

Anarchism and climate change activism

[B O O K R E V I E W]

Oscar Berglund & Daniel Schmidt (2020).

Extinction Rebellion and Climate Change Activism.

Activism. Breaking the law to change the world. Palgrave Macmillan. 108 pages.

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Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a popular and growing environmental and climate movement. Oscar Berglund and Daniel Schmidt critique the assumed link between XR and anarchism in this book. Although observers tend to associate XR's lawbreaking protests with anarchists, the authors argue that this is often due to a lack of understanding of the idea of anarchism. The book, therefore, sets out to analyse and critique XR by focusing on how the discourses around XR, and its often lawbreaking practices, relate to the tradition of anarchism. The authors ask, why are observers of XR so quick to associate it with anarchism? Are they justified?

The most distinctive aspect of XR is their unique approach to protesting, which is provocative, disruptive and potentially impactful. The XR are well-organised and non-violent and welcoming of arrests. Berglund and Schmidt introduce the XR and its close link to the anarchist tradition in chapter one by drawing attention to the perhaps misguided conclusion that the disruptive nature, which sometimes results in lawbreaking, has led to this association. The authors do an excellent job of exploring the association of XR with anarchism and dissecting and breaking down the anarchist tradition in chapter two.

The two types of anarchism, ‘Capital-A Anarchism (adversaries of the state and the police) and Small-a anarchism (opposition to the state and Marxist political parties and movements)’, provide a way of distinguishing the XR from anarchism. Thus, showing how it might or might not be following in the footsteps of the anarchist tradition.

In chapters three to six, however, the authors take a step further into the analytic journey of the book, focusing on critiquing the XR. Through ‘liberal civil disobedience’, the authors argue that XR can maintain the liberal tradition in climate protests. Although they aim to be non-violent and organised in their protests, which ultimately sets them apart from other social movements, the XR nevertheless seems to act against themselves. They end up appearing as an organisation with a hierarchical system, which, in some way, contradicts their protest as they are protesting against a political system with hierarchies. The book further explores XR’s demand for a citizen’s assembly and XR’s theory of change, the civil resistance model.

A strength of the book is its unique and versatile analysis of anarchism, what it is, or not, and its key dimensions. The analysis was useful in thinking about the taken-for-granted link between XR and anarchism and allowed for further engagement with the ‘utopian’ perspective of anarchism. This way of thinking about anarchism makes it more palatable for a student like me, who knew less about anarchism before reading the book. I found myself enthralled and genuinely engaged by how Berglund and Schmidt outlined and dissected each important aspect of analysis and critique they had set out for at the beginning of the book. They could bring a new way of approaching the climate change discourse without making it boring.

The book takes a narrower focus in the last few chapters. For instance, in chapter four, the authors highlight the contradiction of the XR, which emphasises the organisational structure and the ‘hidden hierarchies’ in the social movement. While this is an interesting theoretical critique, the authors tend to overlook XR’s practical impacts, advocacy, and political resonance in the fight for climate justice. Therefore, the authors’ theoretical critiques sometimes miss the practical point of what the XR as a social movement was aiming for in the first place. Berglund and Schmidt usefully analyse and critique the XR and how it serves climate change activism as an environmental movement. However, it would help climate and environmental justice movements considerably if they could show how their critique strengthens XR and other movements.

I also was uncomfortable with the authors’ somewhat narrow take on the citizen’s assembly. The citizen’s assembly is not only a theoretical phenomenon but is, to my mind, a great example of democracy in society. The citizen assembly is a forum to include diverse voices in decision-making processes beyond party politics. Citizen assemblies

may be particularly important in a country where representative politics is weak, many younger people are excluded from democratic processes (for example, they are too young to vote), and fewer citizens are voting. XR type of activism is a plausible option, especially for youth climate activism. Another key principle of XR is 'tell the truth.' The idea is to encourage governments to be truthful about climate emergencies and work with other institutions, including education institutions, to fight climate change. It is rather unfortunate that I live in a society where education rarely incorporates climate change or activism into the curricula. Climate change is considered separate from other justice-related issues such as human rights, racism, sexism, and inequality. A lack of inclusive structures makes it more difficult for the youth to engage with climate change platforms and discourse or debates. With XR activism and its ideas and theories, specifically the citizen's assembly, youth could play a crucial role in policymaking and implementing those policies. Importantly, it allows a liberatory space for youth voices to be genuinely heard.

From a scholarly perspective, the book is thought-provoking and stimulating, especially for youth interested in studying climate change activism. It allows room for further engagement with theories and ideas surrounding climate change activism by analysing social movements such as XR and what it brings into the discourse. Indeed, knowledge is power. But in today's society, knowledge can serve as action. Berglund and Schmidt provide us with a new way of thinking, not only about phenomena such as anarchism but climate activism in and of itself. By emphasising the importance of engagement and becoming more knowledgeable with an idea, a concept, a theory, or even a new type of activism (XR), the authors evoke a new kind of eagerness and willingness from the reader of the book to not only participate in climate change activism but to care about the research and the knowledge that accompanies this social movement.

The book contributes a new way to analyse and critique climate change activism and think about our society. In South Africa, the book could contribute to new research by finding a more diverse way of thinking about implementing a citizen's assembly for the sole purpose of climate change activism. This book is worth reading for anyone interested in sociology, philosophy, anthropology and science. It could also contribute greatly to psychology and frame new analytical research in psychology. It would be especially helpful in introducing students to a new type of activism (XR-type activism), thus, allowing more engagement with youth activism.