

An Anarchist Perspective on Extinction Rebellion

Collective Action

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Rebel to Win – An Anarchist Perspective

The climate movement is growing rapidly as people are all too aware that we have limited time to deal with the climate emergency. The recent climate strike was one of the largest series of coordinated protests in the history of the world. As the movement grows it's worth looking at some of the ideas around tactics, analysis and long-term strategies that we're using. In particular this flyer will be looking at the positions held by Extinction Rebellion (XR). This flyer wasn't written to convince anyone not to participate in XR or XR-run actions. The more people participating in a movement to stop the climate emergency the better. There are still some issues that need addressing though.

Apples to Oranges: XR's Case for "Non-Violence"

A huge part of XR's strategy is based on a very strict commitment to non-violence. This extends to actively helping Vicpol to arrest activists and policing activist's behavior to stop people booing or chanting aggressively at cops. It's worth asking here how "violence" is actually defined and why. XR state in information that they distribute (as well as on their website) that "53% of nonviolent campaigns were successful as opposed to 26% of campaigns that used violence. Moreover, of the violent campaigns, 95% had descended into dictatorship or totalitarian rule within five years." This is based on a study by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan which looked at uprisings from 1900 to 2000 and divided them into "primarily or entirely non-violent" and "violent". The conflicts looked at in the study are all nationalist uprisings and regime changes – there are no international movements or movements around particular issues (like the environment) even covered in the study. The dataset that the study gets it's "violent campaigns" from defines them as involving the deaths of more than 1000 armed combatants... which is a pretty far cry from yelling at cops on a Melbourne street.

The more disruptive and effective that the climate movement becomes, the more likely it is that we'll face a violent response from the government and police to try and restore business as usual. We shouldn't avoid defending ourselves from state violence on the basis of a study that is completely irrelevant to the situation we find ourselves in and the questions we are faced with.

Disruption Is Not the Same as Being Arrested

At the heart of any effective social movement is the understanding that the powers that be (billionaires, politicians, mining magnates, oil companies etc.) won't give up their immense privileges voluntarily – even if the future of humanity is at stake. We should be all too aware by now that we won't save the world by asking nicely – we need to force those in power to act, we need to make business as usual impossible. This emphasis on disruption is part of XR's core philosophy and a huge component of the movement's growth – people are fed up with the same old tired and ineffective tactics.

What's not so clear, though, is the reasoning behind emphasis on being arrested and the belief that it's inherently effective. On XR's website, their social media and at their information sessions they state again and again that we should WANT people to be arrested, that it's good for the movement and brings us closer to the goal of action on the climate crisis. Roger Hallam, one of

XR's founders, claims that what we need for the movement to succeed is a few hundred people to go to prison. There's never any explanation for this though, no evidence of it being effective and nothing to link it back to other discussions of tactics. Any effective social movement is probably gonna involve some people being arrested and it's great that we have people who are willing to be arrested for the movement, but that doesn't mean that doing it on purpose is going to help. There are a variety of other more effective ways to cause disruption. A recent tactic developed in Hong Kong is to hold a space for as long as we can, then dissipate. Using the app Telegram, we decide upon another place where we regroup, and then stay there for as long as we can. This way we maximise disruption without the costs of being arrested and going through the legal system.

The Iron Fist Beneath the Velvet Glove

Encouraging mass arrests for their own sake isn't just useless, it can be actively harmful to a movement and to the people within it. Although most charges that are likely to be laid against protesters are relatively insignificant, the process of going through court and having a criminal record hanging over your head can often be enough for people to take a step back from an active role in movement-building. And that's barely scratching the surface of what people might go through as a result of being arrested – in particular we should mention the track record that the police have of regularly murdering Aboriginal people in police custody, as well as other forms of institutionalised racism. Not everyone pays the same price for being arrested and putting it forward as 'not a big deal' is something that can only come out of naivety and privilege.

Then there's the possibility of the police using outright violence to suppress protests. Over the last few years we've seen a massive ramp-up in the amount of military-style gear that Vicpol have at their disposal and heavy-handed tactics – including violence – used to suppress protests. As we've seen in recent struggles such as the Gilets Jaunes in France, Black Lives Matter in the States and the pro-democracy fight in Hong Kong the police will not hesitate to use violence to suppress any movement that actually threatens the status quo.

The primary role of police in society is to uphold the very system and laws that we must overthrow in order to prevent environmental collapse. They are more than happy to break up strikes, evict people from their homes and protect profit and private property over people's welfare and over the planet. When XR argue that we should collaborate with and try to win over the cops they overlook the structural role that police play in the crisis in which we find ourselves. The issue here isn't the character of individual cops but the way that the police force as a whole upholds the current system as a whole. Like with previous issues, XR's approach is at best ineffective and at worst it leaves us vulnerable and unprepared when they inevitably arrest, tear gas, beat and brutalise us the moment we start to make real change.

Profit or Survival?

The crisis we find ourselves in is being driven by an economic and political system that puts profits and property above all else. In short – Capitalism. Just 100 companies are responsible for 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions since 1998 and those companies hold immense political and financial power. Again this isn't so much a question of individual people's moral character as the underlying logic that keeps the system running. A company must continue to generate

profit or cease to exist. Without constant growth, capitalism falls into major crisis. A system of infinite growth on a finite planet is incompatible with a livable environment.

The Solution that XR puts forward is “citizens assemblies” – randomly selected groups of ordinary citizens that have the power to make decisions regarding the climate emergency. Although this approach bypasses the parliamentary system and the corruption and inaction that come with it, it still largely ignores the level of economic and political restructuring that’s necessary to make real change possible. It does nothing to change the underlying logic of the climate crisis.

To seriously put a stop to extinction, we need to put a stop to capitalism. This may seem like a utopian pipe dream, but it is far more realistic than thinking that with enough public pressure, the planet destroying machine of capitalism can be made compatible with the environment. We need to understand now, as the environmental movement takes a radical turn, that we cannot win without destroying capitalism. In turn, this means the environmental movement needs to link up with other movements that can oppose capitalism: the labour movement, anti-colonial and indigenous struggles, as well as fights against patriarchy, white supremacy and a resurgent fascism.

Where to from here?

As was written at the start, the point of this flyer isn’t to stop people participating in XR or actions XR calls. Be aware, though, that the tactics, analysis and goals that XR put forward are not the be-all and end-all of the movement for Climate justice. Don’t get yourself arrested without asking yourself (and others) what it’ll achieve. Ask how the actions you take will build a movement capable of changing the world. Building a diverse and powerful social movement requires discussion and debate around tactics and goals. We need to build that movement now, more than ever, as we find ourselves at a critical point in history and the clock is ticking.

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The following is a flyer written for distribution at Extinction Rebellion's "Spring Rebellion" event in so-called Melbourne, Australia. It's not intended to be a comprehensive review of XR as an organisation, only the tactics they employ.

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