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Resurgence & ECOLOGIST

May/June 2019 No. 314
£4.95 | US\$8.00



PATHWAYS: Chris Packham • Polly Higgins • Mothiur Rahman • Angie Lewin

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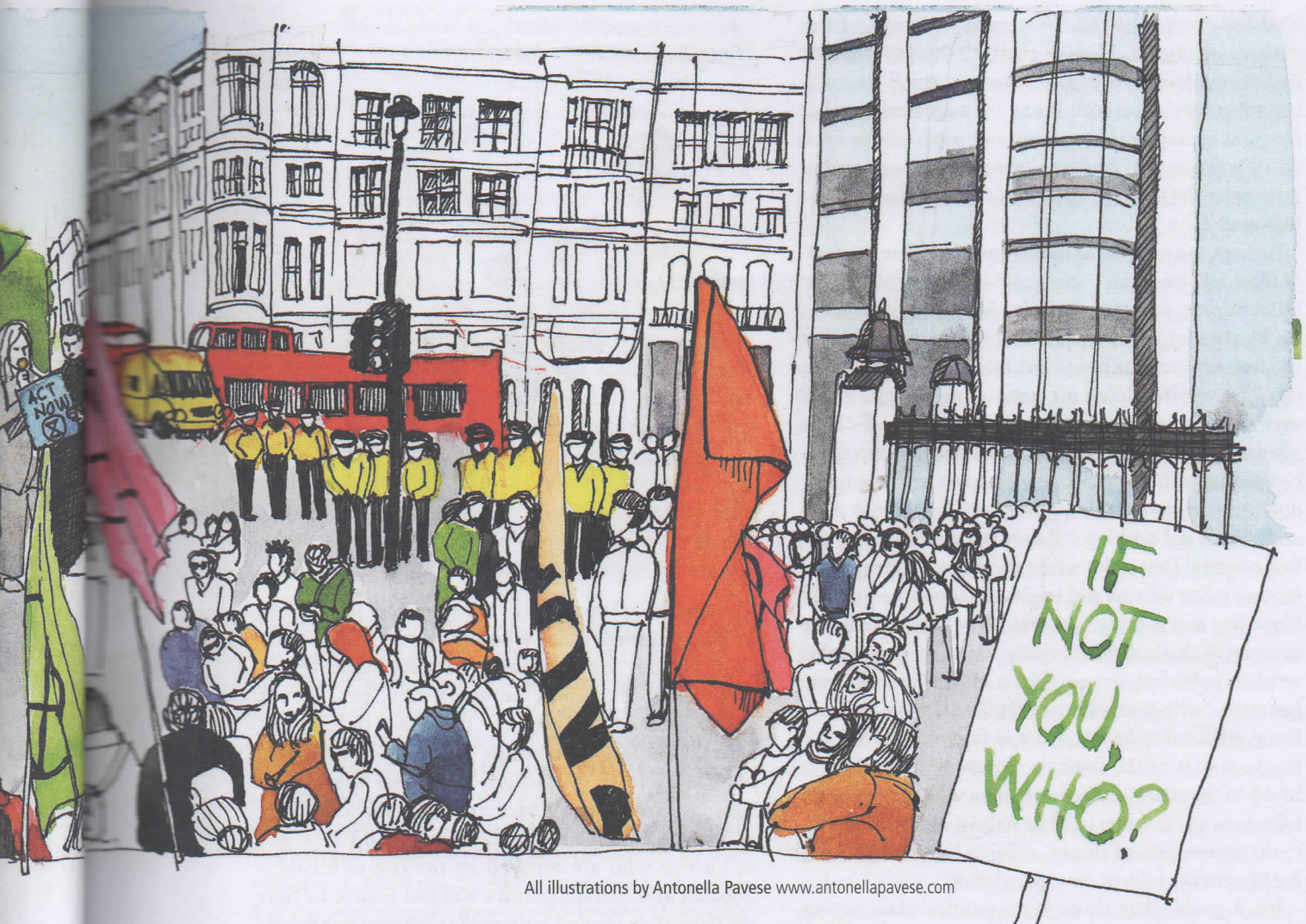
A CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In an age of selfishness, the achievements of Extinction Rebellion prove we are still capable of taking collective action, writes **Mothiur Rahman**

Storm Deirdre was sweeping across the UK as members of my local Extinction Rebellion group in Cornwall unfurled banners to capture the attention of drivers coming on and off the ferry across the Tamar River. As we stood there being battered by wind and rain while cars, buses and lorries fed by fossil fuels rolled off the ferry, it was easy to wonder what difference we were actually making. Yet many of the people driving their vehicles honked their horns in support and we responded with waves and songs. Just over a month later, on 22 January this year, Cornwall Council passed a motion declaring a climate emergency and calling on central government to provide the powers and resources necessary to enable Cornwall to become a net zero carbon emitter by 2030. Similar motions are being declared up and down the UK by local councils at parish, town, district, metropolitan and county level.

Extinction Rebellion's message – and the need driving it – is this: time has almost entirely run out to address the ecological crisis of runaway climate breakdown, mass extinctions of species, and the unravelling of planetary systems that support all life. Extinction Rebellion is a movement for civil disobedience born out of recognition that existing political institutions, national and international, are incapable of generating the political will to meet the urgency of the time.

By generating political will organised through a culture of decentralisation and regeneration, Extinction Rebellion is bridging imaginative capacities from the ideas of European liberal humanism (with its story of the individual as hero against the forces of society pushing down on him/her) into a story sourced in recognising interconnectedness as a vital need not only for ecological resilience, but also for deepening human experience. Through this recognition that interconnection is



All illustrations by Antonella Pavese www.antonellapavese.com

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at the root of resilient systems, it is helping citizens discover unused capacities in political community. I explain below what I mean by political community, as opposed to an ordinary sense of community, by reference to Murray Bookchin's idea of social ecology and Karl Marx's distinction between human rights (*droits de l'homme*) and civil rights or civil liberties (*droits de citoyen*). Whilst the views given here are mine rather than those of the movement, they have evolved out of my membership of my local Extinction Rebellion group in Cornwall and of Extinction Rebellion UK's stewardship and strategy teams.

Multiple crises

The overwhelming weight of scientific evidence is clear: climate collapse is accelerating at a far more rapid pace than previously predicted. The October 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that, on conservative estimates, we have 12 years to take drastic action to halve greenhouse gas emissions to ensure that global temperatures do not increase beyond 1.5 °C above

pre-industrial levels, after which point far greater ecological catastrophes multiply. Climate collapse is not something that is happening in the future. It is happening now, and decisions made within our lifetimes will determine the scale of climate catastrophe children now growing up will have to endure.

With the weight of scientific evidence behind the call for urgency, and a flurry of headlines in national newspapers following the publication of the IPCC report, the pressure seemed to be there for decisive action by state representatives as they headed to the UN Climate Conference (COP24) in Katowice, Poland in December. Underlining such pressure was Sir David Attenborough, warning of "the collapse of our civilisations and the extinction of much of the natural world... Time is running out. [The world's people] want you, the decision makers, to act now."

The call for moral leadership was clear: to find the political will to put 'emergency brakes' on those systemic drivers taking the planet to the edge of tipping into runaway climate breakdown. However, rather than such leadership, short-term political interests

vied for power instead, obscuring the truth of the existential threats. Here in the UK, the government had thrown itself and its citizens into turmoil by opening a Pandora's box with Brexit. In mainland Europe, far-right demagogues are creating turmoil as they see an opportunity to coalesce power in the upcoming European Parliament elections starting on 23 May this year.

Perhaps this vacuum in moral leadership is why many of those involved with Extinction Rebellion do not fit the usual suspects for activism. Erika, Jess and Ros are all in my local group. Erika is a grandmother of three and said she feels terrified for her grandchildren's future. "How can I die without doing my best to turn things around over the next few years?" she asked. Jess agreed: "I am not an extremist or an anarchist or someone who seeks civil disorder. I am someone who cares and a mum. I don't want my two children or their children to look back and think I did nothing." Ros was arrested during the first national Day of Rebellion on 17 November, when around 6,000 citizens gathered in London to peacefully block five major bridges in one of the most prominent acts of civil disobedience in recent times. By the time this article is published, the next phase of rebellion will have just started with International Rebellion Day on 15 April. Being prepared to be arrested and face possible fines or prison is part of the Extinction Rebellion movement. Many of those demonstrating share a willingness to sacrifice personal freedom in order to bring media attention to the urgent risks of climate collapse happening within the lifetime of children now growing up.

It is arguable that, through the political class paying only lip service to the values it ascribes to itself (such as integrity to profession – think of the UK parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009), through the hypocrisy of the technocratic elite avoiding those obligations everyone else complies with to maintain the status quo (such as paying taxes), and through the political and technocratic elite manipulating the very foundations of democratic governance (such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal over Facebook data-harvesting and voter manipulation during the Brexit referendum), the western order centred on liberal values has hollowed itself out, its values no longer holding sufficient substance and traction in wider society to prevent the rise of authoritarian politics in Europe and elsewhere, threatening to obscure the urgency of action now needed to collectively adapt for climate breakdown.

The European dilemma

A group of 30 writers and intellectuals (including Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Simon Schama, Bernard-Henri Lévi and Orhan Pamuk) recently published a manifesto warning that Europe as an idea "is falling apart before our eyes". They fear that the swell of nativist populism across European states will make the coming European elections "the most calamitous that we have known", a death knell for the idea of Europe as a bastion of democracy and liberal humanist values.



The manifesto laments the "abandonment [of Europe] by the two great allies who in the previous century twice saved it from suicide" – the UK and the USA.

However, there may be many who, hearing the call to resist by drawing on "the legacy of Erasmus, Dante, Goethe and Comenius", feel that the lens being applied excludes those born to Europe whose own legacies extend into Africa and Asia and elsewhere across the global south. This may mean that many in Europe who are repelled by the rise of far-right populist and nativist politics will feel unable to fully get behind an idea of Europe that appears to exclude parts of their legacies.

In essence, social ecology views social problems as being at the root of ecological problems...

With the opportunity to call in so many people of diverse legacies into a shared narrative, I cannot help but think there is a crisis of imagination in this manifesto that is a sign of these times: an inability to call in a vision that could land with vulnerable emotional honesty where it matters most when it comes to issues of the colonial pasts of the UK and other European countries. Vulnerable emotional honesty has the capacity to open hearts that could help resist the rise of authoritarian politics and at the same time help address some of the root causes creating the climate crisis we are now facing.

Without such vulnerability being role-modelled, the 'shadow' impacts of colonialism may live on in unheard and subterranean ways within those generations of British citizens of what could be called its 'colonial diaspora', masked over through what

has been the cultural hegemony of progressive liberal values. This championing of individual liberty, sourced in the Europe of old and exported through European emigration to America and Australia, and through European colonialism to Africa and Asia, universalised itself across the globe to achieve cultural hegemonic status as a fundamental element of identity for progressive citizens of both the developed and the developing worlds.

An inability to present to itself the shadow legacy of this struggle for individual liberty, which – while successful in developing the much needed field of human rights for asserting the dignity and equality of each person without arbitrary discrimination – may now be hampering imaginative capacities to create new shared narratives across a different kind of European landscape, one that honours contemporary diverse histories and legacies with equal measure and weight, to become ‘broad-tent’ enough to claim the political will current institutions of government have failed to demonstrate.

Transnational political conscience

There are some experts who think that the system of capitalist economics and governance we have collectively created has too much momentum to change direction in the short window available to avoid climate collapse. Donald McKay is a professor of social science, and his research on previous civilisational collapses demonstrates that a common barrier to transformational change was not that the means weren’t available to make the changes (just as now); nor was it that the need to make them wasn’t known at the time (just as now). Rather, he argues that civilisational collapse happens because the short-term interests of those who hold power (what he calls “oligarchical authorities”) are radically different from the long-term interests of the society they are embedded in. This chimes true for present times, where corporate bodies and

political institutions have shown themselves incapable of taking decisive action against their own short-term interests – at the expense not only of the longer-term interests of society, but also of interests in maintaining the very life cycles of our planet.

Extinction Rebellion, through its words and actions and the way it has spread into over 200 groups in more than 20 countries in just a few months, is showing itself to have the potential to strengthen the political capacity of these longer-term interests into what could be called a transnational civic political conscience – to act as counter-power to such oligarchical authorities and prevent them from determining the future of our planet in accordance with their own short-term interests.

However, in order to generate the political will to become such a counter-power, Extinction Rebellion needs to succeed in a struggle that journalist Martin Lukacs believes contemporary western society has already lost through the pervasiveness of neoliberalism. He believes we have lost an “ideological war ... against the possibility of collective action... Neoliberalism has not merely ensured this agenda [of climate change demands] is politically unrealistic: it has also tried to make it culturally unthinkable. Its celebration of competitive self-interest and hyper-individualism, its stigmatization of compassion and solidarity, [have] frayed our collective bonds.”

With local emergency declarations being made by numerous UK local authorities – many as a result of action by XR local groups – it is arguable that the possibility of collective action is not quite as culturally unthinkable as Lukacs believes. I argue that, in order to strengthen these collective bonds, we need to explore beyond the conceptual frame of human rights that can act to isolate the self; towards a framing of social ecology and civil liberties that brings the self into political engagement with community. Widening the experiential capacity of what it means to be human into ideas of political community beyond the notion of the state could help generate energy and commitment from additional sectors of civil society.

Human rights versus civil rights

The Nobel Laureate Paul Crutzen popularised the idea that we are now living in the age of the Anthropocene. However, conversely we could also say that at no other time has the agency of the planet grown to be so dominant in the discourse, ideas and actions of human beings. Maybe the Earth is moving towards a time that will strip us of those socially constructed identities that determine status and hierarchy: as European or African, Christian or Muslim, rich or poor, urban or rural; towards an identity of equivalence in the face of climate collapse.

Viewed this way, we could make the case that the ecological crisis is itself creating the conditions Murray Bookchin called for in order to realise what he called “social ecology”. In essence, social ecology views social problems as being at the root of ecological



problems, in particular the social stratification into hierarchies of domination. He maintained, as his daughter Debbie Bookchin explains, that “the notion of dominating nature [is] preceded by, and stem[s] from, the domination of human by human and ... only by eliminating social hierarchies – of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, and status – [can] we begin to solve the environmental crisis.”

The liberal humanist project, based on individual rights in the pursuit of freedom of choice, has evolved a legal framework for protecting certain qualities that are cherished by those living in liberal democracies, such as the right to property, right to privacy, freedom of conscience and freedom from discrimination based on gender, race, sexual orientation, and so on. However, if we must now urgently bridge the abstracted freedom of liberal humanism to capacities emerging out of participation through networks and interdependence, then there is a useful parallel distinction to be drawn between human rights and civil rights/liberties, made by law professors Conor Gearty and Keith Ewing in their book *The Struggle for Civil Liberties*.

The distinction they make is that human rights are about protecting the autonomy of the individual, including those freedoms mentioned above: that is, they emerge from a European liberal humanist worldview. Gearty and Ewing quote Marx’s view on how human rights, by its very term, creates a framework uncondusive to the full creative capacities of being human: “not one of the so-called rights of man goes beyond egoistic man ... withdrawn into himself, his private interest and his private desires and separated from the community. In the rights of man ... society appears as a framework extraneous to individuals, as a limitation of their original independence.”

Again quoting Marx, they go on to say that civil rights, on the other hand, are “partly political rights, rights which are only exercised in community with others”. Civil rights are measures that facilitate “participation in the community, in the *political* community”. Civil liberties or rights would therefore include the right of assembly and the right to freedom of expression. In other words, civil liberties are those that promote a sense of political engagement between self and other. Not in the sense of party political, but in the sense of granting the right to experience meaning beyond that of the self. This is in contradistinction to most streams of western thinking, which isolate the individual and reduce his or her experience to that of a private individual and isolated ‘consumer’.

Behind the rather abstract term ‘civil rights’, therefore, is the capacity to fulfil a longing: to experience a widened realm of what it means to be human, reaching towards others in political association and together towards political community. Viewed this way, Extinction Rebellion is a civil rights movement, deepening the capacities of being human that have been obscured through an excessive orientation towards the individual and his or her private level of experience.



The scientific evidence is clear: radically different futures await children born now and those generations after them, depending on the decisions made in the next few years. That future is not yet certain. There are still choices available for how we respond to the multiple crises of Brexit, the rise of the far right in Europe, Trump in the USA, and, bigger than all these, the risk of the planet heating beyond 1.5 degrees and the unravelling of its life systems.

Extinction Rebellion has the mission to use the tool

Behind the term ‘civil rights’, is the capacity to fulfil a longing: to experience a widened realm of what it means to be human...

of civil disobedience to create political change to prevent the catastrophe of runaway climate breakdown. It is also changing something at a deeper level, at the level of the cultural stories through which we create identity. It is opening a space beyond liberal humanism with its deification of the hermetically sealed individual, granting the capacity to experience meaning beyond that of the isolating self through creating political community. R

Mothiur Rahman is a non-practising solicitor specialising in public law, planning and governance. He is a co-founder of the Community Chartering Network and is setting up a legal innovation lab called New Economy Law. He is a member of the political strategy team for Extinction Rebellion UK.
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