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# Intersecting Planes of Crisis:

## Geometrics of crises and catastrophe in Extinction Rebellion Rhetoric

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## CHAPTER 9:

# INTERSECTING PLANES OF CRISIS: GEOMETRICS OF CRISES AND CATASTROPHE IN EXTINCTION REBELLION RHETORIC

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## Introduction

*'We have run out of excuses and we have run out of time.'*

*'We're looking at mass starvation within 10 years.'*

*'The reality is we're sleepwalking into a catastrophe.'*

*'Change is coming, whether you like it or not.'*

These four quotes, woven into upbeat protest music, are heard at the beginning and end of each episode of the official podcast of the branch of Extinction Rebellion in the United Kingdom (see, for example; XRP, 2019c). In many ways, these quotes encapsulate Extinction Rebellion's (XR herein) outlook; a world on the brink, and a system in denial. XR's *raison d'être* is to argue for radical political change to ameliorate the severity of global climate breakdown. In order for societies and political systems to begin making plans and policies commensurate with the scale of the environmental catastrophe, all of humanity is called upon to wake up to its present reality. For XR, this involves a mass movement of informed people dedicating themselves to the environmentalist cause. As the lyrics of the music that forms the backdrop to the quotes stated above state, the listener must 'stand up'.

In this chapter, we argue that while the climate emergency, as conceptualised by XR UK, is best characterised as a "catastrophe", it results from the intersection of different types of crises: a temporal crisis, a crisis of psychology, a crisis of democracy, and, relatedly, one of representation in the movement, a crisis of the media, and a crisis of political economy. These various crises bisect and crosscut each other in complex ways, and impress their shape upon the movement. Building upon the geometrics analogy at the heart of this edited volume, we conceptualise XR's outlook, as found in

the organisation's official podcast series, in terms of *planes of crisis*. The intersection of two planes of crisis form a *line of intersection*, along which decisions are to be made, perspectives differ, and the movement may be divided by differences of opinion regarding how to respond to it. By way of example, the crisis of temporality (that humanity has only a relatively short period left in which effective actions can be taken) intersects with the crisis of political economy (that our present economic system is unsustainable). Along this line of intersection, some argue that capitalism needs to be abandoned in the short term, and others that we have run out of time for revolution. Through a frame analysis of all current episodes of the XR Podcast, this chapter sets out to examine the geometrics of crises as understood and faced by constituents/activists of the XR movement.

We contend that XR UK's rhetoric, as found within the movement's podcast, displays a fundamental difference between climate change and the other forms of crisis the movement faces. Speaking from an etic perspective, we contend that these may be distinguished as two sides of a crisis/catastrophe dichotomy. A "crisis" can be viewed as an imbalance in the system, a problematic feature or phenomenon which arises at a particular moment, but which will lead to a new equilibrium. It is an unstable moment, a rupture out of which a new synthesis is dialectically produced and to which agency and social movements can work towards a solution. However, catastrophe emerges as a point of no return, whereby agency or the 'return to normality' usually implicit in a crisis is rendered impossible due to the lack of alternatives. This differentiation between crisis and catastrophe is pertinent for an accurate understanding of XR discourse on the climate: without immediate and radical action, they argue, climate change will hit a point of no return. Nevertheless, for XR, the climate catastrophe need not – in fact, ought not - be interpreted as reason for a nihilistic outlook, but rather offers humanity the possibility of renewal. While the moment for planetary restoration or cure has now been precluded, there remains the possibility for climate breakdown to bring a rebirth of global society in a radically transformed new order.

In this chapter, we start by discussing the methodological approach and data used, to then briefly introduce XR's history and activities since 2018. Throughout the next sections, we discuss in detail how the group frames and represents the crises mentioned above. We end the chapter by describing the lines of intersection between the crises, and describing XR UK's various proposals and responses to these crises and intersections.

# Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines the findings from a thematic frame analysis of XR UK's official podcast. Frame analysis uses textual, visual and/or audio data to analyse how social movements view reality (Benford & Snow, 2000; Edwards, 2014). As Benford and Snow (2000, pp. 614) point out, framing "denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process. It entails agency in the sense that what is evolving is the work of social movement organizations or movement activists". Working in this vein, we analyse XR's official podcast in order to reconstruct XR's symbolic material, narratives and discourses. Frame analysis, as a form of studying social construction of reality, involves three main components. Firstly, a diagnostic framing whereby players identify a problem and assign blame for that problem; secondly, a prognostic framing in which movements propose solutions; and lastly, a motivational framing which, "provides a 'call to arms' or rationale for engaging in ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive" (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 617). Through this analysis, we contend that the framing and conceptualization of intersecting crises is central to XR UK discourses and worldview. Players within XR employ "rhetorical strategies and linguistic devices" (Hay, 1996, pp. 253) to narrate their understanding of various intersecting crises which restrain appropriate action from being taken in light of the climate catastrophe. This narrative functions as an explanatory story that legitimises and directs XR's beliefs and protest activities (Tilly & Goodin, 2006).

XR UK's Podcast began in March 2019 and was made available on a variety of online platforms, including Spotify, Podomatic, and the movement's own website. At the time of writing (October 2020), the XR Podcast contained 32 episodes in total, 16 full-length episodes and 16 "specials". Episodes vary from 9 to 84 minutes in length, averaging 46 minutes for full episodes and 22 minutes for specials. The podcast is organised and conducted by leading members of the group in the UK: as an official means of communication from the movement, the XR Podcast covers an impressive range of subjects related to the movement, offering a window into XR's narratives, perspectives, and discourse. Throughout the podcast series, discussions on institutions and protest tends to be situated in UK (e.g., Meeting Michael Gove Special, Reclaiming the Streets); however, when discussing proposals there is an articulation between national and the global scale. We should be aware that, as with every movement, their discourse is not monolithic but rather plural, encompassing a broad range of perspectives. Nevertheless, the specific range of voices heard on the podcast, from founders to newcomers, and from experts and affinity groups to critics and novices, were included as a result of decision-making on the part of the XR members central enough to the movement so as to be in charge of producing the

podcast. Moreover, we must note that although the XR Podcast features many different voices and opinions about the nature of the catastrophe, the potential solutions, and the barriers to these solutions being actualised, the movement does not have a specific set of conclusions or policies for the way forward.

As such, the repertoire of discourses emerging from the podcast can be considered to be broadly representative of XR UK as a movement. In order to aid our reconstitution of the XR UK's narrative and discourses on crisis, we consider the podcast in the context of a plethora of material produced and made available online by the movement. Having listened through and thematically coded the data into a range of "crises" and their points of intersection, we constructed an overarching narrative. From this list, we have included in this chapter, we considered particularly prominent in XR UK's discourse a series of interrelated crisis, namely: a temporal crisis, a psychological crisis, a crisis of the media, a political crisis, a crisis of representation in the movement, and a crisis of political economy. It is worth noting that this chapter focuses specifically on the UK's branch of XR, rather than the transnational movement as a whole. Although it is likely that the rhetoric found in XR UK's podcast are found among other XR groups around the world, and the podcast itself may be followed by activists associated with the movement elsewhere, we are not able to extrapolate from the data analysed to other contexts. Hence, the findings presented in this chapter are limited to the UK.

Before moving into our discussion of findings, in the following section we provide a brief history and contextualisation of XR.

## A Rebellion in the Making

The UK has a long-standing tradition of environmental activism (Flesher Fominaya, 2013; Rootes, 2005, 2009). Although an environmental consciousness began to develop in the post-War period (Wilson, 2014), environmentalist activism took off in the 1970s. With the publication of the Limits to Growth report<sup>1</sup> in 1972, and a global explosion in awareness of the impacts of human action upon the natural world, environmental action in Britain increased. In this context, groups such as Friends of the Earth (1971), Greenpeace (1971) and People (1973) kicked off what eco-politics would be in the country. The following decades were marked by the creation of the Green Party and a new wave of environmental activism that commits to non-violent direct action and civil disobedience (such as Earth First; Anti-Roads Movement). For instance, in the anti-road protests of the 1990s we can already see some of the

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<sup>1</sup> A report commissioned by the Club of Rome, in which the trajectory of exponential growth in economic production and consumption, as well as of the global population, was contrasted with the finite resources of the earth.

features present in XR. In their opposition to the building of new roads, these movement actors occupied trees and camped by the road (Flesher Fominaya, 2013), tactics which would be widely adopted by XR years later. As such, even if no research or data exists which links the networks, tactics or discourses, we suggest that it is possible to detect continuities between prior environmentalist movements in Britain and the tactics employed by XR.

Moreover, XR appear to incorporate not only the long tradition regarding tactical and discursive repertoires of previously existing environmental actors and actions movements in the UK, but also of other grassroots movements from the preceding decades such as the Global Justice Movements, Occupy, and the anti-austerity movements. This means that, adding to their environmental cause, their organisational model is based on a loose horizontal network of decentralised grassroots groups, being composed of local branches that adhere to the principles stated by XR's founders, and as such can use the name and tag of the movement (XR, n.d.).

In addition to giving continuity to the long-established history of environmental activism in the UK, XR emerged in one of the most contentious decades since the 1960-70s. In the 10 years from the 2008 financial crash to the creation of XR in 2018, various movements rose up to contest the inequalities resulting from the financial crisis, the bailing out of the banks, and austerity. In the context of rising protest and activism over this period, environmentalist protesters constituted the second largest group after "workers and professionals" to take action between 2010 and 2019 (Bailey, 2020). Despite the prominence of environmentalist protest reported by Bailey (2020) in this decade, it is only in 2018 that his type of protest starts to be visible, coinciding with the creation of XR. In the following year, the same data reports that environmentalists organised 45% of the protests in the UK. It should also be mentioned that XR is part of a broader dynamic of mobilisations around climate and the environment. Besides the mainstream environmental movement that emerged in the 1970s and led to the formation and institutionalisation of Green Parties in Western Europe, in the last decade we have seen a new wave of mobilisations around climate. In particular, from 2018 onwards we have seen rising mobilisation from Fridays for Future and School Strikes led by Greta Thunberg. As a result of their action, climate activism became increasingly more visible in the UK public sphere.

Since its formation in 2018, XR has expanded their presence across the UK and the world. At its height, it had more than 1,200 local chapters, with the movement represented on all 7 continents (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022; XR, 2020b). XR are found in greatest numbers in Western Europe and the Anglosphere: one-third of its Chapters are located in the UK, another third is in the rest of Europe (especially France and Germany), and about 23% of Chapters are based in Canada, United States, Australia and New Zealand. Chapters based in Latin America, Africa and Asia together

make up around 15% of XR Chapters globally. Nevertheless, more than half of all countries with at least one XR chapter are found in the Global South (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022).

In regards to those who have participated in XR in the UK, data from two 2019 protest surveys in London (Saunders, Haynes and Doherty, 2020) help us visualise the profiles of those involved in the movement. The participants in the London protest were equally distributed across all age groups, notably female in representation, and highly educated (with 85% educated to undergraduate level and one-third held a postgraduate degree). Politically, they mix institutional politics and protest action, with a part of the sample being involved with the Green or Labour Party. Nevertheless, they are sceptical about the capacity for government and political parties to solve the environmental crisis. As such, they overwhelmingly indicate that they participate to raise awareness on the environmental causes, pressure politicians to deliver solutions, but also out of a sense of civic duty and moral responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

Their actions are based on the principle of “civil disobedience” (Berglund, Oscar, & Schmidt, 2020). XR UK’s protests utilise disruptive actions that attract media attention in order to raise awareness of the ongoing climate catastrophe:

*At the core of Extinction Rebellion’s philosophy is nonviolent civil disobedience. We promote civil disobedience and rebellion because we think it is necessary – we are asking people to find their courage and to collectively do what is necessary to bring about change. (XR, 2020a)*

Since their formation in 2018, they have developed a set of actions based on these principles. In their first campaign in Autumn of that year, XR took an impressive array of coordinated actions. From late October to mid-November, the movement made their initial “Declaration of Rebellion” in front of the British parliament. From there the following two weeks were marked by roads and bridges blockades and actions whereby participants glued themselves to official buildings that resulted in more than 60 people being arrested. Two major protest events followed in 2019, with internationally coordinated “rebellions” in April and October of that year taking place in more than 30 countries globally. Although major protest events were largely halted through 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a variety of smaller-scale protests continued to take place across the world over this period (Gardner, Carvalho and Valenstain, 2022).

Overall, XR has been one of the most emblematic social movements of recent decades. Their intent of global reach has to do not only with the nature of the environmental and climate catastrophe, but also with the nature of social movements

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<sup>2</sup> In the data collected by Saunders, Haynes and Doherty there is no indication about race or ethnicity, but the researchers point out to a majority of white people.

in the age of dissent (Bailey, 2020). XR emerges out of a systemic crisis that at first glance seems to be solely environmental, but that in their discourse, as discussed below, involves the link between different lines and planes. In this sense, their critique is one that starts with the environment but goes beyond it by engaging and combining time, psychology and emotions, democracy and representation, media, and political economy. If anything, theirs is an overarching critique and narrative of interwoven crises and how these combine to lead us to the current and ongoing climate catastrophe.

## Crisis Geometrics in the XR Podcast

In this section, we relay the key findings from our analysis of XR's podcast. We begin by briefly summarising the six planes of crisis observed in our analysis. These crises are: a temporal crisis, a psychological crisis, a crisis of the media, a political crisis, a crisis of representation in the movement, and a crisis of political economy. Once these planes of crisis have been introduced, we then discuss various lines of intersection that emerge where these crises converge, as found in XR's podcast.

## Planes of Crisis

### Temporal Crisis

At the core of XR's worldview, there is a temporal crisis: an understanding that we are fast running out of time to take meaningful action to curb the worst excesses of the climate catastrophe. Throughout the podcasts, the 2018 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations is repeatedly referenced to support statements about the severity and immediacy of the climate catastrophe. One of the conclusions of this report was that even if countries achieve the goals pledged under the Paris climate agreement, global warming would surpass 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. It also concluded that mitigation of this eventuality would be 'very challenging' after 2030 and, as a result, there was an imperative 'to achieve net zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in less than 15 years' (IPCC, 2018). In other words, the window of time within which the warming of the planet could be kept below egregiously calamitous levels was narrow.

*That choice is open to us only for 10 years. ... If we do not make the right choices and reduce emissions by one-half by 2030, after that it's going to be too late. So there is an alarm clock ticking here. It is 10 years to half*



*emissions ... and then we can still have the opportunity of building a better world. After that it's too late. (XRP, 2020g)*

*We are running out of time. It's very clear: the science is done. ... If you look at the science, that means [that] in order to be below 1.5 degrees we should be cutting our carbon emission by 18 percent ... per year. We're not going to meet this target starting now, but we've got the chance to go to 2 degrees. (XRP, 2020i)*

Drawing on scientific reports, expert opinion, and the 2018 IPCC report in particular, the XR narrative of social and political change presents the 2020s as the key window for change (XRP, 2019c, 2020b). In the podcast, this scientifically justified time restraint is used to encourage XR members to take action and call for wider participation in the movement. Indeed, it is described as being one of the central rationales behind the creation of XR as an organisation.

Generally speaking, the maintenance of momentum is an important challenge for any social movement (Doherty, Plows, & Wall, 2007; Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016; Portos & Carvalho, 2022), and the immediacy of the issue at hand may aid in sustaining activist engagement over a longer period of time. To some extent, the temporal crisis represents a motivational framing by XR, even describing the sense of urgency as useful for breaking down barriers some members of the public may have about getting involved in direct action (XRP, 2019c). However, at the same time, the podcast also foreground concern over what we might call “the psychological crisis”: a range of outlooks, behaviours and emotions that are broadly unhelpful for XR and the environmentalist movement generally. Rather than simply representing a means of encouraging involvement in the movement, the temporal crisis was also presented as a central causal factor for a host of psychological problems for XR to deal with, from denialism and prevarication to panic and activist burn out.

## Psychological Crisis

The sheer magnitude of climate breakdown, the tsunamic and calamitous predictions reported by the scientific community, and senses of individual powerlessness to make changes commensurate with the scale of the problem are perceived by XR as forces which combine to produce a crisis of psychology. The podcasts repeatedly referenced psychological and emotional issues that caused problems for combatting the climate catastrophe in society at large, in institutions of civil society, and in the movement itself. In one sense, the enormity of the climate catastrophe, alongside an unhelpful form of emotional engagement with it as an existential threat, were understood to produce ambivalence, avoidance and inaction among members of the public, political elites, the media, and others in positions of power.

Both emotional disengagement and cognitive dissonance and, at the other end of the spectrum, debilitating levels of anxiety and fear were cited as challenges for XR to overcome (XRP, 2020a). On the former, a lack of emotional engagement was frequently connected to a shallow or inadequate comprehension of the climate catastrophes seriousness. By way of example, one podcast follows a meeting between a range of XR representatives and the Conservative MP Michael Gove (XRP, 2019f, 2019j) . In the wake of this meeting, many of the activists who were present in the room expressed disappointment with his lack of emotional engagement with the issue:

*I find the rhetoric quite challenging ... because everything is so considered and unemotional. ... I just can't help but feel that there's a lack of overall urgency which would be supported by an emotional experience. (XRP, 2019j)*

*We're a little disappointed that they didn't respond more to the kind of emotional seriousness we were trying to bring to the room. (XRP, 2019j)*

Emotional passivity was cited as reason to doubt Gove and the Conservative government's seriousness about dealing with the climate catastrophe; that XR had succeeded in changing 'the debate', but was 'yet to change the political class' (XRP, 2019j). Or, as Joanna Macy put it in a later episode in relation to the population at large, 'we must break through psychic numbing in order for us to protect life' (XRP, 2019g).

At the other end of the spectrum of problematic psychological responses, an awareness of the scale of impending climate breakdown alongside feelings of powerlessness to make meaningful change in the world was perceived to produce a range of debilitating psychological obstacles to engaging in climate activism. As one individual at an XR introductory meeting stated:

*Climate change ... is such a big problem that people - there's so much anxiety around it, and they respond in a very human way which is to close their eyes, and cover their ears [and say] 'I don't want to deal with this, this is scary, there's too much'. (XRP, 2019c).*

At many points through the podcasts, discussion was dedicated to developing a "productive" and "healthy" outlook in the shadow of oblivion (XRP, 2019g). The weightiness of the existential fear accompanying the climate catastrophe was described as potentially resulting in various forms of denial, inertia and immobilisation both within XR and the broader public. Interestingly, the temporal crisis was referenced as both a cause of these psychological issues and as a means through which individuals may snap out of them; that a recognition that time was limited could help to instigate action in place of despondency.

A further psychological issue expressed in XR's podcast was the potential for activists – aware as they are that humanity is cresting a wave of global cataclysm – to become frenetic and overwrought.

*There's a real tendency to give all you can at events like these, and it can lead to burnout. And it's something which Extinction Rebellion have been really keen to bring into the heart of their message, that we can't burn out, this is not going to be over in a week, this is a lifelong pursuit. (XRP, 2019g)*

Alongside a concern for the psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing of XR's activists, some podcast participants expressed anxiety that this would give rise to disengagement from environmental activism in the medium term (XRP, 2019g). An absence of good processes for dealing with psychological wellbeing, both for individuals and organisationally, was understood to be a cause of much individual enervation and interpersonal conflict within the movement. In order to address this aspect of the psychological crisis, XR introduced "regenerative culture" (frequently referred to simply as "regen") as a core feature of XR's institutional structures. "Regen" incorporates a variety of strategies for maintaining psychological and emotional wellbeing and resilience through self-care, people care and planet care (Westwell & Bunting, 2020). This 'can mean a lot of things, from taking a holiday or break to recuperation, healing and growth ... it can also be about dealing with your own darker feelings about what is happening in the world' (XRP, 2019g), and "regen" has been incorporated into the structure of both XR meetings and protest actions. Such self-care strategies have been utilised by other social movements as a means of retaining and politically socialising members (Santos, 2020).

## Crisis of the Media

For XR, the movement faces a crisis of the media inasmuch as the press – and the UK press in particular – has thus far failed to properly inform and alert the public about the nature and scale of the coming catastrophe. Alongside a general evasion of the issue and lack of scientifically-informed analysis of its impending impacts, two issues were cited as particularly egregious: (1) the BBC's policy of including a climate change denier at all discussions about climate change, and (2) the failure to accurately report – or even report at all – on the 2018 IPCC report (XRP, 2019c, 2019a). 'They're touching on it vaguely, but it's not good enough: not on the scale of catastrophe that we're facing' (XRP, 2019c).

While the continued pedalling of denialism among some sectors of the UK press, and disappointing deficiencies in the reportage of other media outlets assumed to be more judicious, a primary focus of XR's critique in the podcast was the BBC. As the UK's national broadcasting service, there was an expectation that the BBC should be held

to a higher standard for informing the public of dangers to their lives and livelihoods. Activists featured on XR's podcast cited the BBC's charter, in which the corporation is charged with informing the public of all news pertinent to their lives and livelihoods:

*They have to reveal to the people essential news, both nationally and globally, and allow the public - their audiences - to engage with that news. But when it comes to climate change, climate breakdown, they have dreadfully failed the public. (XRP, 2019a)*

On this point, the BBC's reporting on the climate catastrophe was unfavourably compared with its role in the Second World War, when it 'served in the national interest, ... raised the alarm, giving public messages about the scale of the threat and how we react to that as a nation to protect ourselves' (XRP, 2019a).

On one level, XR's response to the crisis of the media is rather simple: journalists and news outlets are called upon to 'tell the truth'. However, the podcasts also feature more complex, structural explanations for the media's systemic failure to report the climate catastrophe (XRP, 2019a, 2020f, 2020c). As we discuss further below, the crisis of the media is conceptualised as intersecting with, and in mutually reinforcing relationships with political and economic spheres and their related crises (see figure XX). For now, however, we turn to discuss the crisis of the political sphere.

## Political Crisis

Broadly speaking, the XR Podcast suggests that climate breakdown can only be ameliorated through a large-scale, sweeping, and radical restructuring of society's political, economic, and moral-ethical systems: essentially, a new social order is needed that embodies ecological values at its base<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, political change is XR's central aim, rather than individual responsibility or cultural change, the political system, and hence it is the political system (and the UK political system in particular) that is the primary object of claim-making within the podcasts. Views found within the podcast on the potential for the political system to achieve meaningful change range from cautious optimism to the notion that it is structurally incapable of doing so, with most participants tending toward the latter. Of course, governments have served as the object of social movement claim-making throughout the history of contentious politics. However, XR view their aim as operating on a more fundamental and vital level: as not simply trying to counter a perceived injustice or to make society better in some way, but to save all life on earth. Hence, the potential for its political

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<sup>3</sup> To borrow from both John Dunn's (1972) and Robert Dix's (1984) definitions of revolution.

aims not to be realised is understood not to be a source of possible disappointment, but a crisis.

Through the podcasts, a variety of reasons for why appropriate political action is unlikely to occur are provided. At the fore of these is the suggestion that it is difficult for any party in government to foster public support for the implementation of all policy changes that are necessary to ameliorate the climate catastrophe, such as restrictions on air travel, ending wasteful production and consumption practices, or transforming the nature of private ownership<sup>4</sup>. Hence, it is broadly in politicians' interests to either opt for popular and/or gradualist policy changes or ignore the issue altogether (XRP, 2019f, 2019j, 2019e, 2020e). Furthermore, political elites are viewed as being beholden to numerous big-business interests, many of which are staunchly opposed to changes that would limit their profits or even end their industry altogether (such as oil and gas or the airline industry). These industries have considerable clout when it comes to governmental action, and are often major party donors.

The XR podcast also features several critiques of representative democracy in general, and in particular the Westminster model, in relation to its (in)capacity to lead to appropriate action on the environmental catastrophe. Above all, these forms of democracy are perceived as too elite-centric, detached from the people, and deficient in public consultation on specific policies. George Monbiot, in Episode 4, effectively articulated XR's criticism of this model of democracy: 'we elect every 5 years a group of politicians ... the party winning generally gets no more than 30% of potential voters ... on a manifesto that typically contains about 300 policies' (XRP, 2019f). In place of informed consent and consensus-based decision-making, the Westminster system is grounded on the 'thoroughly undemocratic' system of 'presumed consent' (XRP, 2019f). With the ruling party 'chosen by 3 in 10 people', and individual policies potentially having much less support than this, representative democracy is viewed as being an inadequate instrument for achieving the necessary policy changes to combat climate change (XRP, 2019f). Hence, although XR has engaged in various contentious activities during elections (XRP, 2019b), arguments for more direct forms of democracy – and specifically calls for a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice – are foregrounded.

The creation of a citizens' assembly is one of XR's "three demands"<sup>5</sup> (XR, 2018; XRP, 2019d, 2019c), and is framed in the podcasts as the most effective means of overcoming the political crisis. According to the podcasts, where parliament is combative and unrepresentative, direct democracy would be deliberative and

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<sup>4</sup> Crucially, XR is very careful to state throughout the podcasts that they do not argue in favour of any specific policies on climate change. Rather, their aim is for the government to set up a citizens' assembly, who will decide what policies should be implemented.

<sup>5</sup> Alongside the call for the government and media to 'tell the truth' about climate change and to 'reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025' (XR, 2018).

representative; where representative democracy runs on 'presumed consent' and manifesto pledges, a citizens' assembly would involve direct, collaborative decision-making on how to address the climate emergency; and where politicians producing ecological legislation risk public backlash, a citizens' assembly would absolve them of responsibility (XRP, 2019e, 2020e). However, the citizens' assembly was also considered to aid in dealing with a further crisis: the crisis of representation in the movement. Through the use of stratified sortition, wherein those chosen to be included in the citizens' assembly would 'reflect society as a whole' in terms of 'gender, economic background, geographical location, age, and so on' (XRP, 2020e), those involved in decision-making would not be limited to either the elite political class nor the predominantly white and middle-class personnel of the environmentalist movement.

## Crisis of Representation

XR, like many environmental movements before it, has received much criticism for being overwhelmingly white and middle-class (Akec, 2019; Gale, 1983; Taylor, 1997). This is not just a demographic issue of who organises and attends protests, but also an ideological one linked to the discourses, outlooks, and culture of the movement. In the podcasts, these issues were considered at various points as a set of problems that environmentalist movements in general, and XR specifically, needs to overcome. This crisis was more latent than asserted, with many discussions assuming exclusion on the basis of class, race and geography to pose a range of problems when it comes to combatting climate change.

In terms of XR's outlook, the podcast dedicates some time to considering the links between climate breakdown and global inequalities, colonialism, and structural racism (XRP, 2019h, 2020g, 2020j). There was a recognition that voices outside of the white middle-class of the global north have largely been excluded from the conversation, and that doing so poses a range of serious issues for dealing with climate breakdown. Colonialism and neo-colonialism were described as root causes of climate change both historically and presently.

*Over \$2 trillion in wealth is transferred from the global south to the global north every single year. And that's a net term, so that is \$2 trillion more than any aid or any investment that goes the other way. ... And most of that money comes from the extractive industry, and these are the same industries that cause half of all global emissions and 80% of all biodiversity loss. (XRP, 2020g)*

Concomitantly, global financial markets were conceptualised as being systemically exploitative of the global south, and these arrangements hold considerable

responsibility for the perpetuation of damaging carbon emissions, ecological breakdown, and climate-related inequalities and injustices. There was also an acknowledgement of the dangers of 'green colonialism', wherein environmentalist policy was implemented at the expense of the global south and indigenous communities. When it comes to representation within XR more specifically, the podcasts feature a range of discussions around how XR can be a more inclusive movement, from highlighting issues relating to the right of people with disabilities to take part in protest actions to commenting on differentiated ethnic and racialised experiences when it comes to engaging with the police. For all of these issues, a failure to take them into consideration up to now was understood to have arisen out of a lack of representation outside of white, middle-class and Western-centric environmentalist movements. Given the general perception in the podcasts that the climate catastrophe cannot be properly addressed without taking these issues into consideration (XRP, 2020g), the lack of diversity in the movement represents a crisis for XR.

Alongside stratified sortition in the creation of a citizens' assembly, XR appears to be addressing this crisis by (1) attempting to draw attention to diverse experiences and viewpoints through the podcasts and (2) creating and making connections with groups such as Global Justice Rebellion, XR Working Class, and XR Disabled Rebels. Although the lack of in XR's public demonstrations and contentious performances was repeatedly described as an area of concern, there was at least one argument offered in defence of this. A Muslim woman taking part in XR protest activities contended that while the demonstration was 'not very culturally diverse', this was potentially defensible and even appropriate:

*I see this movement as being mostly white, for the reason that white, rich men got us into this trouble. ... I believe that it is our responsibility as Europeans, and as people from wealthy countries, and white people need to take the burden of this ... It is the white ... subcultures ... that are taking a stand, and why should people that have been oppressed in other contexts have to do this? ... it's a European thing, from the Industrial Revolution onwards, it's one of the many genocides that they have carried out. And we are here because the poorest people, the most oppressed people in the world suffer the consequences of climate change. (XRP, 2019i)*

In other words, white, wealthy, Western men are most culpable for climate change, and so should be overrepresented among those taking responsibility for its reversal. Overall, however, the XR Podcast addresses the crisis of representation primarily by foregrounding the need for including multiple *perspectives* into substantive deliberations on how to combat climate breakdown in a globally just way, and not simply as a matter of how to make their public protest activities more diverse.





## Crisis of Political Economy

For XR, the world faces a crisis of political economy: that our present practices of production and consumption are destroying the planet. Irrespective of whether individual presenters or participants perceived the worst excesses of climate breakdown to be preventable under capitalism or not, the belief that our current economic system is fundamentally unsustainable was ubiquitous throughout the podcasts. Economists, think tanks, political elites, and various industries at large are considered to be 'ignoring the problem' at best, while proponents of incrementalism and eco-capitalism tend to be viewed as failing to comprehend the climate catastrophe's deep-rooted economic causes (XRP, 2020d, 2020f). Although the podcast featured some guests who expressed optimism about the potential for reform, regulation, and businesses and technology companies to find solutions, most participants perceived more radical transformations to be necessary.

Crucially, throughout the XR Podcast, it is repeatedly stated that (a) the movement does not argue for a particular solution beyond its three demands, and (b) XR is not a left-wing or socialist movement, but one that contains activists from across the political spectrum<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, our investigations revealed that when it comes to discussions on root structural causes of climate breakdown, capitalism was consistently at the fore. Although a range of alternative models were provided (such as Kate Raworth's theory of "doughnut economics"; see XRP, 2020d), it was repeatedly stated that XR does not argue for one particular solution. Rather, the podcasts aimed to clearly articulate the nature and importance of the crisis of political economy in relation to climate change. In short, they detailed how 'the living systems that make up life on this planet are disintegrating, coming apart, unravelling under the impact of this exploitative, extractive political economy' (XRP, 2019g).

## Lines of Intersection

Now that we have outlined the six planes of crisis observed through our analysis of the XR Podcast, in what follows we consider the various lines of intersection that emerge out of the meeting of these crises. The lines of intersection we discuss here have been also summarised in Figure 1.

The crises of media, politics, and political economy intersected with the temporal crisis to produce roughly similar questions. Essentially, this can be summarised as follows: are the fundamental transformations needed to these systems achievable in

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<sup>6</sup> However, as Saunders and Hayes (2020) found from their survey of participants in two major XR protest events, 59.1% were supporters of the Green Party, 15.5% for Labour Party, 3.9% Liberal Democrats, and only 1.1% had voted Conservative in the previous general election.

the time available? Addressing, first, this question in relation to the media, there is a general understanding that setting up new alternative news outlets is not a viable option (beyond the production of the XR Podcast itself). Rather, XR aims to persuade the media to “tell the truth” through direct action, targeting media companies through contentious performances. To be sure, concern is raised over whether the media will be corrigible within the time-frame; however, there is relatively little discussion around this issue beyond a general understanding that XR must aim to do so.

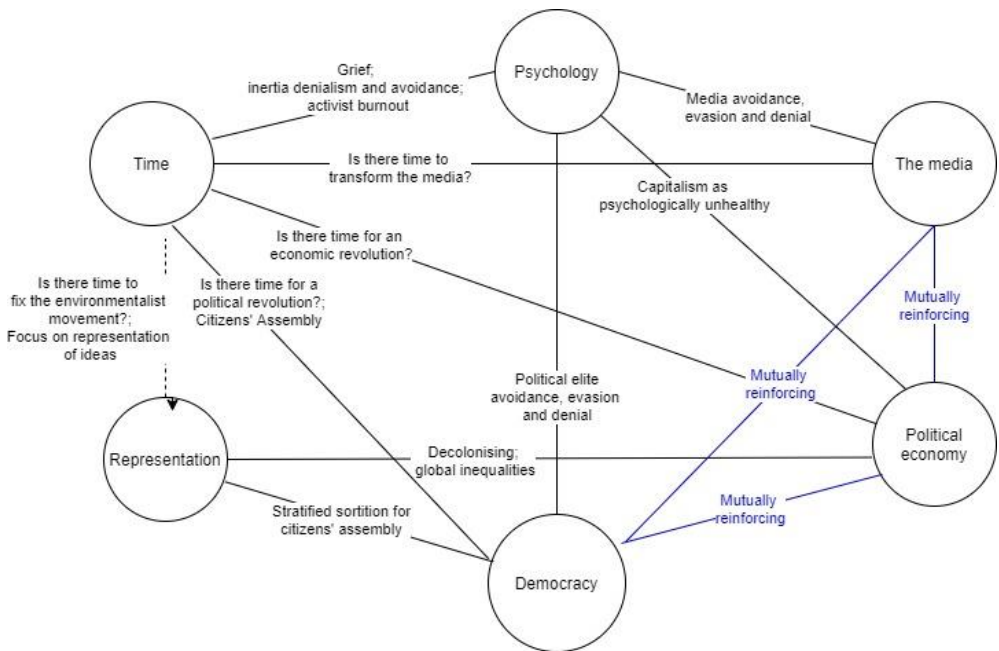


Figure 1: Planes of crisis, lines of intersection

Second, while many podcast participants expressed a view that radical political change is needed both in the UK and globally, there was a general understanding that political revolution was unlikely in the time frame. For this reason, XR offers a more achievable solution: the creation of a citizens' assembly. However, concerns are nonetheless raised in the podcast over whether this will be achieved in time, or even at all. This issue also connects with the crisis of the media, with the latter cited as being a barrier to the creation of a peoples' assembly, with British journalism described as having a tendency either to assume direct democracy to be impracticable or to underreport its role in effective decision-making processes in recent years (XRP, 2019f, 2019a, 2020g).

As mentioned above, citizens' assemblies are perceived as a solution not only to the political crisis, but also as an instrument that can help to overcome the crisis of representation through the use of stratified sortition. Where the temporal crisis meets the crisis of representation, the issue of whether environmental movements can be transformed to become more diverse within the time frame is a pertinent one. The citizens' assembly is hence conceptualised as an effective solution to the intersecting crises of time, politics and representation.

Third, how to respond to the intersection between the temporal crisis and the crisis of political economy animates much debate within XR. For many podcast participants, the climate emergency necessitates an immediate overthrow of the current economic system in order to replace it with some form of environmentally responsible alternative. According to those holding this perspective, as capitalism requires constant economic growth, and constant growth is incompatible with ecological health or even survival of humanity, the climate catastrophe cannot be averted without ending capitalism. 'It's very hard to see how you can have an environmentally benign capitalism. We know you can't have green growth. ... We are faced with a very clear choice: do we defend capitalism against life, or do we defend life against capitalism?' (XRP, 2019f). As a result, urgent wholesale transformation to the economic system is viewed as an imperative. For others, however, the limited timescale precludes the possibility of revolution, and in its place, more "realistic" solutions are to be sought (XRP, 2019f, 2020h): 'If we destroy the financial system, the time it will take to build structures to do that is too long, and we don't have that long' (XRP, 2020h).

The crisis of political economy also connected with XR's deliberations on the crisis of representation, with the podcasts contending that perspectives from the global south needed to be heard in discussions on the transformation of the global economy. Many podcast participants contended that a truly environmentally responsible global economy and ecologically just society would need to be anti-colonial in perspective (XRP, 2020g). It was contended that 'colonialism along with capitalism causes climate change' both historically and in the present. The West industrialised on the back of colonialism, imperialism and slavery, 'fossil fuel companies ... got [their] money from subjugating the global south as much as they got it from oil and gas', and global capitalism continues to destroy the planet through neo-colonial processes (XRP, 2020g). Hence, decolonising and decarbonising are viewed as intimately intertwined processes (XRP, 2020g). The effects of climate breakdown upon communities was understood to be racialised, both through its greater effects closer to the equator, and within the global north ('in London especially, Black people will be more likely to be affected by air pollution than their white counterparts').

As illustrated in figure 1, in the XR Podcast, the crises of the media, politics, and political economy were frequently presented to be mutually reinforcing in their

preservation of the status quo, buttressed ideologically by think tanks and industry pressure groups (XRP, 2019a, 2020d, 2020j, 2020h). A population that has not been told the truth by its media is not in a position to demand radical political and economic restructuring, to vote for it in elections, or to accept its implementation by a particular party in government. Equally, media reportage is more able to side-line the issue in a political landscape in which no main political party is pursuing a sufficiently radical ecological agenda (XRP, 2019b, 2019a). Meanwhile, a mutually supportive relationship was depicted in the numerous ties between corporate interests, financial markets, and global capitalism on one hand, and both the media and government on the other. In many ways, XR's response to this mutually reinforcing system is to attempt to challenge the ideologies underpinning it, calling for a fundamental 'reorientation of the whole ethical compass' that challenges 'everything that mainstream politics, mainstream economics conceives as good' (XRP, 2019f).

The podcasts also feature points at which the crisis of political economy intersects with the crisis of psychology. Capitalist individualisation, 'neoliberalism' and the 'corporate economy' are cited as being psychologically unhealthy for the population at large. The current economic system is described as producing emotional numbness toward climate breakdown through detachment from senses of community, from nature, and from the earth (XRP, 2020d). It is also perceived as restraining the capacity for collective thinking in response to the climate catastrophe and fostering senses of despondency regarding the capacity for collective action to make meaningful change against the hegemony of capitalist liberal democracy (XRP, 2019g, 2020d). Individual people 'have been so benumbed and enfeebled by the industrial process and corporate power' that they believe societal transformation to be already foreclosed (XRP, 2019g).

Within the podcasts, there is something of a pathologisation of the media and political spheres, with various participants suggesting psychological reasons for the lack of appropriate response to the climate catastrophe by journalists and/or political elites. The lines of intersection between the psychological crisis and the crises of the media and politics are understood to produce avoidance, evasion and denialism in these arenas. As one activist put it, a reason that journalists have failed to report accurately on climate change is because 'threats are always uncomfortable, and if we are able to ignore them we will do as long as possible; it's a psychological coping mechanism that's very natural' (XRP, 2019a). Comparatively, the media was presented in the main as having some knowledge of the climate catastrophe but being in predominantly denial, whereas politicians were considered to largely be evading and avoiding the issue (XRP, 2019b).

The intersection of the crisis of psychology and the crisis of representation poses a specific problem for XR. In order to deal with the former crisis, the organisation established its regenerative culture ("regen") approach. In their ethnographic study of

the internal culture of XR, Westwell and Bunting (2020) found that regenerative culture had the potential to be interpreted as exclusionary to those outside or on the fringes of the movement. Although not mentioned explicitly by Westwell and Bunting themselves, we noted that regen discourses, with its emphasis on mindfulness, wellbeing and self-care, have the potential to be perceived as being white, middle-class culture (Tobin & Powietrzynska, 2015). In this way, "regen", as the cornerstone of XR's solution to the crises of psychology, may in fact exacerbate the crisis of representation within the movement.

In sum, through our analysis, we contend that XR understands itself to be confronted with a host of intersecting crises as it attempts to combat the climate catastrophe. For some planes of crisis and their lines of intersection, XR has specific answers and goals that it advances, such as responding to the political crisis by advocating the use of citizens' assemblies. For other issues – what to do about global capitalism for instance – their diagnosis and prognosis are less clear. Overall, however, the podcasts clearly situate the movement in a matrix of crises through which it must manoeuvre in the hope that it will be able to prevent, or at least attenuate, Armageddon.

## Conclusion: Extinction or Rebellion

Through our analysis of XR UK's official podcast, we conceptualise intersecting crises as a core idea in their framing. In XR UK's discourse, it is through a navigation of these multiple intersecting planes that the movement's actions, outlooks, and visions for possible futures are constructed. As the podcasts assert, the sheer magnitude, seriousness and irreversibility of the climate emergency renders it beyond the bounds of a mere crisis: failure to act in line with the science would result in unfathomable suffering for all life on earth. In this sense, all challenges to the actualisation of necessary transformations are rendered crises. The blockages to achieving successful environmental action and change that XR portrays in its podcast relates to a closed circuit of crises associated with the planetary time restraint, psychological barriers to action, media failure, political inaction, cultural and perspective-based homogeneity in the environmentalist movement, and the unsustainability of our present economic system. The climate catastrophe, as depicted by XR UK, is multidimensional, produced and maintained by multiple imbalances, revolving doors, and vested interests. By theorising this in terms of geometries of crisis, we contend that the environmental catastrophe itself, and the barriers preventing action being taken to mitigate its worst excesses, are products of multiple intersecting crises and contradictions.

For XR UK, the choice individuals in society face is a relatively simple one: extinction or rebellion. Given the obstructions and crises mentioned throughout the chapter, to

solve the climate catastrophe, the only rational option is to rebel. Only through the disruption of existing power structures, it is possible to avoid the coming climate catastrophe. Doing so also opens up the space for the various crises discussed above to be discussed, adjudicated upon, and solutions found which are commensurate with the scale of the problem.

As our data indicates, in response to the inaction - or insufficient action - on the climate catastrophe, XR calls for politicians and the media to tell the truth, for the political sphere to act in line with the science, and for more democracy. As an organisation, it also aims to correct its own internal issues, such as its lack of diversity and improvising decision-making on how best to undertake effective protest activities. In many ways, as stated above, the origins of the movement organisation, repertoires and discourse can be traced, not only to previous environmental movements in the UK but also to broader global movements such as Occupy or Global Justice Movement. Inspired by the horizontalism of many movements of the past decades, one of their main proposals is to move toward greater active citizen participation. In a word, the solution proposed by many of these movements is for more democracy. As with other movements over the previous decade (della Porta 2015), XR develops an overarching and transversal critical discourse directed both at governments and economic players, demanding that citizens are included in decision-making processes and to shift away from oligarchy within political institutions (Gerbaudo, 2017). However, we contend that social movements in general, and activism in response to the climate catastrophe in particular, could render their actions and strategies more effective through a geometrics of crisis perspective.

Overall, despite espousing more limited goals, XR UK's rhetoric reflects a desire for revolutionary transformation of the ideological, economic and political systems of power. This is perceived as a logical counterweight to environmental catastrophe (Weaver & Kysar, 2017). As George Monbiot put it in one episode of XR UK's podcast:

*We are being trained in incapacity, we are being trained in impotence, we are being trained to believe that we can't change the world. And we are here to demonstrate that we can. We are here to overthrow an earth-destroying system and replace it with one in harmony with the earth system: in harmony with the living world, in harmony with the needs of all humanity now and in the future. (XRP, 2020c)*

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