

Between XR and COP:

Pivoting climate movement strategy from the radical flank effect to a ‘moderate’ flank, via a shift toward workplace-based activism

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The rapid, system-level change required by the pressing nature of climate-reality necessitates mass mobilisation. XR’s great success in driving climate action up the public agenda is not matched by public appetite to participate in its methods. As ever more people are jolted into awareness of climate realities, they need a relatable space within which to take action. As such there has opened up a fertile space for a mass moderate flank — whose energy can be channelled most consequentially into far-reaching activism in the workplace.

The recent ‘climate code red’ IPCC report has woken up a fresh cohort of the population to the reality of ecological catastrophe. In the coming months and years, this process of realisation will continue, in bumps and starts: as further unprecedented climate-disasters hit; and particularly as November’s COP in Glasgow in November fails us (as [I expect it to](#) with sadly high confidence). The climate issue - and eco-transformation more generally - demands *system*-change. This requires that the mass of the population is taken with us. We need therefore to find the ‘Goldilocks’ zone for climate activism: stretching the public imagination to comprehend its role in the action needed, but not pushing it so far that it doesn’t recognise itself in our cause.

Extinction Rebellion’s great success was to legitimate the language of ‘climate and ecological emergency’ and the goal of climate action based on truth-telling. In 2019 (along with Greta, and Attenborough’s *Climate change: the facts*) we co-created a willingness to talk and act on climate and nature that far outstripped public appetite to join in with its methods. XR has thus created space for a new, less (or differently) demanding flank or flanks *to itself*.

To achieve system-change, what is needed is principally *not* more effort poured into radical flanks such as XR was set up to be - let alone more extreme tactics or organisations - but the emergence of huge *moderate* flanks to this new attractor; this centre of gravity in the climate-movement ecosystem, that XR has become. Such moderate entities will thrive in the space XR created. They will be *how* much of the population is brought with us.

A very important note: this essay does *not* aim to criticise XR. Its tactic of mass arrest was successful, and I’m so proud of having played a part in its launching and in its success in 2019 especially. But our current societal reality sets clear limits on how far mass arrest can go in generating the radical and rapid change we need.²

¹ With huge thanks to Rosie Bell for editorial assistance, and thanks too to John Foster, Jonathan Essex, Anne Chapman and Andrew Mearmain of Green House for comments and edits.

² I *detailed* and evidenced these limits in the pamphlet “Rushing the emergency, rushing the rebellion?” that I co-authored with my brilliant colleagues Marc Lopatin and Skeena Rathor: <https://xrstroud.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/XR-Story-Vision2020-Leaflet.V11.pdf> .

Successful, but not enough

While more individuals wake up with every new tragic disaster in the news, the overwhelming majority of the general population still aren't close to understanding the existential threat now facing civilisation. Herein lies another critical learning from XR: that for all of the organisation's impressive success in terms of raising its own profile and that of its cause, it didn't attract many additional supporters in absolute numbers, after October 2019. That was XR UK's high-water mark in terms of participation: with 2000 arrests and perhaps 30,000 people going on a 'grief march'. The Rebellions since then have not come close to either of those numbers.

Low uptake can be attributed in part to missteps in XR 'leadership' and tactics (e.g. pondering drones over Heathrow, or clambering onto tube trains; off-putting to the overwhelming majority). But more fundamentally, there was always probably a ceiling to XR's feasible support, at this time. Most 'climate concerned' adults just aren't yet willing to experience really significant discomfort to support the cause that they would say they are 'very concerned' about.³ This is reality; and it suggests that the route toward real climate progress will be somewhat slower than XR envisaged. We have a long way to go, to take the broader population with us. The times are urgent; we must slow down...

Outrage lags behind climate reality

Obviously, it will be replied, time is the one thing we don't have. But raging against social reality will not alter it. Popular 'outrage' is bound to lag behind the unseen, iceberg-like reality of climate catastrophe. It's likely therefore that only when catastrophic climate events - unprecedented disasters - become common *across* the Global North - in say 5 or possibly even 10 years, - will millions be willing to go as far as XR have gone, let alone further.

So what is to be done?

Despite reams written on the radical flank effect, academic literature has neglected the scenario wherein a radical flank such as XR successfully shifts the 'Overton window' of what is capable of being put on the political agenda, creating a large new political space on its moderate side. Thus little or no research exists on the kind of potential moderate flank effect suggested here. A moderate⁴ (relative to XR) flank on climate has the potential to force dramatic political change. It can leverage unprecedented action and thought/action-leadership more radical, thoroughgoing and transformative than the traditional eco-action territory of voting, demos and consumer-action, etc - yet more moderate than full-scale civil disobedience risking arrest.

³ Though it is worth noting the hopeful development clearly observable since early 2020 in willingness among many to fly less.

⁴ N.B. In particular, my focus in this piece is on the *means* used being more 'moderate', more inclusive. The *aims* may or may not be more moderate. It's about *lowering barriers to entry*.

Now to be fair one needs to acknowledge quite clearly that being in XR doesn't require risking arrest; several non-arrestables are needed to help every arrestable. But at the same time, XR is *defined* by having at its vanguard as many as possible arrestables. The moderate flanks set out in this piece will be defined quite differently.

Dramatic change can happen almost unnoticed

The form this change will take may be less obviously dramatic than most activists imagine. Serious political change will happen throughout the 2020s⁵ as the mother of all wake-up calls is finally heard, as our climate and weather lethally decline - but it will rarely occur overnight. At times it will be more subtle, and in its 'gradualism' may often go unnoticed to the majority of the population.

Compare the gay rights movement. This certainly achieved dramatic political change - but, asked a non-leading question about LGBT rights today, the average person might well respond that equal rights are obvious. Most ordinary people don't really register the scale of the change that has taken place over a generation, from everyday oppression and even illegality to marriage equality, etc.

Growing moderate flanks

The same process can occur, vis-a-vis 'the climate movement'. *Is occurring*, to some degree. Various possible moderate flanks are already in process or in embryo, including: building on Brits' enthusiasm for nature and conservation (exemplified by '[Wild card](#)', co-created by former-XR firebrand Joel Scott-Halkes); workplace-based moderate flanks (see below); a huge parents' movement to match the youth movement which has been a central novel development in the climate movement since 2018 (examples here include Parents For Future, and [Mothership](#)); and a growth in bottom-up adaptationist (as opposed to only mitigationist) practice and discourse (such as [TrAd](#)), which feels to many more 'positive' than protest. Notably, some of these groups/flanks will not even present as 'activism', let alone as 'protest'.

I am especially hopeful for workplace-based possibilities: real workplace action/activism⁶ to get the changes we need happening in and through every single place of employment as well as through Government action. Most citizens have the potential in one way or another to pursue transformations in their workplaces that could transform employment and business in turn (though obviously it will be much easier for some - e.g. the unionised - than for others - e.g. the precariat). Particularly since the coronavirus showed us that transformations in ways of working are often largely simply a matter of will — home-working being a prime example.

Employee activism

Consider the scope for employees/professionals to influence the ecological footprint of their place of work; including that of procurement / supply-chains. How employers affect the

⁵ Though one of the implications of this piece is: if the climate movement doesn't become inclusive, then that increases the likelihood that the coming climate-driven political changes will be unwholesome. Some 'purists' in the current movement want to keep it pure even at the cost of losing. That's a very bad bargain - and will drive those waking up in coming months and years into the arms of unsavoury including potentially eco-authoritarian or even eco-fascist elements. Much better create a big tent.

⁶ A possible model of a successful moderate flanking move in this vicinity is Lawyers For Net Zero, spearheaded by Adam Woodhall: www.lawyersfornetzero.com. Imagine — create! — a *series* of such initiatives, across the professions and occupations, now/soon, and achieving critical mass. Why not? I'll discuss this kind of possibility further in the next section. (And here I wish to strongly honour Adam, who co-devised with me the concept of the 'moderate' flank.)

world for good or ill through their lobbying activities, and their 'brand identity'.⁷ How they discourage *or encourage* climate- and eco- action from employees. How profits are used: e.g. for genuinely beneficial philanthropy, or not. (Whether your place of work makes profits *at all*, or pursues a different model.) And to influence what a place of work *does*: imagine the possible positive payoffs if a company like Amazon were to discriminate against and warn against climate-denialist literature. Imagine if insurers were pro-actively to lobby Government for real action on climate to save their business model,⁸ and in the meantime refuse to insure companies that added to climate risks or fell short of a transformative approach to adaptation.

Imagine if the NHS were to build on the emergent success of social prescribing to prioritise/create/construct 'green gyms' [i.e. therapeutic gardening] on most of the cumulatively-vast green spaces they own around hospitals. Imagine if more Trades Unions were to get deadly serious about a just – which must mean-a deeply green - *transition*.⁹ Imagine lawyers, accountants, academics, marketers and the rest, insisting that 2050 isn't good enough; that this target equals death, and that they (we) won't sit silently by as our corporate bodies greenwash their offering as 'net zero 2050' etc.

Where such transformation is resisted, many have the power to withdraw their labour in one way or another. After all: if our *children* can symbolically go on strike periodically for part of a Friday, then surely so can we. (This is the approach pioneered by [Earth Strike](#) and, promisingly, it is starting to attract interest from Trades Unions.)

Making the opened space visible

Such an approach demands more of people than most traditional climate activism; rightly so, given that time is so short and the very future of civilization hangs in the balance. But it is *not* as demanding as XR, which is perceived by nearly everyone as too demanding in its emphasis on *seeking* arrest. (To underline my earlier remark, this is not necessarily to criticise the central XR tactic of facilitating / aiming at large-scale arrest per se, but simply to observe that it has all-too-real limits.)

⁷ See my analysis of this, with Roc Sandford, for Reuters: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-global-economy-climatechange-breaking/breakingviews-guest-view-lets-gauge-firms-real-co2-footprints-idUKKCN25A1AO>

⁸ Of course, this is not to deny that there already exist gestures in this direction, such as <https://climate-insurance.org>, &

<https://www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/business-action/sustainable-finance/climatewise>: they haven't had much real impact, and arguably have not been *intended* to have any dramatic impact, as they spring from the mild reformist paradigm of CSR. This is *not* what the moderate flank I am calling for amounts to; it falls significantly short of it.

⁹ Part of the reason why Labour's response after XR's April Rebellion wasn't as adventurous as it could be is because some powerful unions lobbied against a firm 2030 Net Zero. Sadly, when this kind of thing occurs, those unions are prioritizing the jobs of the members now, over the futures of the children of those very same members.

Green House's own important work in recent years on climate jobs can be used to inform the moderate flank; to help ensure that just-transition plans go far enough, and are credible enough to win arguments about win-wins, about what I call the beautiful coincidence: that, by and large, the very things we need to do to save ourselves from catastrophe are the very things we need to do to bring about better jobs etc. etc. .

A successful moderate flank will, as roundly hinted, in fact be a plural moderate flank: i.e. moderate flanks. Such a plural, and unprecedentedly large, moderate flank will mainstream the climate issue by occupying and making visible and vivid the space that XR has opened up. It will reciprocally legitimate XR et al; because the moderate flank's sheer size will make the existence of a radical flank less surprising. A vast, flourishing moderate flank will help people to make sense of the radical flank, by reducing the gap between XR and organisations with which the public are most familiar. At the moment these include organisations like Friends of the Earth and the RSPB; but organisations like Parents For Future and many workplace-based groups (such as Lawyers for Net Zero) are pushing for rapid progress toward (net-)zero etc. Ultimately the effect would be to extend the climate/nature movement 'ecosystem' further towards radicalism. In other words: the flank that I call for is moderate relative only to the recent radical flank, *and not to traditional organisations in the area*. This point is critical in importance.

Climate-activism is different from everything that has gone before

Those who seek an escalation of XR radicalism, or even ([as Andreas Malm does](#)) envisage an eco-saboteurist radical flank, need to face the reality that most of their writing studiously avoids: that there is very little appetite among activists let alone the wider public for even such an intelligent, sense-making radical flank as they imagine.

The climate/ecology struggle is very different from those typically invoked by XR and Malm alike as would-be precedents. This is not a struggle for self-liberation on the part of an oppressed group like the Civil Rights Movement. It is a struggle in which selflessness is necessary. It is an intergenerationally oriented struggle; enacted in part on behalf of those including our non-human kin who are not and never will be us, and who are not able to defend themselves.¹⁰ It is a struggle therefore that is tangential at best to 'identity politics'.¹¹ It is not focally about *oneself*. Consequently, it is often harder for people in our society to get worked up about it — to really *get* that the stakes are in reality even higher (in fact, much higher) than those in great historic liberation struggles. That this is about all humans, all generations, born and unborn.

Change requires that a far larger percentage of the population understand and feel the bitter truth - that no-one in authority is planning to do enough to save their kids; their world. That this issue of issues cannot be outsourced any longer; that Governments, let alone scientists (who are increasingly let down by a policy-making system out of tune with them and with precaution), are not 'on' this in a manner that will amount to *enough*. More people need to *feel* their vulnerability, and that of their children. Doing so will be painful - but also transformative.

¹⁰ The magnificent, mythic rising up depicted in the culminating battle of *Avatar* notwithstanding... Gaia and the animals of the Earth are not going to ride to the rescue... (See on this the close of Chapter 6 of my *A film-philosophy of ecology and enlightenment*).

¹¹ I offer a reason *here*, in discussing the foundational contribution of the Combahee River Collective to the project of identity politics, for thinking that in actuality identity politics necessarily stands in opposition to activism on behalf of nature, animals and future generations: <http://www.truthandpower.com/rupert-read-some-thoughts-on-civilisational-succession/>. For they argue that identity politics has to be about liberating yourself/ves; but the whole point about environmental activism, animal activism and activism for a better long-term future is that it involves you looking deeply beyond yourself.

So there remains a vast task of persuasion.¹² Because the climate situation is so different from those movements so often evoked as analogues (Suffrage, etc.), and because it demands system-change and needs huge buy-in, this task calls primarily not for a radical flank but a moderate flank. Contra Malm¹³ and Green House's own John Foster.¹⁴

Authority can change

Certainly, no-one in authority is *currently* planning to do enough. But a key function of any social movement is to create the leverage that drags those in authority into a position of 'leadership' on the issue at stake. Sometimes then, an effective route to relatively radical and relatively quick change is to persuade those currently in authority to change their views. In addition to building a mass movement, the moderate flank should therefore seek to influence climate concerned CEOs (like [Paul Polman](#)), former or current senior politicians who have been in or are in Government (like Amber Rudd, Rory Stewart, Claire Perry O'Neill, Zac Goldsmith, Rebecca Pow, Michael Gove), generals, top civil servants etc.

Whilst we may have issues with figures of conservative 'authority', there are clear instances where they have accelerated change, where previously it seemed they might always repress it. The Conservatives, responsible in 1988 for the anti-gay 'Section 28', became the party that ensured gay marriage was legalized in the UK. F. W. de Klerk proactively negotiated away power in South Africa even though he was known for most of his career as a "[forceful proponent of apartheid's system of racial segregation](#)". To initiate any such change requires that we first accept that it is or at least can be made possible of those in authority (unless we are literally planning a revolution).

This civilization *will* change form

Everyone knows that civilizations have failed before. And now the threat facing human civilization is potentially terminal. I argue that *this* civilization in anything resembling its current form is finished.¹⁵ Our choice now is whether the full-spectrum transformation that *is* coming takes the form of an intelligent, voluntary transformation -- or the kind that is brutally forced on people when a civilization collapses. We need a liveable planet for all. If we can keep that, then we can keep civilization - albeit much changed.

In this struggle for a habitable (let alone flourishing) future, we face severe free rider / collective action difficulties. Not to mention huge vested interests and inertias. Thus there is no alternative but to achieve a pretty wide buy-in to the needed changes, if they are to be collectively voluntary. We need a sufficient plurality or majority to get onside such that the free riders and the forces of the status quo can be surmounted; propelled to change.¹⁶ The

¹² My own effort to contribute to this includes emphasising in comms our very real short-medium term vulnerability. See e.g. the line I took on BBC's QuestionTime programme when I was on the panel - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QK7DKiKh9_Q, go five minutes in. See also the argument of <https://medium.com/@rupertjread/24-theses-on-corona-748689919859>.

¹³ Malm in *How to blow up a pipeline* is perplexed that there hasn't been more ecotage, especially re climate. *This* is why.

¹⁴ See e.g. <https://youtu.be/cmsuZVkdTeU>.

¹⁵ See <https://ratical.org/collapsologie/ThisCivilisationIsFinished.html> for my full analysis.

¹⁶ Workers are onto a loser if they try to protect their current jobs at any cost. Those areas of employment with the highest current carbon emissions are those in need of the greatest change, and those jobs are highly vulnerable in the coming climate, for obvious reasons. Unless workers help lead

task is far harder than that of the Suffragettes, the Indian Independence movement etc. (XR, in pretending otherwise and trying to generate the hope of a quick full-spectrum win has avoided the truth - and thus generated a good deal of disappointed burnout.) The aim is necessarily nothing less than *system*-change. This implies inter alia changes to what is done in many sectors *together*, changes that interact with each other; and that such change needs a thought-through just transition such that the transition is one that empowers and links rather than divides and rules.

We don't have time to overthrow the current elites

'Paradoxically', I have suggested that all this is *why* a huge moderate flank is now what is needed.¹⁷ Even if eco-authoritarianism¹⁸ were desirable, which obviously it isn't for powerful independent reasons, it is a complete non-starter.¹⁹ The Arab Spring showed decisively that unpopular authoritarian regimes are long-term...unsustainable.²⁰ Without broad buy-in from businesses and elites, not to mention a majority of citizens, the swift whole-systems-transformation needed to avert or mitigate collapse is quite simply impossible. That is ultimately why, on this question, the question on which our children and their children will judge us (and if we fail them, they will indeed *judge* us), the great cause of our time is (the facilitation of) a great, *wide*, unprecedented rising-up. This should issue in due course in democratic forms such as Citizens Assemblies for the redirection — the transformation — of our common future.

Getting there however, I've argued above, will not take the form of a truly mass self-offering-up of citizen activists for arrest (at least, not yet). More likely, it will take many more people moving to change their workplaces. If we can get companies and institutions

away in the direction of green transition, it is highly likely that high job losses will result from the transition in precisely those areas. A just transition, is therefore a key reason for workers to be involved, self-interestedly. (Thanks to Jonathan Essex for help in thinking through this in a way obvious but highly consequential point.)

¹⁷ It will be highly radical compared to the status quo, but moderate compared to XR, let alone to any Malmian (more) radical flank. There is no Leninist solution to the climate tragedy, *contra* Malm (and Foster).

¹⁸ Let me be clear; by this term I obviously do not mean mutual coercion, mutually agreed: that is just *democracy*. The kind of thing that the National Coalition instituted (brilliantly) in 1940 or (reluctantly, with deadly effect from the delay) that the current government undertook in the pandemic. (For carbon rationing, see food rationing; for land conscription, personal military conscription; for a raft of regulatory controls, state direction of industry under Bevin; for a basic income scheme, the furloughing of millions; for compulsory blackout and movement restrictions, lockdown...etc.). That kind of centrally imposed authority goes inescapably with confronting a terrible emergency. It's not authoritarian, it's rather a willing giving up of freedoms for the greater good. 'Authoritarianism' as a label should be reserved for a political structure that suspends democracy. What I want to do (following XR) is rather *upgrade* democracy.

¹⁹ But the risk of authoritarianism occurring as a result of radical-flankery is real: either through the coming to power of some version of that flank, or (much more likely) as a result of a reactionary response to it. Consider the current UK Police Bill. In this context, the maintenance of non-violent discipline to make the state look bad in its over-reaction is arguably of paramount import. We need to make every action count, not fritter away public sympathy through insufficiently-thoughtful actions perceived as violent. And we need a moderate flank so as to bring more public sympathy *actively* on board.

²⁰ Admitting this conclusion does not require thinking that the Arab Spring was 'successful' or 'a good thing', in its medium-term implications. It simply requires admitting the unexpected fragility of authoritarian regimes, that was demonstrated in spades in 2011.

all really racing for zero — zero-biodiversity-destruction as well as zero-carbon — *this* decade, then there is still a chance. While one cue we can take from Marx is that labour remains humanity’s greatest power - as and when needful then, if sufficient change by way of moderate-flank workplace-based activism etc. is resisted, labour may be withheld in targeted fashion, as our children have so inspiringly withheld theirs from school. After all, *if the kids can do it, then by Gaia so should we*. We, the older generation at large; those responsible for parenting the future.

Working for transformation

To sum up. On the spectrum from conventional activism and conventional politics through to arrest-willing non-violent direct action, the most obvious vacancy is in the central area of our lives that is our work. We need to be delivering the necessary transformative change via our day jobs: working to *ensure* that the job really is part of the solution, not the problem, and to do so on a non-reckless timeline.²¹ This implies a date for net zero way before 2050; it implies [real zero rather than net zero](#) except when genuinely impossible and when the emissions concerned are non-negotiably necessary; and it implies a broad focus on ecology as opposed to a narrower focus on climate.

If this push -- for wide, sustained, rapid action via workplaces such that our children can have a future -- fails, then there will be significant scope for escalation into strikes. But the beauty of the moderate flank proposal is that it doesn’t need to start there. It *starts*, rather, with something that will feel significantly more palatable; more ‘vanilla’. And if we need in the end to strike, we still wouldn’t be going as far as XR *have already gone*.

In other words: Relative to XR, all this will be a massive, multiform, moderate flank.

The current need for such could not be starker, nor the opportunity more ripe: there is a glaring ‘gap in the market’, or to use a much more apposite metaphor a *vacant ecological niche*.

Against a backdrop of the approaching UK-based climate COP and the ongoing and accelerating post-Covid economic reset that will shape the whole of the 2020s, we are called to rapid action, to fill that niche. The COP is a place of system-failure and undue compromise; of the elite talking to itself about how not to fix our tragic condition. XR by contrast has pulled wide open what is possible. We must now start to make that possible actual.

The time for creating and embodying a massive moderate flank is now.

²¹ This is what Lawyers for Net Zero is all about. Roughly its model should be creatively taken up *across all sectors*. But in different sectors what that means will likely look very different. That’s of course why creativity is of the essence. My ‘recommendation’ needs to be acted on in diverse ways, ways impossible in many instances for me to predict or even perhaps as yet understand. For instance, in some (perhaps, with some creative thought and practice, many) jobs/professions, presumably, workplace action for climate- and eco- sanity can be relatively ‘direct’. For instance, in farming; and indeed in teaching.