

The Courage of Saying No: Children, Rebellion and Greta Thunberg

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*There is something to be said of wariness when it comes to revolutionary voices. As Albert Camus argued in that beautiful tract of illumination and contradiction, *The Rebel*, “All modern revolutions have ended in the reinforcement of the power of the state.” But he also argued that humankind were the only creatures refusing to be what they are, a permanent self-deluding bunch bound to cause various neuroses. The true rebel, then, is the one who says no, and can maintain credibility even as he risks becoming an ideologue, another dogmatist.*

When children find themselves in the saddle, things get a bit more complicated. Hypocrisy and power are seemingly adult games: the supposedly innocent child is discouraged from expressing views and opinions. When they do, the accusation of hijacking, innocence gone wrong, and manipulation, is bound to be made: behind the child lies an adult Svengali, or at least something approximating to him.

The seventeen-year old Greta Thunberg has found herself plonked into the saddle of historical protest, making the case that any response undertaken thus far to deal with climate change has been woefully inadequate. It began in Sweden last year when, as a schoolgirl, she began protesting outside the parliament in Stockholm, [claiming](#) that her country’s climate change laws hardly amounted to “a green paradise”. This spawned a global children’s protest movement.

Her dissatisfaction struck a high note [in her address](#) to those gathered at the COP24 gathering at Katowice in December 2018.

“You only speak of green eternal economic growth because you are too scared of being unpopular. You only talk about moving forward with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even when the only sensible thing to do is to pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like it is.”

The maturity of saying no; the maturity of admitting to an environmental degradation so profound as to be existential.

The response to Thunberg has, in some quarters, been regrettably dreamy and praiseworthy, ignoring the more strident feature of the message. Radical, even species defying alterations are needed; the brake to be applied with conviction.

Fine to protest; fine to make waves; but structural change of an unprecedented order is required. For Camus’s rebel, the danger here is that is a theorem, or idea, may end up

needing the police to enforce it. To date, the authoritarian element is lacking in the enforcement mechanisms in the climate change structure: states have been left to their own devices in cutting emissions.

Then comes the argument, one straight out of the Cold War manual, that the young Swede is a front and a product of the [Non-Profit Industrial Complex](#), manufactured on the assembly line of engineered protest. For the Japanese-born sculptor Hiroyuki Hamada, the NPIC [targets](#) “those who were not given skills and knowledge to truly think for themselves which are designed to serve the ruling class.” Hamada is suggesting a vicious circle: the children are caged by the system that demands its own set of rules to be abided by; they are rendered ignorant, lobotomised. Can we, then, trust them, and by implication such movements as Thunberg’s [Friday for Future](#)?

Hamada’s bleak circularity is similarly found in such views as Christopher Caldwell, senior editor at *The Weekly Standard* and contributor to such market friendly outlets as the *Financial Times*. Her approach, [suggested](#) Caldwell, was distinctly “at odds with democracy.” Those of Thunberg’s age “have not seen much of life. Her world view might be unrealistic, her priorities out of balance.” The shabby tactic here is typical: leave it to the experienced ones who made the mess to begin with. They know better.

The political reactions have also varied in temper, veering between praise and scorn. On a visit to France in July to [address](#) the French National Assembly, Thunberg bore the brunt of various, less than sympathetic viewpoints of National Rally (RN) MPs and various Republicans (LR). MEP Jordan Bardella of RN was [scolding](#) of Thunberg’s gloominess, effectively denying her any necessary agency. Children were not be used to “exhibit a fatalism to try to explain to all people that the world is finished, that everything is going to catch fire and that nothing is possible.”

Republicans MP Guillaume Larrivé demanded a boycott of Thunberg’s speech, [claiming](#) that an intelligent battle was needed against global warming, one helped by scientific progress and political courage, not “apocalyptic gurus”. Colleague Julien Aubert [also chipped in](#). “Don’t count on me to applaud a prophetess in shorts, a Nobel Prize for Fear.” The planet, yes; green business, no.

Thunberg’s [response](#)?

“This is just hilarious. I have never once met a climate activist who was in this for money.”

Playing on the matter of youth in her address, she [managed](#) a few keen blows of her own.

“Some people have chosen not to come here today, some have chosen not to listen to us. And that is fine. We are, after all, just children.”

In Canada, similarly bilious reactions have followed. People’s Party of Canada Leader Maxime Bernier gave Thunberg the warmest of greetings with [mighty claims](#) that she was “mentally unstable”, “autistic”, “obsessive-compulsive”, suffering eating disorders, depression and lethargy. The fuming protests that followed encouraged him to qualify his remarks, calling Thunberg a “brave young woman who has been able to overcome her

problems and deserves our admiration for that.” Look, instead, to the people behind Thunberg.

“I wanted to show that the choice of influential groups and the media to make her a spokesperson for climate alarmism is not innocent.”

Very little is ever mentioned that Thunberg is perfectly entitled to express her views, however they might grate with the sages, technocrats and the elected. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) was a document that went some way to lifting children out of legal oblivion. Behold, then, such sections as [Article 13](#), which grants the child “the right to freedom of expression” which covers the “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any media of the child’s choice.” The usual caveats are tagged on the end, limiting the right in instances of reputation, protection of national security, public order, public health or morals.

The danger for Thunberg is that for any figure of mass appeal: the fatal nature of trendiness and the brief spell of a fashion. For all her self-commanding purity, she risks becoming the decent face of an establishment keen to assimilate her, giving her an ecological sexing up.

Temptations are being thrown her way. This month, it was [announced](#) that she was a winner at the GQ awards in London, sharing top billing with David Beckham, Iggy Pop, Nicole Kidman and Kylie Minogue. The award for Thunberg was given the title appropriate to such events: the Game Changer Award. Becoming the decent face of environmental protest is the last thing she should want; best be obscene and heard.

While it is all fine for preachy politicians or mainstream newspaper contributors to hector students who walk out of class for being unconscientious, take issue with times of protest (by all means protest, but do so outside school hours), and lecture them for lacking experience, it is also not a fitting statement about the state of affairs that led to such angst. The world may be entering its penultimate phase, at least in a climatic sense, but that hardly bothers the short-term parliament where the vested, constipated interest precedes the universal, bleak message. By all means be critical of Thunberg and appreciate the limitations of the rebel. She, at least, has the courage to say no.

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