

COMMENT OPEN



Radical movements as a call to climate action: a space-time connection

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This comment links the radicalisation of climate justice movements in the Global North across time and space to the long-term environmental justice movements in post-colonial and settler-colonial geographies. I argue that the measures adopted by climate activists mirror the nature of resistance offered by activists against colonialism and its historic and continuing impact on local environments. I present the women-led Chipko Movement in the Himalayas in the 1970s as an example.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few months, images of climate activists throwing canned tomato soup and potato puree on paintings of Vincent van Gogh and Claudet Monet have appeared in the public sphere^{1,2}. These incidents have been followed by activists using superglue to attach themselves to busy roads³. The activists of movements like Just Stop Oil in the United Kingdom and Letzte Generation (Last Generation) in Germany are moving towards radical forms of protest to highlight the urgency of the action needed to address climate change^{4,5}. The methods of protest adopted by the climate activists have led to an active debate in society ranging from outright disapproval of these acts to sympathy for the cause but critique of the modes of protest⁶. Climate activists, on the other hand, have justified their radical modes of protest pointing towards the consequences of inaction for future generations and their disappointment at governments' piecemeal actions^{4,5}.

In this comment, I link the radicalisation of climate movements like Just Stop Oil and Letzte Generation in the Global North across time and space to the long term environmental justice movements situated in post-colonial and settler-colonial geographies^{7,8}. I point particularly towards the women-led Chipko Movement in the Himalayas in the 1970s, where protesters hugged trees in their forests to prevent them from being logged^{9,10}. In doing so, I argue that the current climate resistance movements are a reaction to the inherent injustices in the tempo and ambition of current government led climate action policies. I also underline that the measures adopted by climate activists mirror the nature of resistance offered by activists against colonialism and its historic and continuing impact on local environments (Fig. 1).

FROM ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE TO CLIMATE JUSTICE AND BACK

Environmental justice movements are broadly defined as resistances against unequal distribution of environmental impacts of a development activity¹¹. The term environmental justice is associated with the call to action from Black and other marginalised communities in the United States of America against the disproportional burden borne by them to environmental pollution. However, in a decolonial chronology of environmental justice, it was born early on in the resistances offered by

indigenous peoples to the colonial forces and their impact on life sustaining environments¹². In present times, the environmental justice discourse has influenced climate justice movements as they ask for intergenerational and spatial justice in the face of the impacts of climate change¹³.

To understand the present radicalisation of the climate justice movements, I point back towards the long history of environmental justice movements. I do so in light of a growing scholarship that points towards the colonial roots of climate change^{14,15}. Post-colonial and settler-colonial geographies offer a rich history of a radical resistance against pollution of water, land, air and the loss of food stocks and livelihood¹². These legacies of resistance continue in the form of grassroots resistance against extractivist projects and are defined by some scholars as modes of transformative governance in the face of climate change¹⁶. Resistance is offered in a range of ways from filing lawsuits, producing alternative development plans, using art to underline injustices to blockages as well as hunger strikes¹⁶. The insurgent nature of resistance is a mode to challenge the status quo and to create spaces for action¹⁷. However, scholars also warn against fetishizing conflict and resistance, as in most cases, the burden and heavy lifting is borne by vulnerable communities and people most at risk¹⁶.

I illustrate this through the women-led Chipko Movement in the Himalayas in the 1970s.

THE CHIPKO MOVEMENT: LOOKING BACKWARDS, LOOKING FORWARD

The word *Chipko* means "to stick" in Hindi. The Chipko Movement started in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in India in 1973. Villagers, mostly women, hugged trees to prevent them from being felled by logging contractors. In using their bodies as a shield the protesters highlighted the deep connection that they have to the forest and its role in supporting their lives and livelihoods⁹. The protest was also against the disproportional burden of deforestation that the villagers in Himalayas would have to bear by clear cutting commercial practices in comparison to the profits that the logging companies and middlemen would make¹⁰.

The Chipko Movement was born out of the long history of environment and social resistance to colonial extractive practices in the Himalayas^{9,10}. The Chipko movement was inspired by the Gandhian philosophy and adopted non-violent modes of protest.

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Fig. 1 **Protesting against inaction on climate change.** Activists of the movement Letzte Generation block traffic in Germany by sticking themselves to the street (Damian Chac 2023 available at: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1WO7URmAmPNa7Q6O8uqTljj4GkiKGUVyV> Shared via CC BY-SA 4.0).



Fig. 2 **Protesting against commercial deforestation.** Women in the Himalayas stick themselves to a tree in their forest to prevent it from being logged (Wikimedia Commons 2018. Available at <http://ieg-ego.eu/en/mediainfo/the-chipko-movement>. Shared by CC BY-SA 4.0).

In addition to people hugging trees, the protesters also organised large scale public gatherings, marches and fasts. They used the power of music and poems to spread their message and filed appeals to the courts¹⁰.

Starting in the small village of Reni in Uttarakhand, the movement spread across the Himalayas and soon attracted national and international attention. The Chipko movement was met with resistance from the government and the logging lobbies. Protestors were arrested and sometimes even faced physical violence in the jails. This led to the movement spreading to universities and colleges as well as finding a political footing in the Himalayas. This critical mass helped the movement in negotiating forest rights for the locals and is said to have brought in the new era of people-centric environmentalism in India¹⁰. Chipko's legacy continues to inspire environmental resistance in the Himalayas even today, including anti-dam, anti-mining and even anti-urban planning protests¹⁸ (Fig. 2).

In comparing present day radical climate protests to the Chipko movement I point to some similarities and some differences. First, both movements are characterised by acts of active resistance and civil disobedience, underlining the non-violent nature of their protests. Second, both movements are grassroots movements, started by those vulnerable to the impacts of environment and climate degradation, respectively. For the protestors in the Chipko movement, it was the immediate loss of livelihood drawn from the forests. For the present day climate activists, it is the amplifying impacts of climate change that each future generation will face. Finally, both movements ask for representation in taking decisions over their environments and their climate. In the case of Chipko through rights to the forest and in the case of climate movements through citizen assemblies.

Despite the similarities, some differences are also apparent. The Chipko movement was inward looking, as the objective was not to attract large scale attention but to immediately respond to local

environment threats. The national and international attention that followed, happened gradually as people found commonalities and sympathy with the protestors. The radical climate action movements are outward looking, as the objective from the get go is to draw attention to the consequences of climate change. In doing so, the movement, voluntarily and involuntarily engages people. This involuntary engagement is where the movement has drawn critique in that it inconveniences the everyday lives of people and uses them as intermediaries to convey a message to the politicians.

EPILOGUE

At the time of writing this comment, members of the protest movement of the Last Generation are facing criminal lawsuits and potential time in jail for public disruption¹⁹. It is too early to determine if this response from the state leads towards generating sympathy for the movement or if the radicalisation of the climate action movement leads to a loss of public appeal. Under any circumstances, it is crucial to understand how present climate grassroots movements continue to build upon the legacy of resistance to colonialism much as the legacy of colonialism continues to drive climate change.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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