

Some Like It Hot

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Theme: [Environment](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

I am nothing if not an optimist, a trait that most on the Left seem to share. A belief in the future, that there is one that includes us. That things, eventually, get better, if we fight for it.

'Unrealistic', I hear you say, what is there to be optimistic about? The planet is going to hell and taking us all with it, and there's nothing we can do about it! Well, maybe so, then this happened, a small event, minute even, in the scheme of things but somehow it triggered a response in me that I could not ignore and which I had to address:

Once a week I mentor, at my local public library, two children, 10 and 12 yrs old, in English and Maths (my maths sucks I might add but there's nothing to stop me learning from my charges is there?). Both, a boy and a girl are from Eritrea, or at least their folks are and very sharp they are too, especially the girl. Anyway, at our last session the girl suddenly asked me, 'Is it going to get hot?' At the time I thought she was referring to the weather but it was only later that I realised that's not what she was asking me at all. I think she was genuinely worried and looking to me for answers, for an explanation. I think we forget, or ignore the fact that children really do listen when they want to, and they most certainly absorb everything that's going on around them, especially when it get repeated over and over, on the news, by adults as they talk about the topic of the day; global heating.

What to say to a bright and sensitive, ten-year-old? And I have to say, I'm obsessing about it. I couldn't get to sleep that night and I can't get her question out of my mind. What *have* we done?!

If, and right now it looks like a big if, we survive as a species, what will our descendants make of the mess industrial capitalism has made of the planet in the pursuit of private profit and power and will they curse us for our inaction and our greed? Probably and rightly so. We are a world of addicts, addicted to *possession*, even if we don't actually own any of it.

The question of what to say is intimately bound up with what to do. Nevertheless, it's still a dilemma. I don't want give the girl *my* nightmares but then, she probably already has her own. Yet these are issues that have to be faced, but is it right, is it ethical even, to burden a young mind with such momentous problems? Problems that she simply may not have the knowledge (yet) to comprehend?

I asked an old friend and he immediately said to me, 'Well you must speak to her! You have a responsibility to speak to her and tell her what the issues are.'

The situation is without precedent. There's nothing in our collective past to guide us. We rightly, I think, call it an existential threat, yet the real threat is not climate change *per se* but capitalism itself! How do I explain *that* to a ten-year old? But the two are intimately

intertwined. Climate change and environmental disaster is directly the result of industrial capitalism chowing the planet and its resources. But at least in removing capitalism, we have a chance of dealing with climate change. Is this what I should tell her?

What an undertaking! Is it even possible at this late stage? We're told we only have ten years before der tag but actually, the time is irrelevant except insofar as perhaps it will spur us into collective action. But will it? Has it?

The real problem we confront is that those in control really don't care about anything except their class and preserving their privilege. They're oblivious to the suffering of the great majority of humanity, largely because they don't view them as really human. And this is not new. If we look back through history, we can see that the ruling class, not only have they *always* viewed the 'great unwashed' in this fashion but as we know, they have enshrined their view in 'law'. Workhouses, penalising poverty, condemning the disabled, starvation, homelessness, crime, 'over-population', and of course, war, something the rich never engage in personally. It's always the poor who get the blame and get to pay the price to the 1%.

Their indifference to human (and animal) suffering is self-evident and as the crisis of capitalism intensifies, so does its demonisation of the working class, of people of colour, of immigrants, the young, the old and the defenceless. This is the true face of 'democracy'.

Extinction/Rebellion

Then along came Extinction Rebellion (XR), the first (visible) sign of a petrified middle class. Is it a catalyst for change? Many on the left take this position, claiming that XR is some kind of 'wake up' call. But is XR the answer? Is it the first shot over the bow of the sinking ship Neoliberal Capitalism? I have to admit that I too, like to think that's the case. After all, a lot of mainly young people are actually going out of their way to get arrested (in Paris they get tear-gassed first). So there's no doubting their bravery (driven by some kind of desperation?). Call it foolhardy even, but they are putting their futures on the line.

One of the founders of XR, Roger Hallam, claims that if sufficient people get arrested, this will force the government to act (in fact he claims a very specific number of arrests, 20,000 I think, I tried to find his book on his website to verify this number but the link is broken). He bases this assertion on his studies for his PhD on Civil Disobedience.

But okay, let's assume Hallam is right. 20,000 people get arrested and the government agrees to actually cut carbon emissions by 2030 or so (rather than promising to). Firstly, what is net zero carbon? Is this really zero carbon? And what if it is? Is this the end of the story?

As I understand it, net zero carbon is actually based on carbon trading, that is to say, we exchange our carbon emissions with a country (or company) that produces less carbon, so overall, greenhouse gas emissions stay the same or even rise (which is what's happening every year that goes by). But carbon is the least of our problems out of a list of greenhouse gases and chemicals. Worst of all is methane, followed by water vapour in the atmosphere (driven there by global heating of course). According to *Scientific American*:

"methane warms the planet by 86 times as much as CO₂, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change."

And as the Siberian permafrost melts, it's releasing millions of tons of the stuff!

So, the next target is what? Cows or maybe Siberia, or both. Do the math, it will have to be. So the next target is MacDonalds, in fact isn't every ounce of mince beef a viable target. But then there's the rain forests, chopped down either to make way for crops demanded by the West, palm oil for the industrial food and cardboard for the boxes. It should be obvious that there is no end to the targets. Clothing, electronics, cars, packaging, everything in fact that industrial capitalism makes and sells to us is contributing to global heating and environmental destruction, all in the name of profit, for the few.

2030

Okay, so let's assume that our geriatric and totally incompetent governments do wake up and smell the coffee and we do achieve net zero carbon, what does that really mean?

No cars, no gas- or coal-fired power stations. No cars? Are you kidding? No cars? No hamburgers, no plastic? Plastics are made from oil and *plastic is now everywhere, including [inside us](#)*. Yes, it's possible, there's no denying that it's possible, if we have an economic and hence political, revolution. Is that possible? Yes of course it is - possible - but is it doable in the time we have left and is XR the right starting point?

Well, failing anything else, that start has already been made by XR and I know this sounds heretical but is climate change actually the right target to start the transformation with, without linking it to capitalism?

And why hasn't the 'traditional' left, which one assumes would be the logical source given its objectives, not where XR is today?

This is an interesting conundrum, not the least because there are real questions to ask about XR's roots and its progenitors, resources that are denied to the left. A leg up if you like, that corporate power gives; access to the media, slick PR and so forth; all the trappings of a modern marketing campaign. Of course, this makes some on the left suspicious, and rightly so.[1] But on the other hand, XR could be more of a Pandora's Box than a marketing campaign and I know that there are other sections of the Left who take this view of XR, as a stepping stone on the way to revolution regardless of its initiators objectives.

But firstly, why hasn't the Left originated something like XR in the first place, given not only the urgency of the situation but also because the Left have been campaigning on the environment for decades only to be upstaged by a young girl from Sweden?

I think I've already supplied one reason for this above, the other resides in priorities. From a Left perspective, climate change is not the cause but the effect, or result if you like, of the economic-political system we call capitalism. We argue, quite rightly in my opinion, that the solution to climate change, is getting rid of capitalism and replacing it with a rational, sustainable, socialist economy and in so doing, abolishing war and the exploitation of the planet and its peoples. This is real progress, not more of the same. But in order to do that we need to recover our belief in the collective.

It's an existential argument really. The realisation that only a sustainable, socialist economy is the solution to climate change, will only come about when it's too late to implement it, if, if it's proposed by the Left, simply because the capitalist state won't allow it, and for obvious

reasons; their own survival as a class. Ergo, ultimately, revolution is the only solution both to an economic system that destroys not only the environment but all of us too. But on the other hand, capitalism would not allow XR to end capitalism either (assuming that's its goal, which judging by my understanding of XR's objective, it's not).

And herein lies the rub and it explains the initial acceptance of XR by the ruling elite and for two main reasons: one, XR claims not to be 'political', or for that matter, economic, in other words, it's not really challenging the *status quo*, merely *adjusting* it. And two, the state can no longer deny the reality of impending disaster unless steps are taken, now. But what kind of steps are permitted and are they enough? So the government declares a climate emergency. Big deal! It means absolutely nothing, it's just words without the commensurate actions.

The UK is a small country, making a transition to a (theoretical) carbon neutral economy is doable; call it green capitalism. Some energy production would be from renewable sources, we are told. Gas cookers are no longer being installed in new housing. Cars are moving to electric. Power generation, wind and solar but fossil fuel electricity generation will continue but it will be carbon traded (this is already happening using REGOs, Renewable Energy Guarantee of Origin), hence the 'net zero carbon' description.

Shell Energy is the new name for First Utility, who in the same breath now suddenly claim to supply their 700,000 customers with '100% renewable' electricity. Making it seem awfully easy to switch a big customer base to renewable sourced power.

If we look at First Utility's last published energy mix (below) they sourced just 3.7% of their supply from renewables. But — as if by magic — post takeover from the oil and gas giant Shell they are now '100% renewable'. And all of this without a single article showing partnerships or contracts with a renewable provider. - ['Shell Energy's 'renewable' promise highlights the problem with REGOs'](#)

It is possible and it would leave the capitalist economy intact. However, it would have *no impact on global heating or on species and ocean death or the melting of the ice at the poles and the melting of the glaciers*, which in turn supply water for the Monsoon in Asia. This is a real dilemma because sooner rather than later, people will realise this. Ten years is no time at all, even if it's twenty years, not ten that we have left before the catastrophe is irreversible (if it isn't already).

And given that we import most of the things we use/consume, and we have no control over what they're made from or how, unless the transformation is essentially global in nature, whatever the UK does is but a drop in the acidic ocean.

But of course, this mustn't stop us from trying, indeed it's imperative that we do and for a two reasons; one, we have no choice and two, it's my estimation that if the UK actually manages to reduce its carbon emissions significantly, this might have a 'knock-on' effect on other countries but will 'net zero carbon', by itself, actually address the crisis?

I think I've made it plain that it won't, not only because it's only a part of the problem but because a country like the USA, the planet's largest producer of greenhouse gases, and because its military produces more carbon than a bunch of countries combined (140+), have bowed out because such an action threatens the profits of the big corporations.

The Limits of Civil Disobedience

There's another, even more important aspect to XR's zero carbon campaign, the implications of which, need unpacking. If we look at the state (and its medias) response, starting last October with XR's first non-violent civil disobedience campaign (blocking five of London's bridges across the Thames), as a media campaign it was extremely effective. XR got oodles of coverage, even from the execrable BBC and a lot of sympathy from the public, up to a point, the point being when it took ages to get home after a shitty day at the office. We praised the courage of those mostly young (and white), middle class people, who now have a criminal record following them around, probably for the rest of their lives. So be it. It took guts (it takes guts) and it's a direct reflection of the fears my young friend in the library has about her future. In reality, *these are acts of desperation dressed up as a party.*

However, as the XR's campaign picks up speed, starting this week actually, the state and it's complicit media are changing their tune. When XR announced it's new campaign, the BBC's coverage opened, not with sympathy for these brave young people but the inconvenience it will cause, the cost of policing it and emphasising its negative impact on working people (like the government cares about working people?). This is to be expected. The media will work overtime demonising XR, emphasising the inconvenience to working people, the 'irresponsibility' of XR's actions and so forth. Again, this is to be expected. Already, on BBC Radio 4, XR's activists are now being called Anarchists[3]!

And then there was the announcement by the government that all 1200 or so people busted so far, would all be charged with a variety of offences, even going so far as to use two courts exclusively for the next 19 weeks to carry it out the prosecutions. Examples *have* to be made.

The state means business. If, and when XR's campaign really starts to bite (or before even), the state will not tolerate it. It will not tolerate challenges to its hegemony. It never has and it never will. It's as simple as that. Of course that doesn't mean it can't be challenged and ultimately, successfully challenged but is XR's campaign of non-violent disobedience the correct vehicle? Roger Hallam thinks so.

Part of the problem lies in XR's exclusivity, not intentionally I know but confronting the state directly takes a fearless and young, mind. And where does it end? Hallam's theory is given that his 20,000 arrests come to pass, the state will cave in and do what exactly? Implement 'net zero carbon' by some date in the future, 10 or maybe 20 years from now. Job done?

Why should XR succeed where generations of activists have failed? Part of the putative answer to this lies in Hallam's conception of the power of non-violent direct action aka Gandhi I assume, to achieve positive results, where for example, the use of violence has failed (has it, will it?). But I contend that this is a false dichotomy. Who can predict how events develop or what will be a successful strategy? Of course nobody wants to use violence but on the other hand, the state has no problem using violence against any peaceful opposition, and it's used violence against us for centuries, with or without resistance.

It also doesn't take into account the myriad of events and interactions occurring within and between various capitalist countries as they compete for markets as well as their relationship to their domestic populations. For proof of this we need look no further than the hysterical witch hunt surrounding a possible Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn and

the threat he allegedly poses to the *status quo* and especially the reactions of the big beast across the pond that has publicly proclaimed that it wants to stop Corbyn.

In sum, we can say that reality is far more complex than XR's conception. This is not to say that XR isn't an important development because it is. It signals a shift in our relationship to state power and hopefully to the planet, potentially. It shows that the state can be challenged, albeit with immense difficulty, not say sacrifice given that so far, XR is operating in isolation from virtually all the other social movements that are also opposed to the status quo.

One XR member said to me the other day that she would like to see a 'movement of movements'[2], another way of describing a 'popular, or united front' of some kind, but because XR consciously rejects politics (at least publicly), never mind economics, it limits its actions. But I think I understand why XR apparently takes this position, it reflects what XR sees as a general rejection of Establishment politics by the population at large, and that by taking this position it will attract a far larger support base but I'm not sure about this, I think it's positions like this that raise the suspicions on the left about XR's 'real' motives. After all, just look at the support Corbyn has gotten (and still gets, despite the vile witch hunt being conducted against him), and from people who have previously rejected mainstream politics, people who didn't vote, especially the young, the marginalised and the dispossessed.

XR seems to be largely a young, white, middle class phenomenon, not that this condemns it but it limits its ability to reach a larger audience given the sharp class divides in English society. And note that the state understands this, that's why the BBC's news coverage focuses on how XR's actions disrupts working peoples' travel to and from work and in an age of Austerity, emphasises the costs of policing XR's actions deliberately as this builds resentment toward XR (I read the figure of [£7.5 million](#) as of this month).

The critical challenge for XR is how to broaden and deepen its connections to civil society, to anti-capitalist struggles, and to the organised working class, not only here in the UK but internationally given that the crisis is global in scope. But will its proscriptions against politics limit its effectiveness? And more importantly, is XR open to changing its tactics, its strategies, to broaden its base? I think it's undeniable that unless a 'critical mass' are brought onboard, XR will die the death of a single issue struggle.

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Notes

1. There are a number of critical essays on XR, from [Cory Morningstar's](#) virtually indigestible essays through to more considered analyses by people such as [Tim Hayward](#), that it's a devious plot (Morningstar), designed to bring about a 'green capitalism' and that may be true for all I know but I venture that virtually all XR members don't think that way at all and I suspect that they would be very upset if this turned out to be true.

2. The phrase 'movement of movements' appears to come from:

Farhana Yamin, who is described in XR's blurb as a 'climate change lawyer and former lead author of the IPCC, coordinator of the Political Strategy Team and experienced UN negotiator' appears to be playing a prominent role in the meetings [between XR and the UK government]. As Cory Morningstar [has pointed out \[6\]](#), Yamin has "spent 27 years in UN climate negotiations", "helped midwife the 2015 Paris Agreement to curb greenhouse gas emissions", serves Greenpeace as a board member/trustee, will soon take up an advisory role at the World Wildlife Fund, and wants to build a bridge with existing organisations to forge a much bigger "movement of movements". - '[Extinction Rebellion and the Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism](#)'.

So what of XR's claim not to be political? Is it any wonder that some on the left view XR with a degree of suspicion?

3. The accusation occurred on the BBC Radio 4 '[Today](#)' programme, 17th July. Apparently it was a retired policeman who not only accused XRers of being 'Anarchists with a smile' but that Roger Hallam 'hates capitalism', so now hating capitalism is a crime?

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