be used by climate change denialists to negatively influence other citizens' understanding and constrain climate change mitigation endeavors (Vuong et al., 2023).

The business sector contributes substantially to the anthropogenic impacts that fuel climate change and environmental degradation but also holds enormous socio-economic power. Therefore, addressing the current environmental crisis necessarily requires their active participation (Vuong, 2021). However, radical environmentalist organizations often consider business owners and large corporations only as risks to the environment, especially those operating in environmentally sensitive sectors like oil or transportation. They have conducted many radical actions to sabotage, hinder activities, and even inflict violence toward these people and organizations (Binde, 2023; Healy, 2023; Limb, 2023; NTV, 2023; Speare-Cole, 2022), which risk forcing the business sector into a direct confrontation, rather than cooperation. There is a risk that activism can create confusion or even be *weaponized* on the one hand to defame the climate movement and on the other to attack business competitors. Environmental activist groups that conducted vandalism of artworks, like Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil, are funded by the Climate Emergency Fund, which was founded by Aileen Getty – the granddaughter of J. Paul Getty, the oil tycoon (Angeleti, 2022). Targeting institutions with no ties to funders involved in the fossil fuel industry risks not distinguishing between them or even casting doubt on the protest's true intentions.

3. Adopting a solidarity approach

It is clear that to optimize both the impact and the outcome of their action environmental activists need to employ appropriate and effective strategies for raising public awareness and support. Actions such as vandalism, harassment, and blockades, if deemed inappropriate by a large cross-section of the population, can have negative repercussions, including declining public support for the environmental cause, creating opportunities for opposing forces to discredit the movement, undermining the effectiveness of other forms of activism, and risking being weaponized for political and economic purposes.

We believe that activists should avoid such actions and concentrate on educating the public about climate change and other environmental concerns, promoting an eco-surplus culture based on pro-environmental norms, practices, and values to reduce negative anthropogenic impacts on environments and conserve and

restore nature, and facilitating collaboration among governments, businesses, and citizens to formulate solutions (Nguyen & Jones, 2022; Vuong, 2021; Vuong & Nguyen, 2024). Businesses are fundamental to our societies as they create jobs and foster innovations. Excluding them from climate mitigation endeavors is almost impossible, and considering them enemies is unwise. Instead, businesses should be encouraged and motivated to be involved in the climate change adaptation and mitigation processes by changing their priorities and recognizing that environmental values must be considered fundamental outcomes in the business operation processes (Vuong, 2021).

It should also be acknowledged that while structural transformation and social transition are important for addressing climate change, doing it the right way is no less crucial. Priorities are shaped based on underlying core values, goals, and worldviews. For these factors to be transformed, deep leverage points (e.g., restructuring institutions with consideration for stability, reconnecting humans and nature, and rethinking how knowledge is produced and used) are required (Abson et al., 2017; Vuong & Nguyen, 2023). Such a transformation will risk destabilizing or even damaging the existing organizations and social and economic structures that are securing the lives of large groups of people if the process is not stimulated and facilitated through criteria based on consideration, learning, and adaptation. When existing structures are changed, a precarious equilibrium between promoting action that may be perceived as being advantageous for some while having adverse consequences others must be sought and maintained. A degree of social resistance to change and ensuing conflicts is inevitable, but keeping this under control is vital since intensified conflicts and wars do not help solve the climate problems but rather exacerbate them (Vuong et al., 2024).

The passion and commitment of climate activists should be acknowledged and advocated. As well as focusing on raising awareness and putting pressure on the political and economic systems to address the ongoing climate change, activists should also participate in supporting and facilitating the process to reduce the cost of structural transformation and social transitions. Climate change and extreme weather conditions should be viewed together with other urgent issues such as existing socio-economic injustices caused by pre-existing fragilities and inequalities on the ground since they are concomitant causes of current and ongoing disasters (Lahsen & Ribot, 2022). Climate activists' recognition of and contribution to addressing such critical issues are also essential for the movement's success in climate change mitigation and adaptation, especially when the Earth needs more human wisdom and solidarity than ever.

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