

The evolution of the climate movement: from radicalism to complacency

It is worrying to note that a large part of the environmental militancy seems to be more focused on maintaining the few privileges it possesses

Bilbo Bassaterra

In 2018, [the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's \(IPCC\) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C](#) marked a turning point in the [climate movement](#). This report warned of the catastrophic consequences of global warming and urged the international community to take radical action. This call to action triggered an unprecedented wave of mobilisation, giving rise to a new generation of movements that not only put the climate crisis at the centre of the institutional and social debate but also intertwined it with other struggles such as labour, decolonial, feminist and anti-speciesist.

Over time, however, the initial enthusiasm for these movements has waned. What began as a radical challenge to the hegemonic powers has been transformed into a series of initiatives more oriented towards complacency and group therapy. In many cases, organisations seem content to engage in protests that are more akin to marketing campaigns aimed at recruiting new activists than a real challenge to the status quo.



The façade of the Congress stained with beetroot-coloured water after a protest by Rebelión Científica / CTXT

The paradigm shift in the climate movement

The theory of change of these movements originally envisaged the need to generate such powerful social tension that governments could not ignore it, forcing them to find a solution and take a clear position: either cooperate by accepting the demands or expose themselves as servants of the corporate destroyers of the future. This radical approach sought to directly challenge institutions and pressure them to take concrete action in response to the climate and environmental crisis we face.

However, we currently observe that many organisations in the climate movement limit their public activity to displaying banners and organising a large annual rally. These actions, while visible, often go no further than symbolic gestures that do not challenge power structures or generate the necessary pressure to bring about meaningful change. This should provoke deep reflection within the climate movement on whether it is really acting for a comprehensive revolution or settling for activities that ensure some visibility in the public sphere.

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The movement faces the risk of diluting its message and potential impact by focusing on methods that, while necessary for awareness raising and visibility, do not challenge the deep roots of the climate crisis and environmental injustice. The crucial question is whether organisations are willing to adopt more confrontational and disruptive strategies that challenge power structures or whether they prefer to maintain a more comfortable and predictable activism that does not create too much trouble for political and economic decision-makers.

Ultimately, reflection on the effectiveness and strategic direction of the climate movement is essential to ensure that actions are publicly visible and lead to tangible and sustainable changes in politics and economics towards a more just and sustainable future for all.

Attrition and disaffection: the movement's internal crisis

The disquiet and disappointment at not achieving radical change in a few years has generated considerable attrition in environmental activism. The lack of tangible results has led to widespread disaffection with the possibility of mitigating the worst-case scenarios predicted by the scientific community. This sense of frustration is exacerbated by the constant pressure of increasingly urgent deadlines imposed by the climate crisis. In response to these difficulties, some climate activism has adopted a 'put care at the centre' stance, focusing on internal projects and activities that promote the well-being of its members. This serves as an excuse to avoid the risk of facing external repression and effective involvement in the tasks of collective management, which end up falling to others with a greater sense of collective responsibility. The result is that, paradoxically, those who are most involved are not cared for. Clearly, our struggle must be to put care at the centre, but this must not be a constraint on our political activity but rather a praxis in which solidarity and mutual support are the backbone of the community.

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At the same time, these groups that prioritise internal care over the occupation of public space have often demonstrated a lack of capacity or interest in developing a resilient response to internal tensions and conflicts. This dynamic has led, at best, to situations stagnating without clear resolution and, at worst, to the loss of highly skilled and committed activists over time. The lack of effective structures and processes to address internal disputes and

promote cohesion, and of activists willing to take responsibility for taking these processes forward, has weakened the movement's ability to remain united and effective in its struggle for climate justice and the possibility of learning lessons that strengthen collectives.

These internal and external challenges underscore the complexity and urgency of revitalising climate activism with

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strategies that not only promote internal well-being but also directly confront the systemic barriers and external threats that prevent meaningful progress towards a sustainable and equitable future. It is crucial for the movement to find a balance between self-care and

effective action that actively challenges the power structures responsible for the global climate crisis.

Disconnect with vulnerable communities

While the climate crisis affects all people, it is the most vulnerable and marginalised communities that suffer disproportionately from the real and tangible violence that results. Unfortunately, these communities often fall off the radar of large climate organisations, which tend to adopt more conservative and traditionalist positions. While these organisations may have exerted an initial influence on well-meaning younger social movements, they have also limited the radical practices that characterised them in their early days.

The dominant influence of large NGOs has led to standardisation and moderation of the radical practices emerging from the younger movements. These movements often adopt the strategies and approaches of large organisations, which are perceived as established authorities on climate activism. Moreover, NGOs' co-optation of prominent individuals from these movements has weakened their capacity for self-management and contributed to a loss of the autonomy and creativity that characterised their early initiatives.

This dynamic has led to organising festive events where the participants' attitudes do not adequately reflect the seriousness of the existential threat they seek to confront. These events adopt a light and carefree tone, becoming

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more spaces for socialising and entertainment than moments of real struggle and resistance. The priority in these contexts is to create a relaxed atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable, which dilutes the urgency and seriousness of the fundamental message being communicated. This discrepancy between the form

and content of environmental actions reveals an alarming disconnect with the pressing reality of the ecological crisis and its profound socio-economic implications.

Ultimately, there is a risk of trivialising the struggle for climate justice and failing to effectively mobilise society to address the existential threats to our planet. The dissonance is clear if we use a metaphor that environmental organisations often use to define themselves: they are the ones who warn that our house is on fire. If you want to be taken seriously at a fire, you don't go looking for maracas and a costume to wear before you raise the alarm; you break glass and bang on doors to make everyone pay attention.

Intersectionality: a misunderstood concept

The feminists of the Combahee River Collective postulated that emancipation would only be possible collectively.

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By introducing the concept of intersectionality, they recognised that their political freedom as black women and lesbians depended on the global liberation of all groups dispossessed and oppressed by dominant power structures, especially the capitalist order. For them, true

intersectionality meant fighting not only for individual recognition of multiple oppressed identities but for collective emancipation that encompassed all of them.

In contrast, in the contemporary climate movement, intersectionality is often limited to internal or individual practices and communicative strategies rather than a genuine engagement in collective emancipation. It is mainly understood as a way of recognising and addressing the intersection of oppressions individually with each participant within the collectivity, as a kind of competition to see who is the subject of more oppression within the organisation itself, which prevents it from translating into joint and solidarity-based action linking the climate struggle with those of other social movements. Sometimes intersectionality is even perceived as a potential complication, as more traditionalist positions fear that showing solidarity with other causes may provoke internal tensions or scare the general public away from participating in the collective's activities.

This narrow view of intersectionality within the climate movement can limit its ability to form strong and effective alliances with other social movements, such as racial justice, gender, labour, indigenous rights, etc. Embracing a deeper and more engaged intersectionality would be crucial to building a genuinely inclusive and powerful coalition that not only confronts the climate crisis but also addresses the underlying systemic injustices perpetuating social inequality and environmental degradation globally. We cannot forget that the climate crisis is the ultimate consequence of various systems of oppression, the ultimate expression of a cultural process based on the belief that specific individuals of our species have the right to own and, therefore, exploit what surrounds us.

A movement undermined by the middle-class effect

The current climate movement is predominantly composed of middle-class youth. This has shifted the focus from radical and structural struggles to a more comfortable and less confrontational perspective. It is not uncommon to see initiatives that seek to bring the climate crisis issues closer to neighbourhood residents, but these tend to be outsider approaches. Instead of integrating themselves into the day-to-day life of the neighbourhood or municipality and becoming immersed in their reality and problems, environmental organisations opt to hold trainings, workshops, and meetings in the hope of attracting those who are already concerned about other issues to their cause.

In the face of the critical situation we find ourselves in, with climate change accelerating, biodiversity loss and increasing pollution affecting every corner of the planet, it is worrying to observe how a large part of environmental activists seem to be more focused on maintaining the few privileges they have within the current socio-economic system. This conservative attitude manifests itself in a reluctance to question and challenge the power structures and economic dynamics that perpetuate the environmental crisis. Rather than advocating radical transformation that breaks with the capitalist and neoliberal logic that has brought the world to the brink of

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ecological collapse, many activists settle for superficial reforms that do not fundamentally alter the status quo. This perspective limits the environmental movement's ability to build a world of equals, where social and environmental justice is indeed achievable, and perpetuates a cycle of inaction and complacency that

threatens the future of the planet and all its life forms.

The lack of class consciousness within the environmental movement has led to such grotesque situations as the radical disengagement with those sectors of the movement that are suffering the harshest institutional punishment. This phenomenon can be seen, for example, in the lack of solidarity and support for the very eco-social movements that are facing police charges for their actions, which most climate organisations have surrounded with security to prevent them from being linked to the movement. In the same vein, there is also a lack of support for indigenous, peasant and workers' communities who face repression, displacement and violence for defending their lands and natural resources. Environmental activists seem to have difficulty understanding that the only way to prevent institutional repression from falling on them in the future is to fight it together with those who suffer the most today.

If environmental activists do not join these struggles and do not understand that institutional repression is a tool used to silence any form of dissent, they are left alone and vulnerable. By not standing in solidarity and fighting together with those already under attack, it loses the opportunity to build strong and resilient alliances that can more effectively confront repression. It is in unity and solidarity that the strength to resist and overcome the repressive tactics of the system lies.

Moreover, this lack of strategic vision limits the environmental movement's ability to achieve structural change. Repression is not just a problem of certain groups; it is a manifestation of a system that seeks to perpetuate socio-economic and environmental injustices. If environmental activists commit to fighting repression in all its forms, they will not only be protecting other movements but also creating a broader and more powerful common front to confront the ecological and social crises of our time. Ultimately, the struggle for environmental justice is inseparable from the struggle for social justice, and only through joint resistance and solidarity can we hope for real and lasting change.

The need for critical reflection

The climate movement needs critical reflection on its current direction and practices. It is essential to recover the radical essence that characterised it in its beginnings and to reconnect with the communities most affected by the climate crisis. This is the only way to build a truly inclusive and effective movement in the struggle for a sustainable and just future.

To achieve this, it is essential that climate organisations review their approach and commit to more courageous and challenging activism. This means being willing to confront repression and genuinely stand in solidarity with all struggles of oppressed sectors. Intersectionality must be more than a communication strategy; it must become a daily practice that guides all actions of the movement.

It is necessary to understand that we must get involved in other struggles not because we want them to take into account the climate crisis or because it will affect the political subject of those struggles, but because it is simply right and necessary to bring about a change in the culture of domination that has brought us this far.

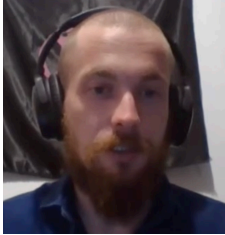
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❖ **About the author: Bilbo Bassaterra** is co-founder of Futuro Vegetal.



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Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org