

The Particularity of Radical Climate Disobedience in Europe as a New Phenomenon

Gina Haubner

Universidad Pompeu Fabra Barcelona, Spain

Abstract:

This paper investigates the significance of radical activism within contemporary climate justice movements (CJMs) in Europe, framing it as a distinctive and underexplored phenomenon. It offers a novel contribution by analysing the radicalization (della Porta 2018) of contemporary CJMs through their practices, alongside theoretical, conceptual and normative approaches. The paper introduces the framework of radical climate activism, offering a well-framed and robust conception of the understudied concept of radical disobedience.

In recent years, movements such as Ende Gelände, Extinction Rebellion, Letzte Generation and Just Stop Oil have profoundly shaped European climate activism. Their tactics, including coal mine blockades, highway sit-ins and adhesive protests, reflect a deliberate embrace of high-cost disruption, with imprisonment constituting an integral part of their strategy.

Despite this, research on this phenomenon remains scarce, with notable exceptions (Scheuermann 2022, Celikates 2022) and Ollitrait (2022) in particular, who classifies these CJMs, including Fridays for Future, as a third wave of environmental movements in Western Europe. Unlike prior generations, they distinguish themselves as a “militant generation”, inventing a way of life that critiques capitalism’s ecological impacts while advancing a comprehensive critique of systemic injustices. The slogan “System change, not climate change” is widely embraced among them.

Two core characteristics define radical climate activism: (1) its purpose and demands and (2) its protest strategies and methods:

1. Radical climate activism aspires to systemic change, advocating for profound, socio- ecological transformation. CJMs aim to dismantle fossil fuel dependency and confront capitalist exploitation and its growth imperative, interweaving sustainability with demands for climate justice and democratic reform.
2. In contrast to traditional civil disobedience, radical climate activists no longer focus primarily on appealing to the conscience and understanding of governing institutions. Instead, they employ disruption to interrupt “business as usual” and impose economic and political costs on unsustainable practices, often by targeting fossil fuel infrastructure through direct actions.

The paper argues for a conceptual distinction between radical (climate) activism and other forms of protest, highlighting its unique characteristics and significance. It exceeds the standard, liberal understanding of civil disobedience (Rawls 1999) by explicitly rejecting fidelity to the law through its longing for systemic transformations that go beyond addressing singular injustices or malpractices. In conclusion, this analysis holds significant academic, social, and political value, offering meaningful contributions to the discourse on radical climate activism in Europe.

Keywords:

Radical Protest, Climate Justice Movements, Disruption, Socio-Ecological Transformation.