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Youth activism and the call for generational responsibility in climate politics

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Abstract: Young climate activists have been instrumental in stirring the climate debate, employing a range of actions and discursive approaches to urge swift action from governments and society. A large body of literature on youth studies, sociology, education, communication, and environmental sciences shows how these activists have actively worked to surpass entrenched discursive and imaginative constraints within the climate debate by demanding their voices to be heard, and by offering a new vigour to the concept of climate crisis. By challenging established norms and systems, youth activism has, to a certain extent, inspired alternative visions for the future where their voices could be recognized and included. This chapter provides an overview of literature examining how youth-led climate action may have expanded the boundaries of discourse within climate politics. Our analysis underscores one of the most relevant contributions of youth activism: the moral imperative of generational responsibility, which has catalysed the politicization of the present moment. Continuously excluded from political processes, youth demand broader societal participation to formulate solutions and alternatives, indirectly proposing ways to reconfiguring climate politics as more democratic and pluralistic.

Keywords: climate change; climate politics; communication; generational responsibility; youth activism

1. Introduction

Since 2019, we have seen young people demanding swift action from governments and institutions to halt the looming climate disaster (Han and Ahn, 2020; Ritchie, 2021). The recent wave of youth climate activism is a response to the continuous exclusion of young people's voices in climate decision-making. Collectively they question "the prevailing norms, lifestyles, decisions and actions that perpetuate business as usual and its far-reaching, long-lasting and in some cases irreversible global impacts" (O'Brien et al., 2018: 1). Young-students and young-adult activists' groups such as Fridays for Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR) were able to mobilize a historically large number of people, particularly newcomers of very young age during the Global Climate Strikes and other public displays of resistance (de Moor et al., 2021). Their presence in the public arena was refreshing, as their voices cried for an urgency that was being ignored.

The actions of young people not only challenged climate sceptics and deniers, but also exposed the lack of governmental ambition in tackling the most challenging global issue society faces (Han and Ahn, 2020). This emergence was likely facilitated by the interaction of various societal factions (e.g., the release of the Special Report (SR15): *Global Warming of 1.5°C* by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2018, Pickard, 2021) creating favourable conditions for the movement's emergence and dissemination (Eide and Kunelius, 2021; Soler-i-Martí et al., 2022). António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, praised the revolting youth for their courage and encouraged their actions further. Frans Timmermans, at the time the European Commission's Executive Vice-President for the green deal, credited Greta Thunberg and the FFF movement for The European Green Deal (Euronews, 2021). Ripples of change seemed to be contributing to (slightly) more ambitious ecological transformations. Yet, not without resistance and

contestation of *other* adult voices that critiqued the youth in condescending and infantilizing tones (e.g., Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020).

Noteworthy, the movement succeeded in bringing the "climate crisis" to the forefront of society's agenda, making "climate emergency" the Oxford word of the year in 2019 (*Oxford Word of the Year 2019 | Oxford Languages*, n.d.). Arguably, words related to climate change – such as "emergency," "crisis," "limits," etc. – might enhance perceptions of either returning to an (un)wanted normality, a sense of despair, or a sense of incapacity (Asayama et al., 2019). The concept of the crisis was effective in the initial mobilization of youth, but other concepts were needed to sustain their action (Guenther et al., 2024). One of those terms was "climate justice" framed as "intergenerational justice" (Carvalho, 2023: 5).

Young people were successful in exposing issues of intergenerational justice during the Global Climate Strikes as they demonstrated the obvious (Kunelius and Roosvall, 2021; Kenis, 2021) : How could they be investing in their education and future, when they might not have a future at all? The cause of intergenerational justice produced a degree of cohesion among the youth across the globe, particularly during the first marches in 2019 and later in 2022 and 2023 during school and university occupations. There is a strong moral argument when young climate activists speak of the injustice of inheriting a frail planet that previous generations were the most responsible in destroying (Pickard, 2021), although not all members of society agreed with the means and strategies (Bergmann and Ossewaarde, 2020; Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021). A political "we" emerged as a generation confronting an older one about their responsibility in guaranteeing a livable planet for the future (Soler-i-Martí et al., 2022).

Written approximately five years after the first global School Strike for Climate in 2019, this chapter analyses whether and how youth climate activism' voices were seen to contribute to a more inclusive and democratic understanding of climate politics in the public arena. What limits of the climate debate were being challenged and/or reinforced?

How have their voices been received, reinterpreted, and made sense of? Youth climate activism encompasses different groups and collectives with different goals and tactics in their climate action (Marquardt, 2020). In Portugal, as an example, after the initial global climate strikes, some newly founded groups continued their climate action within the limits of institutional politics, that is, contesting the system while still following *the* institutional script (O'Brien et al., 2018); other groups developed more disruptive strategies of contesting the status quo *outside* institutional venues (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024). These included continuous street protests and school/university occupations, showcasing the depth and importance of youth-led movements in rethinking more democratic ways of engaging with power struggles (Malafaia, 2022; Mattheis, 2022). Importantly, the youth collectives falling in this category advocated for "system change" and for disruptive claims to rethink normality.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, we identify some of the limits of the climate debate, as it has been developed in mainstream public spaces. Second, we demonstrate how shedding light on the intergenerational struggle within climate politics creates opportunities for change, despite facing resistance from entrenched discourses on climate change. We also show how this focus allowed to politicize the *now*, fomenting a sense of urgency leading to mobilization and action. Third, we conclude. The chapter mostly draws on a review of published scholarship, but we also empirically support our argument with an excerpt of a television reportage on youth climate activism aired in Portugal in 2023 (for full analysis, see Santos et al., submitted). Additionally, it builds on insights from the JustFutures project (JustFutures, 2020), which explores young people's narratives and political imaginaries in relation to climate futures and just transformations.

2. The discursive limits of the climate crisis

Although every discursive act is an opportunity for re-creation and transformation, there are power inequities that keep certain ideas more salient than others (Fairclough, 1992).

Our theoretical orientation contends that communicative practices have both a representational function, in constituting the meaning of reality, and an interactional function, in constituting sociopolitical relations (Halliday, 1985). The representational function refers to the meanings that are socially constructed about climate change and possibilities to address it (those meanings are key contextual background for political engagement; Carvalho et al., 2017). The interactional function means that the relations between governments and citizens, and their respective positions, are constructed through communicative practices. The status of these interactions may reveal the provisional nature of social agreements and the selection of societal priorities in a given time and space (Maeseele and Raeijmaekers, 2020). For example, the prevailing neoliberal discourse confers private institutions greater independence from government policies in managing their greenhouse gas emissions than within a hegemony of an eco-socialist discourse.

Critical discourse studies and other scholarship have shown the prevalence of discourses that are shaped by elite voices, such as scientists and policymakers, excluding the voice of different publics (Horta and Carvalho, 2017). While the significance of scientific and technological knowledge is unquestionable, depending exclusively on these sources neglects the diverse insights and injustices that individuals encounter within their own communities, particularly in connection to their unique experiences of indigeneity, race, and class (Ford and Norgaard, 2020). There are important decisions to be made in relation to the chosen *paths* for mitigation and adaptation as they shape and are shaped by *different* discourses. Not only does addressing the unequal global emissions necessitate the dismantling of global colonial relationships that maintain the logic of the exploited and the exploiter (Ford and Norgaard, 2020), but it also requires an awareness of the relationship between economic growth and its environmental impact. Present governments and corporations are transforming environmental concerns into a new driving force for economic development without addressing the much-needed decoupling

between the two (Kenis and Lievens, 2016). *Structural* changes are required so that societies can pursue just, inclusive and sustainable strategies to tackle the issue (Sultana, 2022). Yet, there is very little to no discussion of those structural transformations in public spheres.

Climate activism has had an important role in making evident the much-needed political and conflictual dimensions of climate change, although their expression in public spaces has been restricted. Climate activists since the 1970s have intervened in public life to whistle blow the wrongdoings of corporations, and more recently carrying the flag of climate justice (de Moor et al., 2021; Ritchie, 2021). While not long ago the biggest concern was to mitigate the presence of climate change denialists that were doubting the severity of climate change, now the tension can be said to lie primarily elsewhere (Jacobsson, 2021). There has been more debate on the most problematic aspects of human activities and how to best define sustainable responses to an existing "crisis." These responses are tied to political imaginaries which, in Machin's (2022: 2) words, are "dynamic constructions of political reality that enable practices, orient expectations, inform decisions, and determine what is politically legitimate, feasible, and valuable – and what is not." Some of these imaginaries operate within the logics of the current neoliberal capitalist system and others may seek to break free from reformist strategies and propose a different structure altogether (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024; Jacobsson, 2021; Machin, 2021; Marquardt, 2020).

Several limitations stand in the way of imagining alternative paths and pluralizing the climate debate (see Herbert, 2021; Moore and Milkoreit, 2020). One of these is the perpetuation of an idea of an insuperable capitalism, and the colonization of the "there is no alternative" rationale (Hall and O'Shea, 2013), which is deeply rooted in "imaginary significations" (such as the market, the state, the law, the research; Castoriadis, 2005). Research involving professionals engaged in energy transitions reveals the presence of imaginary lock-ins, which constrain the emergence of alternative visions beyond techno-

optimistic, green-growth-oriented modernization (Marquardt and Nasiritousi, 2022). Experts in the field encounter challenges in comprehending and incorporating the more radical and *political* proposals advocated by activists (Üzelgün et al., 2022). This resistance may arise from the lack of clarity in public debate regarding the political responsibility of regulating large corporations or engaging in critical discussions about the role of an economic growth system (Jacobsson, 2021). Discussing the role of citizens as capable of working towards a common good involves offering a type of agency and volition that renders them as more than victims or culprits of climate change. Instead, they emerge as subjects in climate politics (Carvalho et al., 2021).

Young climate activists demanded a seat in the climate debate and politics in different ways. Some of those groups might have been more assertive in proposing *alternative*s with their different tactics and forms of dissent (O'Brien et al., 2018). In 2022, after the popular marches and the COVID-19 pandemic, the End Fossil – Occupy! movement carried out school and university occupations until demands of rapid decarbonization were heard. In Portugal, their occupations ended with police intervention and without a clear commitment by governments. Yet, the ways in which youth have demanded social transformation illustrate how an alternative and pluralistic democracy can be imagined (Kenis, 2021; Machin, 2022). Stereotypes were broken and new relationships of legitimacy were called for as young people, once thought of as unengaged in political affairs, claimed spaces of recognition (Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus, in press). We discuss next young people's claims for social and environmental change and how these were negotiated and integrated in the public debate.

3. Exposing intergenerational injustice in climate change through youth activism

Young people often find themselves excluded from meaningful political decision-making (Malafaia, 2022). Their understanding of participation frequently extends solely to voting, an activity some are precluded from due to their age (Karsgaard and Davidson, 2023). Still,

they display political engagement through various unconventional channels including individual consumption (e.g., boycotting unethical brands), participation in protests, and online activism. But their continuous exclusion from political processes has led to arguments in favour of youth disobedience as a means of addressing their lack of political representation and awareness (Mattheis, 2022).

Thus, calling for a school strike for the climate in 2019 was inherently political: it signified students' rejection of the societal roles assigned to them and asserted their agency as agents of change (Kenis, 2021). During this time, organizations like FFF and XR pointed fingers at politicians for their perceived passivity in addressing global warming (de Moor et al., 2021). An ethnographic study in Portugal showed also how the school climate strikes achieved different political contestations within both larger political systems and the microcosms of their families, schools, and communities (Malafaia, 2022). They destabilized traditional educational roles, by acting as the "educators" of climate science (Guenther et al., 2024), by showing collective approaches to climate issues and by using the public space as an arena for youth contestation (Malafaia, 2022). While the youth climate strikers were not the first to skip school for a higher goal, their tactics seem to be even more appealing because they resonated with the point they wanted to make. Their actions convey the idea that attending school was futile in the face of climate change; what is needed is political pressure, not further studying (Kenis, 2021). We understand their actions to expose an injustice that became heard and seen, acting on the assumption of equality and working towards re-politicising the debate (Kenis and Mathijs, 2014).

Early on, the concept of generational responsibility permeated the discourse of many activists and groups such as FFF ("We are skipping our lessons to teach you one." – BBC NEWS, 2019). The youth critiqued older generations for their role in creating climate change and their perceived insufficient efforts to address it. Additionally, it was also evident in how older generations, particularly those in positions of power, either commended or rebuked the young generation for their activism (Pickard, 2021). The ways

in which this recognition was shaped by more influential social actors and discourses is an important discussion for the analysis of young people's attempt to offer alternatives (Santos et al., 2023).

Moreover, youth activism acknowledged their immediate limitations, urging sceptics and politicians to better acquaint themselves with recent climate science findings (Han and Ahn, 2020). Climate science, then, was a focal point for groups of the youth movement (Marquardt, 2020). Science was invoked as both a perceived ally to their agendas and an ethical referee to make moral assessments (Ferreira da Silva and Carvalho, submitted). Through the rationale of "it's not us saying it, it's science," young activists morally assess the actions of governments and corporations, holding them accountable while taking their own political views. Activists can constitute themselves as *amplifiers* of the message of science (Rödder and Pavenstädt, 2022), critical knowledge brokers for their audiences and even bolster public trust in science (Eide and Kunelius, 2021). Yet, in the name of climate science, activist groups may find themselves aligned with the very systems they critique (Kenis, 2021; Marquardt, 2020), keeping the moral authority on the side of a small group of people, leading to the exclusion of values of inclusivity and pluralism.

Media(ted) discourses played an important role in shaping how the public spheres understand the youth's message and its relationship with the scientific field. The following excerpt is from a television report aired in Portugal in the commercial television channel in January 2023 showing how the message of the youth is received and made sense of (Reportagem Especial, 2023; Santos et al., 2024). Filipe Duarte Santos, a leading climate change scientist in Portugal, is presented reacting to the youth-led school occupations in Lisbon during the month of November 2022 by the End Fossil-Occupy! movement. Matilde Ventura, its representative, appeared immediately after, indirectly responding to his comments.

Screenshot	Sound Transcription
 News caption: “The struggle of the youth put the topic of the environment on the agenda.”	Filipe Duarte Santos: These [direct] actions are, in the end, to be expected to happen. What is sometimes disappointing is that the level of education and information that these activists have is actually very low.
	Matilde Ventura: I am 18 years old. I can't explain all the intricacies of undergoing an energy transition and a drastic systemic change. I feel like I know enough, but sometimes when I'm asked to talk about super-specific things and super-specific alternatives, I . . . I can't speak about it. Because I'm not an expert, there are experts. I'm just trying to claim the future that I am entitled to.

Figure 1 Excerpts. Interaction of a climate scientist (a) and a climate activist (b) during a 17-minute reportage on Portuguese television.

We chose the excerpts (Figure 23.1) because, in a way, there was a recognition of the role of youth in bringing environmental issues to the forefront of the news agenda. The news caption and the initial intervention of the scientist highlighted this aspect. However, while the scientist understood the actions of young people, he was shown leveraging the moral authority of science to question their legitimacy. The mobilized youth were portrayed as lacking adequate knowledge and comprehension of climate science and its pressing challenges, reinforcing barriers to recognizing their political voices as meaningful

contributors to the climate change discourse (Bowman, 2020). Their media representation thus worked to undermine their legitimacy as climate actors.

This delegitimising trend was evident in various global media analyses. There were shallow descriptions of hopes and demands that represented the protests in infantilizing ways (e.g., Huttunen and Albrecht, 2021; Jacobsson, 2021; Marquardt, 2020; Santos et al., 2023). Although Thunberg and the youth activists received credit, they were also dismissed as climate alarmists, causing people to fear the apocalypse (Han and Ahn, 2020). Resisting the existential threat of climate change may have prompted the media to develop strategies aligning the youth's struggle with those of the antagonists, including the government. For example, during 2019, youth were depicted next to high-ranking officials, and the coverage focused on the adult voices that claimed to be aligned with the cause (see Santos et al., 2023). By obscuring the conflict the young people wanted to expose, the media emptied their claims of political power and turned the strikes/direct actions into harmless events incapable of disrupting neoliberal common sense (Jacobsson, 2021).

Activists, however, argue that it is unfair to demand of them ready-made solutions to the climate crisis (de Moor et al., 2021). The public should bear responsibility to understand their legitimacy to have a voice as embedded in values of justice and equality to promote their visibility further. Returning to the excerpt presented (Figure 23.1), Matilde Ventura asserts young people's role in the cause. Her role is to guarantee a future to the newer generations and generations to come, and not to offer a concrete or simplified solution. Not only climate change necessitates complex and integrative measures for mitigation and adaptation, but "there are experts" able to envision the "super-specific alternatives" required. Noteworthy is her mention of a "drastic systemic change" that still is a focus of contention, particularly in mainstream television. During this piece, there were no mentions as to what a "drastic systemic change" could look like. Mainstream journalism is still incapable of seriously putting issues of capitalism and class on the news agenda (Jacobsson, 2021; Santos et al., 2023). The youth's potential of re-energizing the

political debate of climate change, then, fell short of its potential. Through their actions and claims, the youth wanted to make visible the deeply problematic hierarchies of power and inclusion that kept their voices and experiences in the present unattended, even though they will bear the brunt of climate change in the (near) future.

Still, the global youth climate movement played a significant role in heightening awareness regarding the climate crisis because they brought to the present the voices of their future selves (Holmberg and Alvinius, 2020). Matilde states that she is "trying to claim the future that [she is] entitled to." Generational issues then provided another layer to the climate justice discourse: the notion of temporality (Friberg, 2022). Usually paired together, issues of generational justice speech came with explicit and implicit messages related to crisis and emergency and to act *now* (Soler-i-Martí et al., 2022).

As described by Kenis (2023), a full understanding of time, that is, when it sharpens the awareness of contingent possibilities, can politicize the present to confront societies with the need to act. Similarly, young people by bringing the generational tensions to the fore, made more evident the need to act now, disrupting normality (O'Brien et al., 2018). Groups like XR and End Fossil-Occupy! have employed a repertoire of contention: they occupied public spaces and disrupted the normality of daily life (such as road blockades), including key youth spaces like schools and universities. Not only they were pushing the limits of their constrained agency (Mattheis, 2022) but they also exposed how powerfully direct actions conveyed a much-needed disruption from present-day ways of life (de Moor et al., 2021; Pickard et al., 2020).

In helping to make this point, youth groups introduced postapocalyptic elements to their communication (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018; de Moor and Marquardt, 2023). This helped frame the present already in catastrophe (Friberg, 2022): underneath the systems, norms and beliefs that pave path dependencies towards collapse. Focusing on the here and now, as the voices of the youth in the present (Holmberg and Alvinius, 2020), lead to a

radically different position than in the past, allowing politicization along an intersection of social and intergenerational justice lines (Kenis, 2023).

We argue that the strikes and the disruptive action (within their nuances) exemplifies ways of relating with communities and with climate politics. The youth activists mobilized concepts such as “radical care” during the demonstrations and occupations (Pickard et al., 2020). They experimented with alternative modes of existence and interaction when protesting, showing how utopian impulses are present as a driver and result of their collective action (Clot-Garrell, 2023). Sustainable futures demand change at multiple levels, and the actions of young people impact in complex ways via peer groups, communities, and families (Malafaia, 2022; Trott, 2021). And these ripples of influence can be understood as a way of producing alternative political imaginaries in which power imbalances are leveraged and new alternative ways of being are practiced. Importantly, their claims and actions should encourage society to consider how intergenerational justice should serve as an ethical foundation to allow the youth to express their concerns about the future, and their political imaginaries. The attempts to limit and downplay the voices of young people by adults reflect ongoing structural dynamics that are resistant to bending. Truly taking the voice of the youth, incorporating their anxieties, experiences, and knowledge can produce important opportunities for fostering alternative political imaginaries and a more horizontal and deliberative based democracy (Kenis, 2021; Machin, 2021; Pickard et al., 2020). Young people overall feel to be fundamentally misunderstood, and want adults rather than become involved, to *listen* and consider to their claims and proposals (Liou and Literat, 2020).

4. Conclusion

This chapter encourages the reader to understand the youth’s actions in their capacity to open sockets of renewed oxygen that fuels creativity, transformation, and possibility. Within the diversity of youth climate action and the political imaginaries sustaining such

pluralism (Ferreira da Silva et al., 2024; Han and Ahn, 2020), the movement shared a common claim: to advance youth's political agency on issues of climate change (Holmberg and Alvinius, 2020; Liou and Literat, 2020). Young people made powerful arguments in showing how their agency was politicizing the present to open possibilities for the future. However, other social actors' resistance shows how there are still entrenched discursive limits to accommodate the plurality of claims and repertoires of action proposed by young activists. In their more disruptive actions, such as road blockades and school occupations, climate activists embodied strategies that allowed to envision and *practice* alternative political imaginaries (Bowman, 2020; Pickard et al., 2020). Importantly, one should not underestimate the capacity of young people to mobilize political agency that produce more capable, forward-thinking ways of relating to the present and to the contingencies of the future. By disrupting everyday affairs, they invited society at large to critically evaluate the state of normality and the path dependencies configuring the future. Yet, their ways of doing and claiming encountered resistance from the media and of other relevant actors. This resistance was illustrated by the excerpt of a long reportage on youth climate activism. We showed how there are still hierarchies that shape whose voices and strategies should be given priority.

Moreover, actions undertaken by youth employed two distinct approaches: one involves demanding changes from external actors, while the other entails taking direct action on those changes (Trott, 2021). We contend that the youth worked to take direct action on those changes by their disruptive efforts to make their voices heard. In this way, young people are exploring the agency they possess and are carving out transformative and democratic spaces. Their actions and discourses represent endeavours to establish nodes of solidarity and support (Clot-Garrell, 2023; Pickard, 2021). Further research is imperative to delve into these expressions of solidarity in their capacity to challenge, forge, and rejuvenate alternative systems and modes of interaction in a truly transformative way (O'Brien et al., 2018).

Societies, then, bear the responsibility of upholding values of intergenerational accountability and are required to embrace the voices of youth in a supportive and critical manner. This is a crucial step towards dismantling entrenched power imbalances that have historically marginalized the contributions of youth – and indeed of other minoritized and/or marginalized groups – in discussions surrounding climate change.

Suggestions for future reading

Bessant, J. and Pickard, S. (2024) The disruptive power of recognition and young environmental activists. In *Handbook on youth activism*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 31–45. Available at: https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781803923222/book-part-9781803923222–12.xml

The chapter imagines what would happen if established political leaders and others recognized young environmental activists as fully equal and legitimate political participants. The likely outcome, the chapter suggests, would be disruptive, emphasizing the transformative potential of recognition struggles.

Machin, A. (2021) Green democracy: Political imaginaries of environmental movements. Em Grasso, M. and Giugni, M. (eds.) *The Routledge handbook of environmental movements*. 1st ed. Routledge, 12. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367855680

The chapter explores the concept of democracy within green movements, aiming to clarify its meaning. It introduces a framework called the “green democratic imaginary.” Through analysing various green movements (Earth First!, XR, and FFF), it examines how these dimensions manifest differently across different movements.

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