



# Seeking attention, provoking reactance: Radical climate activism after Covid-19

European View  
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## Abstract

In Western Europe the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 marked the close of a period of climate activism that had until then been dominated by the Fridays for Future movement, with its youth-driven protests and pleas to *listen to the science*. But now that its political star has faded more radical groups have taken the reins—many of which are less interested in organising mass rallies than in staging acts of civil disobedience. This article charts some of the fault lines created by this activist changing of the guard, takes a critical look at the now prevalent logic of *attention at all costs* and outlines how and why it may give rise to feelings of reactance. It concludes that the zeal of this new generation of activists must be curbed if the acceptance of climate protection measures is to be ensured.

## Keywords

Climate movement, Activism, Protest tactics, Backlash, Attention, Reactance, Radicalism

## Introduction

Writing about social movements can be a difficult and tedious endeavour. By the time research on them has made it through the peer review process, they have often already slipped (back) into irrelevance—either because their main concern has been successfully addressed or, as is far more often the case, because it has been replaced by others that are now seen as more relevant. To cite just one prominent example, consider how excited many observers were by the meteoric rise of anti-capitalist and anti-austerity movements in the wake of the 2007–9 Great Recession. From Occupy Wall Street to the Indignados in Spain, these new players on the stage of public opinion promised nothing less than the dawn of a new era, sparking a wild and intoxicating mix of dreams, hopes, longings and

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expectations. Yet by the time the first scholarly articles about them went to print, they had either ceased to exist or become so dysfunctional that they could no longer be attributed political significance: other crises had appeared on the horizon, and other actors (e.g. the German PEGIDA movement) had pushed their way into the limelight.<sup>1</sup> Later, in the 2010s, it seemed for a while that the fight against climate change would become a new fulcrum of the social movement cosmos, especially after Greta Thunberg and Fridays for Future had come on to the scene. Within a few months they had built a strong movement brand, held mass rallies around the globe and won the support of celebrities and politicians alike. Presidents, prime ministers, business executives and even the pope showed themselves eager to meet the young activists and listen to their sharply honed message.

But fate can be harsh and bring down even influential and powerful movements in a matter of weeks. In the case of those that Buzogány and Scherhauser (2023) view as emblematic of contemporary climate activism in Europe (Fridays for Future as well as Ende Gelände and Extinction Rebellion), it was the Covid-19 pandemic that caused Fortuna's wheel to turn. Even if one is usually well-advised not to overestimate the effects of this or any other crisis (which often seem smaller with some distance), it is evident that the implementation of *lockdowns* destroyed the political momentum that climate activists had previously built up, made mass protests impossible and diverted society's focus to something that simply appeared more pressing at that moment. Things may have returned to normal since then, but the aforementioned groups are still severely weakened and have lost their hegemonic position. In most countries where they played a crucial role before the pandemic, they are now no longer seen as those who determine the course of the climate movement as such, but rather as actors who *missed their chance* and whose post-Covid decline has created space for new voices both more determined and less compromising. Perhaps best known among them is the German Last Generation (Letzte Generation), which first rose to fame with a hunger strike right before the 2021 federal election and has since grown into a kind of poster child for radical climate action between the Alps and the North Sea. Groups with the same name and ideals have also been founded in Austria and Italy, while others (such as Just Stop Oil and Renovate Switzerland) at least employ the same tactical repertoire. To increase their political impact, they have formed a transnational alliance called the A22 Network<sup>2</sup> and published a joint declaration in which they style themselves as a band of climate warriors who are here 'to say we will create a new world. . . . While there remains breath in our bodies, we will not stop' (A22 Network 2022).

## The false idol of attention

While it is not uncommon for activists of all stripes to clothe their *raison d'être* in bombastic language, the members of the A22 Network do so with such fervent emotionalism that the stylistic difference from more established actors could hardly be clearer: they not only see the world from a Manichaeian vantage point but base their activism on narratives of doom and sacrifice. Apocalyptic rhetoric is just as common among them as an almost messianic belief in their own righteousness and a disdain for political compromise. And while Greta Thunberg and her supporters admitted that they were not experts themselves

(but were only asking their governments to *listen to the science*), the prevailing view here seems to be that the problem is already well understood and that it is now just a matter of drawing the correct—radical—conclusions (Bitschnau 2023b). The point is not that this logic as such is inconsistent: if one is entirely convinced that climate change will spell the end of human civilisation, advocating a radical approach might be the only reasonable reaction. Yet the scenarios conjured up in activist circles usually contradict the more nuanced assessments of most experts and rest on shaky teleological premises. In conjunction with the ambition to *create a new world* (which to some ears sounds more like a scarcely veiled threat than a promise), blind faith in these and similar doomsaying scenarios harbours a potential for political escalation unprecedented among modern ecological movements.

In operational terms this ideological determination is complemented by a greater degree of agility than one is used to from other groups, with protests often carried out in the style of a guerrilla force. Whereas the idea of Fridays for Future is to dedicate one day a week to its mass rallies and Ende Gelände plans its interventions long in advance, the tactical approach of ‘the new kids on the climate block’ is more dynamic and their ability to react, better developed. What sets them apart most significantly, however, is the extent to which they privilege disruption as their primary *modus operandi*. Rather than convincing others of the need for radical action, their protests aim to attract as much attention as possible, which (it is assumed) will result in political pressure and ultimately trigger policy changes. In other words, they extend the adage that there is *no such thing as bad publicity* to mean that there is also no such thing as a bad protest, for every protest creates at least some publicity and thus helps the cause.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this method has not really proven itself in practice, and one could argue that it has at least three weaknesses that make it appear to be a strategic miscalculation.

First, there is the obvious fact that attention has always been a volatile currency: one day the entire world proclaims its solidarity with a cause, and the next day that same cause is relegated to the margins or forgotten altogether. With news cycles getting ever shorter in the age of social media and protests more *episodised* (Poell 2020), the attention span for most forms of climate activism is barely a full day—and even those that stay in the public eye a little longer rarely leave a lasting impression or prompt others to change their views. At best they evoke declarations that while one may sympathise with the protesters’ cause, they have *gone too far* this time; at worst, any attempt at nuance is instantly swept away by a wave of furious backlash. This problematic constellation is complicated further if one considers that radical protest tactics are by their nature depreciating assets: the longer they are held on to, the lower their novelty value and the less media attention they receive. For example, spilling soup on famous paintings (a prominent form of climate protest; see Kinyon et al. 2023) may shock people the first and perhaps also the second time. But by the tenth time, it becomes a side note, and the most common reaction to be expected will be a more or less indifferent shrug.<sup>4</sup> The same applies to the blocking of roads, an action that will continue to infuriate those stuck in traffic jams but which the general public finds worthy of its attention only in special

circumstances. The more it turns into *business as usual*, the more it loses its radical character and immediate relevance.<sup>5</sup>

Second, there is not much reason to believe that the biggest problem with climate change is a lack of political attention.<sup>6</sup> At least since the signing of the Paris Agreement, the issue has gained great visibility—the rallies of Fridays for Future, the extensive coverage of the COPs,<sup>7</sup> the popularisation of climate journalism and the adoption of initiatives such as the European Green New Deal all testify to this, as does the newfound electoral strength of ecological parties in many European countries. In Germany, probably the most striking example of this, the salience of climate issues not only helped Alliance 90/The Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen) achieve a historic result in the 2021 federal election<sup>8</sup> but also enabled its lead candidate Annalena Baerbock to present herself on an equal footing with her Christian Democratic and Social Democratic competitors. As mentioned before, it is of course true that in recent years Covid-19 has been a more dominant crisis, as has the Russo-Ukrainian War. But neither has cast doubt on the consensus that climate change is a major threat and needs to be addressed. The only issues that remain unclear are what this *addressing* means in practice and whether a majority is willing to pay the price it will cost to prioritise climate protection efforts. In this sense the problem for most people seems to be less that they are unaware of what is happening now (and may happen in the future) but rather that their awareness does not have much bearing on their behaviour. Searching for ways to change the latter is clearly a more fruitful approach than carrying out mostly futile exercises in communicative redundancy.<sup>9</sup>

Third (and this is arguably the most important point), the attention given to the protests is in most instances immediately absorbed by their appearance and hardly ever touches on strategies to save the planet. In a sense one could say that the activists are drinking from a chalice that they themselves have poisoned: since their central objective is to generate attention through disruptive and spectacular actions, they risk having everyone focus on precisely these actions and not on the message they want to convey. People then discuss *whether it was really necessary* to block this road or vandalise that object, but they neither link these discussions to concrete policy demands nor suddenly begin to back the latter. For instance, the debate after the Last Generation's paint attack on the Brandenburg Gate centred primarily on legal and technical matters, prompting Berlin's Governing Mayor Kai Wegner to declare that the whole action had done nothing but impair the 'free discourse about the important issues of our time' (cited in Mishra 2023). And Joshua Garland only generalises this criticism when he notes that although such actions can generate 'saliency and shock, [they usually fall] short of engaging audiences with the key climate arguments' and as a result detract from the 'message that the activists intended' to deliver (2023, 8).

### **More harmful than helpful**

In addition to the difficulties arising from this overly narrow focus on public attention, there are also concerns about the tactics used. In particular, it seems possible that they cause *reactance* (i.e. resistance to positions that one feels pressured to adopt), a reaction

typical of situations in which individuals are made to feel that ‘their free behaviors [are] eliminated or threatened with elimination’ (Miron and Brehm 2006, 4). As research indicates, this can even be the case when people are confronted with the message that there is a scientific consensus on climate change—for they might interpret this to mean that their own opinion is irrelevant or suspect that they are being manipulated (e.g. Bolsen and Druckman 2018; Chinn and Hart 2023). There are still more reasons to expect that people react in this way when faced with street blockades and paint attacks. Perhaps most crucial among them is the gulf between the preferences of the majority, which are in most cases geared towards expanding and protecting personal freedoms, and attempts to restrict these freedoms in the name of climate protection. Such advances almost automatically provoke reactance, especially when they result in what many view as a circumvention of democratic decision-making.<sup>10</sup> Added to this is the immediacy of the protests and the fact that they are already restricting certain freedoms in a way widely considered inappropriate. It is not that difficult, after all, to empathise with those who spend hours stuck in traffic jams just because some activists felt it necessary to glue their hands to the asphalt.

Still, it could be argued that the biggest source of reactance is not so much *what* precisely the activists advocate or *how* they advocate it, but the public identity they assume. Young, academically educated and adhering to a decidedly post-materialist lifestyle, they give to many the impression of being out of touch with reality (i.e. the lives of most people) and provoke forms of rejection that are affective rather than rational. In fact, there is probably no image more detrimental to their cause than that of some middle-class student activists lecturing a working-class delivery driver on the perils of global warming. Watching such a scene, one is strangely reminded of the Marxists of past decades, who always sought to stir up the masses and never understood why those they thought they were representing showed so little interest in their beliefs and jargon. It is true, of course, that not all activists fit this mould, but it is also not far-fetched to claim that many present themselves in a way that makes it easy to portray them as misguided idealists who enjoy telling others what to do.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, this contrasts sharply with Fridays for Future, which from the outset conveyed a far more positive image. Partly because most of its participants were children and partly because it aimed to appeal to the mainstream, it even managed to be viewed as a collective conscience. Radical groups like Just Stop Oil and the Last Generation, on the other hand, appear to most people as unnecessary nuisances at best.

## Conclusion

Whatever the reasons, there is little doubt that this latest form of climate activism is fraught with difficulties. Instead of bringing about change, its one-dimensional (and desperate) quest for attention has become an end in itself and is increasingly opposed even by those who agree that more needs to be done to fight global warming.<sup>12</sup> This, of course, also has implications for the climate movement as a whole, which sooner or later must take a stand on the approach of the A22 Network and its members. It might not be amiss for it to take some inspiration from Juvenal’s famous question about who watches the watchmen<sup>13</sup> and ask itself whether it should protest against protesters who jeopardise the

acceptance of climate protection measures, whether it should take action against activists who harm the work of many years, and how it can respond best to voices calling for even more radical solutions (e.g. Malm 2021) and an end to the ‘consensus around non-violence as the only path’ (Anfinson 2022, 151). Viewed from the outside, it seems clear that one should dread the day when proposals of this kind become reality and collide with the sensibilities of a public that has little tolerance for protests flirting with violence (Simpson et al. 2018). At worst, they could weaken efforts to mitigate climate change for years to come—even such that are undeniably democratic.

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## Notes

1. In this context, one could speak of the emergence of a different *crisis cycle* (Bitschnau 2023a).
2. The name is derived from the fact that it was initiated in April 2022.
3. This is true for non-violent protests. As of January 2024 the members of the A22 Network reject all forms of violence (although the concept is interpreted narrowly and does not include acts of sabotage).
4. Especially since there is no real damage here. The paintings in question are all protected by glass panels.
5. To keep the public interested, activists who depend on media attention must therefore continually come up not only with something new but also with something shocking and provocative.
6. Poortinga et al. (2018) find that between 88.7% (Lithuania) and 97.7% (Iceland) of Europeans believe that the climate is changing and that this change is at least partly caused by human activity.
7. Conferences of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.
8. They received 14.8% of the vote, up 5.9 percentage points from the 2017 federal election.
9. But it is also considerably more difficult, and there may be no perfect (or even good) solution at all.
10. Even supporters of climate protection may reconsider their initial position if there are relevant policy trade-offs (Rettig et al. 2023).
11. There is no doubt that activists should have the right to demand more climate action. What many dispute, however, is their right to impose particular policies that have not been the subject of democratic deliberation.
12. A German survey from June 2023 found that 85% of respondents were opposed to road blockades and 56% were in favour of harsher penalties for protesters who resort to such means (Kolvenbach et al. 2023).
13. *Satire VI*, 347–8 (*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*). The same aphorism is often misattributed to Plato.

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