

#FightEveryCrisis: Re-framing the climate movement in times of a pandemic

Clara Thompson (28th May 2020)

Just as 2019 seemed like the beginning of a new era of climate protests, early 2020 appeared to mark its abrupt end with the outbreak of novel corona virus. Starting in Sweden in August 2018, 'Fridays for Future' (FFF), a group of committed students organizing school strikes seemed to materialize out of nowhere, grabbing media attention and creating a global sensation that peaked in the following year. The protest tactic of choice, the school strike, was particularly controversial, sparking discussions about the political participation of young people, the urgency of the climate crisis and responsibility across generations. Similarly, starting in London in November 2018, Extinction Rebellion drew attention to the looming environmental disaster by engaging in high profile non-violent civil disobedience in cities across Europe, leading to debates about the legitimacy of stopping "business as usual" in order to draw attention to the climate crisis. Especially for groups like FFF, XR or the German climate group *Ende Gelaende* (which is also a German saying for "here and no further"), that developed out of the occupation of the Hambacher Forest and has brought thousands of people to occupy open pit mines, large scale physical protests have been the decisive form of mobilization. In April 2019 approximately 40.000 people joined in civil disobedience actions in London. In June 2019, over 2000 people entered a coal mine in the Rhenish lignite mining area, blocking it for an entire day. Around 10 million people worldwide joined the 3rd Global Climate strike organised by FFF on the 20th of September 2019. In Germany alone there were 1.3 million people on the streets that day for climate change protests in Berlin and several other major cities.

Disappointing results of the year 2019

Putting aside the outbreak of COVID-19 for a moment, activists already realized by the end of 2019 that their protests were not successful enough in terms of leading to radical change. While the European Union as well as some European governments including Austria, Belgium and the UK declared a climate emergency, they had not started cutting CO₂ emissions drastically. In addition, activists started suspecting climate protection policies such as the *European Green Deal* to be more a tactical distraction than an ambitious plan to start tackling emissions. Activists and others have accused it of green washing and using the slogans of climate activism but none of its substance. Furthermore, many scientists and activists criticize the year 2050 as the set date for the EU to reach carbon-neutrality as being too late. In Germany, the *Datteln 4* coal-fired power plant is to be opened at the end of May 2020 despite Germany's announcement to phase out coal by 2038 (which is already much later than most European countries). Finnish state-owned utility Fortum owns

approximately 70 percent of German power plant operator Uniper, tying *Datteln 4* to the Finnish state and making it partially responsible for the controversial opening the power plant. This means that also Finland will likely fail to reach its target of becoming climate neutral by 2035.

In addition to this disappointing outcome, the media attention for the climate movement had decreased by the end of 2019, as the actions of FFF, XR and other groups started losing the news values of novelty, unpredictability and surprise. Media attention is crucial for protest movements placing their messages, shaping the discourse and mobilizing followers. At the same time many climate activists were experiencing burnout after the seemingly endless series of protest actions in 2019. Some started rethinking their strategies, exploring new possibilities of regaining interest of the media. There seemed to be a consensus that protests must continue until real political changes were made that would help avoid the most catastrophic effects of climate change.

2020 has of course been much different than anyone could have anticipated. With the outbreak of a pandemic and physical distancing measures in place most of the actions and stories that climate activists had planned for 2020 had to be shelved for the time being. In addition, the novel virus traumatized people not just in terms of worrying about loved ones becoming sick or dying, but also in terms of causing financial meltdown, worsening domestic violence, feeling isolated, and other consequences. Thus, the issues that the climate movement had been addressing thus far with its actions and stories were no longer the focus of events. The outbreak of COVID-19 brought about a change in the media, social and political resonance space. The long-lasting impact this pandemic will have on society, politics and the economy is still uncertain, but it is likely to be bigger than anticipated.

Media reporting in the time of a pandemic: climate crisis vs. novel corona crisis

What does this imply for climate activists? As long as case numbers remain high, the news will be dominated by case numbers, mortality rates, the fragility of our health system, and the geographical spread of the virus. This will last for an unpredictable but likely extended period of time. Climate-damaging investment packages to rescue economies during the crisis, on the other hand, have been subject to less critical mainstream media attention. However, media attention for the pandemic are also likely to be in waves, as case numbers are sinking in Europe in mid-year (although rising elsewhere) with concerns about a second wave later in the year. Furthermore, although attention to the climate and the environment decreased noticeably in the first couple of months of the spread of COVID-19, it was not completely off the table. Climate activists have still occasionally been interviewed to talk about their responses to the crisis. In these times, climate groups with well-known activists tended to have better chances of being heard, as the media mostly sought out “celebrity” spokespersons.

The media has also explored the question how the climate crisis and the virus outbreak related. Unfortunately however, many articles mostly compared the effects of the two crises with each other, which is not a particularly helpful narrative, instead of searching for links between them. When journalists ask about the ways the crises supposedly “compete” with each other it often remained unclear which particular aspects of the crises the comparison is referring to (the “health” crisis? The “economic” crisis?), thus making the issue unnecessarily abstract and vague. Second of all, measuring which crisis is “worse” holds the danger of belittling the traumatizing effects each of them can potentially have on people’s lives. As Fridays for Future activists point out with their Hashtag #fighteverycrisis, instead of trying to figure out which crisis is worse, we should recognize the severity of each crisis and act accordingly to prevent them in the future.

Taking back social media

To balance out their dependency on mass media and the minimal news reporting on climate change at the moment, activists have increasingly turned to social media. However, they have also struggled to keep control of more problematic narratives circulating online being connected to the climate movement. Misleading statements like “mother nature is cleansing itself”, “humanity is the virus” or posts expressing support for the short-term stop of CO₂ emission due to the economic shut down were widely found on Twitter, Instagram and other social media platforms in the first couple of weeks after the COVID-19 breakout. Many climate activist groups responded immediately, joining efforts to debunk these newly circulating narratives. In March, XR Scotland stated on Twitter that “any claim that a global pandemic and loss of thousands of human lives is a *good* thing for the climate is far more dangerous than the virus itself” and further: “Misleading narratives about ‘overpopulation’ can lead to the promotion of eugenics or a one-race state achieved by oppressive anti-immigration policies”. XR Germany followed later in the month with a Twitter Post encouraging solidarity with the thousands of refugees being locked in at the camp Moria on Lesbos:

“it is not humans who are the problem, but certain ways of living together, economic activity and bad political decisions [...]. Such narratives celebrate the death of mostly structurally disadvantaged people and imply that the earth can be ‘saved’ in this way. They aim to create an irrational image of the enemy and open the door to repressive and racist anti-immigration policies.”

In May, Greta Thunberg published a Facebook post stating that CO₂ temporarily falling might be good in showing how much emissions decreased in the last decade, but is generally “not good news”.

Demystifying such narratives has kept activists busy since the outbreak of the virus. In addition, especially in the first months of the coronavirus crisis many climate groups made efforts to support local communities and show solidarity with overburdened health care workers. Some groups joined forces with their local food banks and supermarkets, cycling supplies to elderly costumers so they would not have to come pick them up themselves. Other groups created solidarity funds. Since the outbreak of the virus efforts have been made to show intersecting links between struggles, making solidarity between different (climate) activist groups more visible. In Germany, one of the first big successes and blueprint for showing solidarity within the wider movement and running campaigns in times of corona was an action by the collective ‘Seebrücke’ (‘Seabridge’), a Germany based group calling for the establishment of safe routes for refugees. The hashtag #LeaveNoOneBehind was widely adopted by climate groups across Europe with many climate activists joining in small physical protests against the catastrophic hygiene situation in the refugee camp Moria and demanding it to be evacuated immediately.

Since the outbreak of the virus, the conservative media in particular have criticized activists’ call for more climate protection measures following an economic framing à la "The pandemic is more important than the climate crisis, which is why the economy must now be rescued without regard to the climate". This narrative sets the stage for a climate policy "rollback". Activists know that economic and financial systems do not operate in a vacuum, but are highly dependent on the political environment. In order to respond to and prevent this roll back climate groups all over Europe have been getting involved with political decisions about how to reboot the economy after the pandemic is over. In Germany, the discussion about the so called “Abwrackprämie” - a supposed stimulus measure providing every new car buyer with a bonus and thereby encouraging cars purchases (including cars that run on fuels such as diesel!) - has been intense. Including during the (now digital) weekly climate strikes, German activists protested against the financial bailout of the car industry which in their eyes contradicts promises of the government to pursue the “Energiewende” – the planned transition by Germany to a low carbon, environmentally sound, reliable, and affordable energy supply. Similarly, in France, a 22 billion dollar investment package to support industries, largely the aviation and automobile sectors, with no strings attached, did not slip past French climate activists unnoticed. XR Germany started a campaign around the theme “Klimarettungsschirm”, a “financial parachute for the climate”, demanding governments tie financial aid for companies to climate neutrality obligations and stop funding the fossil fuel industry. On April Fools Day a fake *Google* website made by XR activists appeared, announcing that the tech giant has reevaluated their responsibility regarding climate change in times of crisis and has decided to immediately stop funding organizations that are associated with climate denialism. A day later, the group *Google Workers for Action on Climate Change* stated its support for the action. (The real) Google then announced that it will desist from building AI tools for oil and gas drillers. This communication guerrilla action by XR New York as well as the other examples

show that activists have not lost their voices, and have instead found new and creative ways to pressure governments, even from their desks at home.

However, COVID-19 has also shown the limits of digital campaigns. Although activists' concerns and narratives can also be brought to the public through social media, they do not generally have the same reach as mass media. Since the mass media are active co-creators of the narrative about the climate crisis, the climate movement depends on the media to talk about it. While it is possible to reach many through social media, it is difficult to reach people beyond the "filter bubbles". Furthermore, unfortunately spreading out to the digital realm has excluded many former more senior activists who were not able to catch up with the ever changing fast pace of digital activism. While activists have made it into mainstream media since the outbreak of corona, and recently there has been a rising interest in what has become of the climate movement, media attention for the climate movement has not yet become consistent again.

So what can we do?

Even without a pandemic capturing media attention it is a great challenge for social movements to bring their messages into the media. Not only do they lack "real means of power", scholars have found that they are usually forced to adapt to the "media's desire for 'simple' messages or 'imaginative' images" in order to receive coverage.¹ Protest movements typically attempt to undertake actions that include an element of surprise, involve socially influential actors and attempt to personalize the events to increase the interest of the news media.

But how to find new ways of exciting and provocative actions, when all that people worry about is how to go back to normality as quickly as possible? Activists know that the post-virus phase will be a decisive one. Politicians are seeking a narrative that will determine how the economy will be stabilized and further crises prevented. They will choose among competing narratives, with some prevailing others. Activists know they must engage in this "competition" – if they do not, climate unfriendly narratives may become dominant and the climate crisis will intensify further.

Finding a new narrative

Since the outbreak of corona, climate activists and scientists have wearily observed politicians and people's growing eagerness to return to "normality". They know that normality and stability is only possible if all crises are tackled at their *origins* instead of only their *symptoms*. Measures like physical distancing, financial bail-out for key industries and vaccinations may be effective short team measures to deal with the novel corona crisis, but they are not enough to

¹Brunnengräber, Achim, Ansgar Klein, und Heike Walk, Hrsg. 2005. *NGOs im Prozess der Globalisierung: mächtige Zwerge, umstrittene Riesen*. 1. Aufl. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. P. 353.

prevent the next virus from breaking out. As long as our economic system encourages people to destroy our ecosystems and cut down entire rainforests for profit, the outbreak of the next virus might just be waiting behind the corner: Destroying natural habitats forces animals to flee, making it more likely for them and humans to get in contact with other species. In the case of COVID-19 the virus was much likely transmitted by bats that migrated to Malaysia after they were forced to leave the rain forest in Sumatra. There they probably transmitted the disease to other animals, that later were sold at an animal market in Wuhan.

The story of the climate, CO₂ emissions and greenhouse gases is the one that has brought the climate movement to the forefront of public attention over the past year. However, it has one big problem: Many people, who are lucky enough to not have their livelihood threatened by the effects of climate change yet, still do not understand how it affects their daily lives. This narrative refers to the climate as if it can be isolated from our economic system, from our health and from the outbreak of new diseases. Furthermore, at the moment, with many people having very acute worries such as the health of loved ones and how to pay next month's rent, the narrative of the lurching climate crisis might overwhelm people more than mobilize them. Framing climate and ecological protection as the surest way to achieving true stability can directly address such concerns.

For the period after the Corona crisis ends or at least recedes activists will need to develop a new narrative that is concrete and immediate. In that sense, similar to the one that has dominated during the pandemic. It must be a narrative that answers how people's health can be best protected and that promises economic stability. It must be a narrative that shows the direct connection between everyday human concerns and the protection of nature from exploitative practices such as extractivism. It must be a narrative that shows that crises such as COVID-19 and climate change do not affect all people equally and one that builds solidarity beyond borders. This narrative must demonstrate that climate and ecological protection is not a "luxury" but the basic building block of a resilient society. In short, it must be made clear that climate and nature conversation are the most basic form of health protection and economic stability.

Tearing down rain forests does not just increase the probability of transmittable diseases, it directly and indirectly contributes to raising CO₂ emissions, which results in flooding, sea-level rise and catastrophic wild fires such as in Australia in 2019. As long as governments exclude the protection of biodiversity and ecosystems in their plans, stability will remain an illusion. As long as people deny themselves as part of the ecosystem and that their livelihood, health and well-being depends on their care for it, a state of crisis awaits us and future generations.

All activist groups need to come together to find a common narrative of climate protection which shows that this is the world's best hope for a stable economy and open, healthy, resilient societies. That the corona virus crisis will change

everything is a key narrative that activists need to communicate, so that people can expect substantive changes and build their acceptance of this. Over time, mass media space will become more readily available for climate activists' actions and narratives. This chance should not be missed, as it may be the best one the climate movement gets in the foreseeable future.

About the author:

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