Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Environmental Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fenp20

Whose system, what change? A critical political economy approach to the UK climate movement

Oscar Berglund & David J. Bailey

To cite this article: Oscar Berglund & David J. Bailey (2022): Whose system, what change? A critical political economy approach to the UK climate movement, Environmental Politics, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2022.2156179

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2156179

Published online: 19 Dec 2022.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2156179

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Whose system, what change? A critical political economy approach to the UK climate movement

Oscar Berglund [a] and David J. Bailey [b]

[a]School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; [b]Department of Political Science and International Studies, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

Demands of system change are common in the climate movement but there is little agreement on what this entails or how it might be achieved. This has contributed to discord and division between seemingly allied positions, each seeking to address the climate crisis through alternative strategies for change. We argue that these strategic differences also reflect, and for that reason can be better understood in terms of, alternative stances towards capitalism. Adopting a critical political economy approach, we assess a number of these debates and divisions as they have played out in the UK environmentalist movement. We highlight both the connections between alternative strategic positions within these debates and the broader stances towards capitalism that underpin them, and offer a critical evaluation of their likely limitations. In doing so, we identify potential points of overlap and cooperation between those holding seemingly contrasting positions in ongoing debates within climate politics.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 14 December 2021; Accepted 4 December 2022

KEYWORDS Climate activism; critical political economy; green consumerism; Green New Deal; prefiguration

The escalating climate crisis has seen the dramatic growth of climate change activism across the Global North since 2018. As the scale and impact of ongoing ecological damage has become more evident, so we see a heightened urgency amongst individuals and groups across these societies, with a corresponding willingness to mobilise, protest and campaign against the climate crisis and in demand of an ecological solution (de Moor *et al.* 2021). This has also led, however, to a growing range of types of campaigns, protest methods, policy proposals, and alternative strategies for ecological change. This has included questions of how to use civil disobedience (Sovacool and Dunlap 2022), whether democratic reform is a necessary precursor to effective climate action (Smith 2021) and what kind of political economic reforms activists should be pushing for (Aronoff *et al.* 2019, Schmelzer *et al.* 2022) This proliferation of alternative responses has, at times, created tensions and

CONTACT Oscar Berglund oscar.berglund@bristol.ac.uk

divisions between those adopting different positions across the spectrum of climate change activism. These tensions have tended to be considered part of a broader debate over questions of strategy, tactics, and campaign efficacy (Hestres and Hopke 2020), as well as more fundamental questions regarding the plausibility and desirability of particular visions for alternative and sustainable societies and systems of production (Douglas 2020). We argue that these eco-debates, over strategies and alternatives, can (and should) be understood through a critical political economy lens, meaning that we explore the agency of progressive social forces in relation to the political and economic structures that these social forces seek to change. In doing so, we conceptualise alternative actors, ideas, strategies and proposals for change, in terms of their location within, and relationship to, contemporary capitalism. In doing so, we claim, we acquire an appreciation of both the reasons for division and debate within the environmentalist movement, the varying levels of influence and impact upon the climate crisis of those different positions, and the potential for both antagonism and cooperation between climate change activists adopting seemingly divergent approaches.

Debates, divisions, and British environmentalism

In advancing a critical political economy account of the debates and divisions across the climate movement we focus on the UK. While the debates we highlight are not nationally-specific, nevertheless the UK offers a context through which to explore the concrete way they have played out, and in ways which we expect to have similarities with other advanced capitalist democracies. As in other countries, the UK saw a spike in climate activism in the immediate pre-pandemic period. This significantly increased the salience of climate change amongst the public, media and policymakers (Berglund and Schmidt 2020, Kirby 2022). It was also the product of a longer history of environmentalism which included both radical and moderate campaigners (Saunders 2012), including direct action movements, such as Earth First and the anti-roads movement in the 1990s (Wall 1999), the Climate Camps of the 2000s (which saw a co-existence of radical and reformist strands (Saunders 2012)), and a successful direct action anti-fracking movement in the 2010s (Brock 2020). Likewise, in 2019 the UK had some of the largest School Strikes (Fridays for Future) outside of Germany, and saw the founding of Extinction Rebellion (XR) in 2018, which has subsequently resulted in the emergence of the post-pandemic off-shoot groups, Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil (for an overview, see Melia 2021). In addition to these protest-focused movements, more party political-oriented initiatives have also marked British green politics, including the sporadic growth of the Green Party of England and Wales, and the adoption by the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of a commitment to a Green New Deal. Finally,

alongside (and, in part, overlapping with) these protest-focused and party-focused forms of climate change campaigning, we have witnessed alternative community initiatives that seek to reduce harm to the climate, including the eco-community garden, Grow Heathrow, the Spirit Horse eco-village in Wales, and the BedZed project in London.

These different environmentalist initiatives reflect a range of alternative perspectives and strategies that respond to the question of how best to address the climate crisis. These have sometimes translated into debates that are hotly contested, but which academic contributions have often failed to fully engage with. As Hestres and Hopke (2020) note, a discussion of theories of change 'is not well developed in the literature on environmental activism' (p. 373); and, indeed, even where discussions do focus on 'theories of social change', these often avoid a more fundamental discussion of the social, economic and power relations that underpin alternative ecological strategies. In contrast, in the current paper we argue that the different approaches, alternatives and strategies that populate the spectrum of climate change activism are not merely strategic options or political preferences, but rather can be understood through a critical political economy lens as alternative positions within, and relationships to, contemporary capitalism. Considered in this way, we seek to show how the divisions and debates that mark climate change activism reflect the uneven socio-economic power relations from which they emerge and which they seek (in different ways) to challenge. Thus, in response to the popular demand – 'system change, not climate change' – we highlight the way that the agents, strategies, and proposals for socio-ecological change each relate to the systemic properties of contemporary capitalism within which they are located. In this sense, it matters *where* in the system calls for change emerge, and by *whom*, and this in turn informs the *types of change* envisaged. In this sense, it matters: whose system, and what change?

Beyond tactics and strategy: a critical political economy approach

Critical political economy is *political economy* in the sense that it seeks to understand and explain processes of production and distribution, and how these shape, and are shaped by, the extra-economic social relations and institutions upon which they depend (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). It is *critical* political economy, moreover, as it presumes that progressive (i.e. emancipatory) socio-economic change is possible, and that this requires purposive agency by social forces with the potential to advance that change, and that critical political economy scholarship can and should contribute to those efforts (e.g. Farrands and Worth 2005, Bailey *et al*. 2017, Powell and Yurchenko 2020). As such, critical political economy seeks to conceptualise capitalism in terms of the configurations of firms, the state, workers and households, as social relations of production, and the institutions, ideas, and

forms of agency that constitute these configurations. This is done in a way that recognises the inter-relationship between these different elements of capitalism, and seeks to explore, evaluate, and advance the opportunities for progressive, more egalitarian, socio-economic change that arise within, and as part of, those configurations (see Bailey *et al.* 2022).

In adopting a critical political economy approach to the field of climate change activism, therefore, we seek to highlight, understand, and explain, the connections between the different agents, ideas, strategies, and visions of change that populate particular positions within the environmentalist movement, as well as their emergence from, and relationship to, particular positions within contemporary capitalism. Put simply, different responses to the climate crisis reflect different positions within, and relations to, capitalism. We posit three broad 'stances' towards capitalism – liberal, social democratic/socialist, and radical. Rather than viewing each of these stances as a set of ideas, tactics, strategies, or programmes for change, insulated from the context within which they emerge, or as belonging to ideologies that exist only at the level of ideas, instead we argue that each stance reflects a particular position within, and relationship to, contemporary capitalist social relations. In turn, we seek to show how each of these three alternative stances overlap with, and inform, many of the debates within the climate movement. In doing so, we highlight the following distinguishing features of each position: (1) the degree to which an onus is placed upon individual and/or collective agency within contemporary capitalist relations; (2) the degree to which capitalism and capitalist private property ownership are prioritised and protected; (3) the role conceived of the state; and (4) typical criticisms levelled at alternative stances towards capitalism (see Table 1 for a summary).

Three stances towards contemporary capitalism: a critical political economy approach

A liberal stance: individual agency and the protection of capitalist property rights

What we term a 'liberal stance' towards capitalism conceptualises the contemporary socio-economy in terms of an interaction between independent property-holding individuals, engaging in the exchange of labour, commodities, or other factors of production (including capital and land), in which the return or reward for that exchange reflects the benefits that the inputs create, all of which ensures a just marginal return for all factors of production. This process of interaction in production, driven by these just exchanges, creates beneficial outcomes for all involved, expanding the total amount of goods, services, and capital in circulation, and thereby producing economic growth. It follows from this that the individual is centred when looking at how society

Table 1. An overview of critical political economy.

Political economy model	Liberal	Social democratic – Socialist	Radical
Individual agency	Significant individual agency as consumer and citizen	Limited individual agency, significant (class-based) collective agency	Limited individual agency, significant collective agency
Action towards the state?	Electoral and representative	State-focused action and mobilisation of subordinate groups	Largely outside or against the state
Challenge to private property?	Minimal	Reforms, ranging between redistribution, nationalisation, planning	Transcending, communing, collective ownership, communities
Limitations	Excludes change that threatens capitalist relations and private property rights	Systemic barriers prevent the implementation of substantial reforms	Limited power resources of groups promoting radical 'alternatives'; difficulties in 'scaling up'

operates, with citizens in society and the polity, and consumers or producers in the economy, and with individual action therefore considered the primary form of agency within contemporary capitalism. As Stahl (2019) puts it, 'the idea of free and completely independent individuals exchanging goods in a market without the presence of coercion or the ability to influence market forces is a utopia, in line with the idea of the completely classless society' (p. 482). Given its positive stance towards capitalism and capitalist property rights it is perhaps unsurprising that a liberal stance is typically attributed to property-holding individuals who benefit from contemporary capitalism (Navarro 2007). For those adopting a liberal stance towards capitalism, the state is conceived as a fundamentally non-economic actor, resting on a conceptual (and real) separation between the 'political' and the 'economic'. The role of the state is therefore limited to that of overseeing and enabling exchange and production. The *liberal* democratic state should therefore see representative decision-making limited to narrow electoral channels, with a restriction of the policies that might be adopted to those which maintain the rights of individual private property holders and that avoid any substantial threat to the autonomous operation of 'the market' (Wood 1995).

We can see the elements of this liberal stance towards capitalism in parts of contemporary climate activism. For instance, the hope placed in Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) by many within the climate movement – a central demand of XR – rests upon a broadly liberal stance towards contemporary capitalism.[1] Citizens' Assemblies are to be formed by opinion-holders engaging as individual citizens within a representative liberal democratic state. Further, in advocating citizens' assemblies as a bulwark against the influence of vested economic interests in contemporary political systems, XR presents a relatively minimalist approach to social change. This approach is largely silent on the

question of existing power relations or private property rights and ownership, and seeks a system of political decision-making that is insulated from economic power relations. Taken together, this speaks to the liberal belief that the separation between the 'political' and the 'economic' is both possible and desirable, and it elevates the role of scientific expertise and (individual) human reason. More generally, XR appeals to a largely depoliticised citizenry, explicitly seeking to remove questions of ideology, class, or capitalism, from their sloganeering.

Similarly, those advocating green consumerism, as a strand of contemporary climate activism, also display a broadly liberal stance towards capitalism, with a focus on limiting each individual's carbon footprint and seeking to influence business and government through exercising individual consumer power, for instance in the flight-shaming movement and veganism (Seyfang 2005, Gunderson 2020). As such, green consumerism is largely without a corresponding attempt to modify or alter the socio-economic relations that constitute contemporary capitalism.

The social democratic and socialist stances: class mobilisation and the state

What we term 'social democratic and socialist stances' towards capitalism ranges from those who seek either a more moderate intervention by the state to address some of the more damaging aspects of capitalism (social democratic) or more extensive intervention by the state to shift power relations in society to the advantage of workers (socialist). Thus, for social democrats and socialists, market-based interactions (as advocated by those favouring a liberal stance towards capitalism) produce sub-optimal outcomes, including economic disequilibrium in the form of recessions and unemployment, unsustainable levels of inequality, unstable patterns of production, the exclusion and disenfranchisement of the property-less (or, more generally, 'labour'), and a corresponding sub-optimal allocation of resources. In seeking to address this range of potential problems, social democrats and socialists tend to propose some form of response by the state: either state intervention, for instance to prevent recessions and mitigate inequalities (in the case of social democrats), or through a more substantial role for the state, including public ownership of firms/industries, to substantially redistribute power towards those disempowered within capitalist society, and/or create the possibility for a transition away from a capitalist society and towards a socialist one (in the case of socialists) (Moschonas 2002, Bailey 2009). Those adopting a social democratic or socialist stance towards capitalism recognise the need for the collective mobilisation and support of disempowered groups – most obviously, the working class – on the basis that this will strengthen their power resources in order to challenge those

empowered within and by the operation of capitalism (Korpi 1983). Unsurprisingly, those adopting a social democratic or socialist stance are also typically those within society who are both subjected to the detrimental consequences of capitalism, and organised within collective bodies such as trade unions and left-leaning political parties.

This social democratic or socialist stance can also be witnessed in some key contributions to climate activism. This is perhaps most evident amongst those advocating for a Green New Deal, a central feature of which highlights the need for state policies to challenge established power within capitalist society, and for this to be done with the support of a mobilised working class represented by trade unions and left-leaning social democratic or socialist parties. As Pettifor (Pettifor 2019, p. 98) puts it, 'the state is the most appropriate institution for financing, mobilising and implementing the huge effort of economic transformation' required to respond to climate change. Similarly, Buller (2020) argues that the Green New Deal requires 'organizing within trade unions, to make the rhetoric of a worker-led just transition a reality', including by 'putting down strong roots in trade unions'.

A radical stance: experimental initiatives in the interstices of capitalism

Finally, what we term a 'radical stance' towards capitalism is a position which seeks to transcend or replace capitalism through the creation of 'alternatives', instantiated in the present but reflecting visions of future ideal social systems. These are typically located outside of the state, through initiatives or experiments that seek to create extra-state and extra-capitalist social relations (Bailey, 2019). Radicals tend to advocate the replacement of capitalist social relations with collective, egalitarian, systems of production and distribution, achieved through activity which takes place outside of (and potentially against) the state (Gibson-Graham 2006). Whereas social democratic or socialist alternatives tend to take the form of state-oriented action, those adopting a radical stance tend to participate in activity located outside of the state, underpinned in part by a suspicion that state-focused activity is likely to be too constrained by the pressures placed upon the state to sustain capitalism and capitalist social relations. These initiatives also often tend to be small-scale, and on the margins of society, as radical experiments in the 'interstices' of capitalist society (Wright 2010, pp. 322–327). Those adopting a radical stance towards capitalism are typically considered to be highly educated and/or (organic) intellectuals with a commitment towards transcending capitalism through collective action (Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra 2019). This is typically through activity that is outside of the kind of mass organisations, such as trade unions, that social democrats and socialists tend to emerge from, and instead with links to some of the newer social movements that exist alongside formal workers' movements in contemporary

capitalism (Yates 2020). This has led to questions by those with a more state-orientated approach regarding the (im)possibility of 'scaling up' local initiatives to the extent that they might create society-wide change (Srnicek and Williams 2016).

A radical stance towards capitalism can clearly be discerned within contemporary climate activism, for instance with the creation of intentional regenerative communities and in a range of 'degrowth' initiatives (Rilović *et al.* 2022). This includes experiments informed by degrowth ideas, such as community gardens, workers' cooperatives, and collective squatted housing projects, each seeking to create community projects informed by the principles of prefigurative politics, horizontalism, and non-hierarchical participation, in an attempt to instantiate future visions of society in small-scale initiatives in the present, or what are sometimes referred to as 'nowtopias' (see Barlow *et al.* 2022).

Having set out a critical political economy account of what we consider to be three alternative 'stances' that exist in, and towards, capitalism, and the way in which these inform contemporary climate activism, we seek in the next section to show how these different positions also inform (either explicitly or implicitly) the debates and divisions that we sometimes see between different strands of environmentalism. In doing so, we focus on two illustrative debates which have shown a tendency to erupt with a degree of frequency: first, regarding the scope for individual ecological action; and, second, regarding the question of growth. In both instances, as we seek to show, the key positions that have been articulated within these debates reflect the (oftentimes unacknowledged) diverging stances towards capitalism adopted by their advocates.

Debate 1: the scope for individual and collective agency (liberalism and its critics)

The role of the individual in bringing about systemic change is hotly debated within the climate movement. On one end of the spectrum is what we term 'footprint activism', a form of activism that is focussed on lowering the carbon footprint of individuals, with transport and food emissions tending to be prioritised by climate activists. One prominent example is the 'flight shaming' movement, with the organisation Flight Free UK offering members of the public the opportunity to make a pledge to be flight free for a year, in the following terms:

> Reducing our carbon footprints is vital in avoiding climate breakdown. There are lots of things we can do, like eating less meat, using renewable energy, or driving less. But did you know that just one flight can wipe out all those

> savings? Living sustainably whilst continuing to fly is impossible. (Flight Free UK 2021)

Beyond encouraging people to decrease their carbon footprint, participants are also encouraged to make their decision not to fly a public act.

> Choosing not to fly can have an impact that goes beyond just reducing our own emissions. If lots of us do this together, we will make it normal not to fly, and show politicians and industry that people are ready for change. (Flight Free UK 2021)

This tactic therefore aims to put the onus on participants of Flight Free UK to influence others to make the same decision, thus creating a culture whereby flying (for leisure at least) is seen as unethical.

Whilst it is difficult to argue with the ethical claim of lowering one's carbon footprint, there is much debate about footprint activism as an effective form of political engagement. For commentator Ash Sarkar, adopting what we have termed a socialist 'stance', footprint activism is a distraction purposely promoted by the fossil fuel industry, and which is criticised directly due to the focus on the role of the individual:

> The whole notion of your own personal carbon footprint is fossil fuel propaganda - literally! The first carbon footprint calculator was developed and popularised by BP in a $250 million campaign. Why? To individualise the problem, and let big polluters off the hook. (Sarkar 2021)

Likewise, American journalist and activist Mary Annaise Heglar (2019) calls the tactic 'victim blaming' and warns about 'a population beset with shame so heavy they can barely think about climate change – let alone fight it'. For those (socialists and radicals) opposing footprint activism, therefore, the flaw lies in its liberal stance towards capitalist relations, placing the onus on individual action and limiting the activism in a depoliticising way that fails to pose any challenge to capitalist property rights, and therefore fails to achieve either the collective struggle needed or to target the capitalist relations held responsible for the climate crisis.

Further, reflecting its liberal premise, according to which the market is able to distribute goods in a smooth and equitable manner, footprint activism rests upon the assumption that a decline in demand for carbon-fuelled products (as a result of ethical consumption) will likewise generate a corresponding decline in supply, and therefore an overall reduction in carbon emissions. For those adopting a more critical stance towards capitalist relations, however, this relationship between demand and supply is problematised, with the very real possibility that production drives demand. As radical scholar and activist Peter Gelderloos expresses it, regarding veganism as a form of ethical consumerism:

> Vegan or non-vegan consumers cannot destroy capitalism and save the planet, nor does veganism necessarily prefigure an ecological society. We will destroy capitalism and save the planet outside our involuntary role as consumers. Veganism as a boycott does not work. Within capitalism, a decrease in demand can lower prices, and increase total consumption. (Gelderloos 2012)

Both socialist and radical activists thus reject footprint activism as a political strategy on the basis that it does not necessarily reduce demand or, therefore, production and total consumption. In short, this rests on the claim, held by those critical activists (both socialists and radicals) who contend that political agency requires collective action and that as individual consumers there remains a fundamental incapacity to challenge the (capitalist) social relations which generate ecological degradation.

The collectivist alternative

As we have seen, in contrast to those adopting a liberal stance, with a focus on the role of the individual, those adopting a social democratic/socialist *and* radical stance seek to highlight the need for, and role of, collective agency. For social democrats and socialists this is typically in the form of collective class politics, with working class actors collectively mobilised, most typically through trade unions. In contrast, collective agency for radicals more commonly takes the form of prefigurative communities and new social movements.

Perhaps the key form of collective struggle for socialists is through trade unions. From a socialist stance trade unions are fundamentally different from other kinds of political pressure groups in that they express the collective interests of workers. Chris Saltmarsh, co-founder of Labour for a Green New Deal, is a key proponent:

> We must understand unions not as another interest group to 'get involved' in climate activism, but as the essential collective vehicle through which we will win justice for all affected by the climate crisis. This is how we will move beyond decades residing in the fringes of political discourse and bring our grand ambitions into sight. (Saltmarsh 2018)

This is thus a call to deprioritise individualised and depoliticised forms of climate activism and instead understand the fight for climate justice as one that is inherently part of capitalist social relations where people have limited individual agency but significant class-based collective agency.

More radical activists tend to see trade unionism as insufficient and instead promote a broader prefigurative politics and regenerative communities. Thus, radical activists commonly posit, and create, alternative producer communities, with the purpose of bringing together collective groups of people to meet the basic needs of the participants in a sustainable way. Schlosberg (2019) calls such practices 'sustainable materialism', including

urban or rooftop farming, and investing in and running small-scale energy infrastructure initiatives. The underlying principle is that through cooperative and ecologically-sound practices the collective group members produce materially sustainable and beneficial outcomes, such as cheaper food or energy (Bomberg and McEwen 2012, Seyfang *et al.* 2013). In this way, alternative forms of production are envisaged and realised through the acts of the producer communities, with the onus on production because it is in production that emissions take place. In addition, these initiatives seek to expand and 'scale up' sustainable production through integration within, and replacement of, existing processes of production. One UK-based example of producer communities is Grow Heathrow which aims

> To further the Heathrow villages as an iconic symbol of community resistance to the economic, ecological and democratic crises. To develop and promote community and resource autonomy to support long-term community resilience. To establish replicable structures of organisation, which could provide a model for future non-hierarchical, consensus-based communities. To root the grassroots radical values of the 3rd runway resistance in the Heathrow villages for the long term. (Grow Heathrow 2022)

This is not then about individual households. It is rather about building communities that can become less reliant on capitalist markets as well as the state. Such movements constitute a critique of the way in which goods and services are produced and owned in the capitalist economy. They promote common ownership rather than private or state ownership and they promote a way of producing basic goods that does not rely on making profit. As such, alternative producer communities seek substantial alternatives to private property-based production systems.

Those with a more radical stance towards capitalist social relations also take up collective action in the form of creating intentional regenerative communities. These seek to exit mainstream society altogether, often through the creation of an 'ecovillage', in order to create new societies built on different and more sustainable foundations (Sanford 2017, Casey *et al.* 2020).

> An ecovillage is an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designing its pathway through locally owned, participatory processes, and aiming to address the Ecovillage Principles in the 4 Areas of Regeneration (social, culture, ecology, economy into a whole systems design). Ecovillages are living laboratories pioneering beautiful alternatives and innovative solutions. (The Global Ecovillage Network 2021)

In such initiatives there is a much broader understanding of the degree to which capitalist social relations need transforming. Rather than focusing on the way in which goods are consumed or produced, intentional regenerative communities take a holistic view that is often inspired by deep ecology (Litfin 2009). These communities emphasise culture and more fundamental

changes to lifestyle. This includes changes to how food should be grown, how decisions should be made, how conflicts should be dealt with, and a range of other aspects of social and cultural life (Sanford 2017). Separation from much of society is perhaps a defining feature of regenerative systems, although at the same time it creates the potential for such communities to be isolated in terms of their relationship with, and therefore impact upon, society 'outside' of the intentional community. This also, however, poses a strategic challenge in terms of exactly how this form of activism can be helpful in terms of enabling a transition to a desired future sustainable society.

We therefore see disagreements between those advocating collective action, over what *type* of collective action should be adopted, and the degree to which it should also be informed by a commitment to individual agency. This is perhaps most visible in the recent debate over Deep Adaptation, a strand in the British climate movement that shares many of the prefigurative ideals held by radicals, but often without centring the critique on capitalism or capitalist social relations, and therefore similarly largely bypassing the question of class. The figurehead of Deep Adaptation is Jem Bendell, who has written extensively about impending civilisational collapse and later also become a prominent anti-vaccine campaigner. His co-edited.

Deep Adaptation

Book defines the concept as 'the personal and collective changes that might help us to prepare for – and live with – a climate-influenced breakdown or collapse of our societies' (Bendell and Read 2021). It thus shares with liberal approaches an inward-looking focus on the individual, and with radical approaches a focus on collective community agency. For Saltmarsh, however, this inability to conceptualise the climate crisis in terms of its relation to capitalism results in a situation whereby 'the advocates of *Deep Adaptation* prefer to stay on the comfortable terrain of psychological adaptation to societal collapse', and in addition adopt an 'anti-humanist' position in which they 'assign blame to humanity in general instead of the capitalist system which puts profit ahead of all else' (Saltmarsh 2022). Thus, the form of collective action proposed by different contributions to the climate activism debate also reflects the stance taken towards capitalism by particular activists.

In summary, the question of the agency of the individual consumer and citizen as well as different collective forms of organisation is less of a single debate and more of a perennial question in climate activism that appears in many such debates. Differences between liberal, socialist and radical stances on this question inform how positions in these debates are articulated. We turn now to consider a second debate prevalent within climate activism, over

the extent to which capitalist social relations need to be transformed, which has tended to focus especially on the question of growth.

Debate 2: the limits to growth (Green New Deal and its de-growth critics)

The question of growth and its limits, and the degree to which growth can be 'green' has been a prominent feature of the recent debate surrounding the proposal for a Green New Deal. The proposal itself emerged in the US and UK contexts and was largely associated with the left wing of the Democratic Party in the US and Labour Party in the UK, although it can be traced back to the New Economics Foundation (2008), and commentators such as Larry Elliot and Ann Pettifor. Given these roots, and its association with the more socialist wing of the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Green New Deal reflects clearly what we set out above as a social democratic/socialist stance towards capitalism. Indeed, those within the Labour Party who have advocated the Green New Deal, especially *Labour for a Green New Deal*, have tended to do so in a way that highlights the benefits that can be achieved through what we have set out as a social democratic/socialist stance towards capitalism: a favouring of state-led initiatives that seek to challenge market outcomes, including the nationalisation of key industries, in addition to advocating a greater role for trade unions within the workplace. To illustrate, we can break the argument down into the following key claims.

For a social democratic/socialist Green New Deal

First, advocates of a *Green New Deal* have sought to highlight the importance of state-led action as the only viable means to oversee and implement the socio-economic changes necessary to have any chance of successfully responding to climate change. In Pettifor's terms:

> Extraordinary levels of collective effort will be required if societies are to achieve the transformation of their economies away from dependence on fossil fuels and the extraction of the earth's finite assets. The scale of such efforts will be comparable to that of a nation urgently embarking on the collective effort of defence in the face of impending war. [. . .]
>
> Suffice to say that, as in wartime, the state is the most appropriate institution for financing, mobilising and implementing the huge effort of economic transformation. (Pettifor 2019, p. 98)

Second, Green New Deal advocates emphasise how state-led reforms create the possibility for a transition of the socio-economy incorporating the interests of (especially) the working class, to achieve a just transition. For former Labour shadow chancellor (under Corbyn), John McDonnell:

> If climate justice activists are going to take energy workers and the public with us, our policies must not place a disproportionate burden on the poor, and must not treat flippantly the fears of working-class communities whose past experience of economic transition has been overwhelmingly disruptive. (McDonnell 2019)

This included a commitment to offer workers affected by a green transition to be retrained and to ensure that their incomes are not adversely affected. This was central to Labour's Green New Deal.

Third, advocates of the Green New Deal explicitly challenged existing property ownership rights, which were seen as an obstacle to addressing climate change. Thus, the socialist think tank Common Wealth argued for the need to replace the current system 'of concentrated ownership and economic power' with 'a new ecosystem of democratic ownership, governance and control to reshape how we create and distribute wealth' (Brett *et al.* 2020, p. 4).

Finally, supporters of the Green New Deal have highlighted the need for extra-state forms of collective action, especially through trade unions. As Adrienne Buller, Senior Research Fellow at Common Wealth at the time, argued, any attempt to implement the Green New Deal requires a focus on work in communities and the move towards community-led and municipally owned companies that pose an alternative to current prevailing forms of ownership, thereby 'translating generic pillars of the Green New Deal like "democratic ownership" into their concrete potential', especially by 'putting down strong roots in trade unions' (Buller 2020).

In sum, the Green New Deal initiative clearly displayed each of the core tenets of a social democratic/socialist stance towards capitalism as we have outlined it above, including a commitment to state-led action, alongside an emphasis on the importance of linking this to the mobilisation of social groups outside of the state, especially workers, and for this to seek to challenge and address the unequal forms of property ownership that characterise contemporary capitalism.

The limits to green growth: a radical degrowth critique

The Green New Deal has, however, been on the receiving end of several criticisms, especially by those adopting a more radical stance towards capitalism. This has especially been articulated by those adopting a 'degrowth' perspective that is sceptical regarding the proclaimed capacity of the Green New Deal to bring about a shift to 'green growth' through the institutions of the capitalist state, which is often considered unable to transcend or transform capitalist social relations. This critique is based on the view that any attempt to gain access to the policymaking instruments of the state will inevitably run into the problem associated with the systemic need for the capitalist state to manage and oversee the reproduction of capitalist relations, including the inherent compulsion for capital accumulation and economic

growth. At some point, it is claimed, the state-led strategy that is intrinsic to the Green New Deal will unavoidably run into obstacles that ensure that it either unravels as a strategy of governing, *or* requires a commitment to growth and capital accumulation that undermines any commitment to addressing climate change (Neal 2021). This problem is especially notable, Neal (2021) argues, when it comes to the Green New Deal's proposal for nationalisation, which is dependent on the problematic idea that nationalisation, reform of corporate ownership, and renewed municipalism, can bring about a change in the system of production in general. In contrast, for its radical critics, the Green New Deal represents only the reform (but not replacement) of capitalist relations of production, and as such retains the drive for capital accumulation and (most concerningly) growth.

Further, having established the contradictory nature of the capitalist state, radical critics also point to the necessity of *extra*-state forms of collective action in order for any successful challenge to climate change to occur. Thus, having rejected the notion that action within the state might be successful – due to it being fundamentally implicated in the management and overseeing of capitalist economic management – radical critics also point to the need for extra-state mobilisation and action as part of a society-based form of opposition and resistance. Yet for radical critics of the Green New Deal, 'it is unclear whether it [the Green New Deal] is helping bring about a combative constituency, a social power rooted in workplaces and communities, or whether it is simply restoring faith in parliamentary politics and the effectiveness of voting' (Beuret 2019). This potential re-legitimation of liberal democratic institutions, moreover, also creates an additional risk that social movements are in turn discouraged by the turn to parliamentary solutions.

In rejecting the prospect of a state-led green transition, and highlighting the importance of extra-state collective action, radical critics of the Green New Deal highlight the importance of a more fundamental alternative to the contemporary capitalist socioeconomy, and especially one which rejects the compulsion for growth associated with capitalism. As such, the claims of the Green New Deal are claimed to rest on a reassurance to wider society that climate change can be addressed without any fundamental alteration of contemporary capitalist social relations or current ways of living, something which is rejected. As Brian Davey (2019) of the Feasta Climate Working Group argues,

> what we must promise is a society where people share and look after each other. What we must try to promise is not rising incomes but security. That's a fundamental point and I don't find it in the proposals for a Green New Deal which is all about creating "well paid jobs".

Instead, therefore, critics, and especially those adopting a degrowth position, argue for extra-state, grassroots-based, that prioritise a democratisation of social relations of production beyond the state, in a way that echoes the

forms of political practice commonly associated with a radical stance towards capitalist relations, including, for instance, 'community-controlled renewable energy sources and democratically managed public transport networks, retrofitted social or collective housing, and worker-owned industrial plants' (Schmelzer *et al.* 2022).

Thus, we see those adopting a radical stance towards capitalism espousing a critique of the Green New Deal that questions both the opportunities available through the capitalist state and the degree to which capitalist firms and the market can be reformed, instead of requiring the instantiation of alternative social relations of production altogether: 'societies need to be prepared by reorganizing institutions so that they are no longer dependent on growth and accumulation' (Schmelzer *et al.* 2022). The debate itself therefore highlights some of the key conflicting assumptions held by social democrats/socialists, on one hand, who tend to see a central role for the state, and those adopting a more radical stance towards capitalist social relations, on the other hand, who are far more sceptical regarding the potential for state-based political activity to be able to deliver its promise of 'green growth'.

Conclusion

'System change, not climate change' has become a popular slogan in the climate movement. We have set out here to explore the question of alternative strategies for (alternative types of) system change, through the lens of critical political economy and positing three stances adopted towards capitalism and capitalist social relations – liberal, social democratic/socialist, and radical. Our argument is presented through a discussion of debates within British climate activism, but these debates and divisions inform much of climate activism across the advanced capitalist democracies. As we show, the strategic alternatives that sometimes divide the climate change movement can each be viewed and evaluated in terms of the broader stances of political economy that underpin them: a broadly liberal stance that sees climate action through representation, electoralism and green consumerism, with a minimal challenge to property rights; social democratic and socialist stances that seek more substantial change to private property rights and which envisage a role for both the state and social mobilisation outside of the state; and a more radical stance that seeks to transcend both property rights and the state, through the construction of extra-capitalist and extra-state prefigurative communities. Each stance, moreover, faces different limitations and obstacles.

The purpose of breaking down and crystallising these divisions in the climate change movement is not merely to understand what different actors mean by system change and the alternative strategies that they propose for achieving this. Instead, we argue that opportunities exist for collaboration

and alliances to form, despite these differences. In making clear the shared (or otherwise) assumptions and approaches adopted by those adopting different strategies for change, we also seek to highlight where opportunities for cooperation exist. Three observations stand out.

First, ownership matters: whether resources, utilities or other means of production are owned by corporations, the state, workers or local communities is important because it affects whose interests they serve. Private property ownership underpins the 'normal' operation of the market, and from our critical political economy perspective this acts to perpetuate the inequality, and lack of democratic oversight, that is fundamental to the climate crisis. The extent to which actions challenge ownership and property rights is therefore an important dimension in understanding the likelihood that the tactics and strategies of climate activists will address the core problems of the climate emergency, and indeed result in 'system change'.

Second, building power, institutions and movements in communities and workplaces is an important point of overlap between the positions within the various debates and political economy stances that we have considered herein. Whether these communities are seen as potential parts of a broader state-led Green New Deal, or as an effort to act outside and against the state, is perhaps of less importance than the practical work of community-building and social mobilisation *per se*. Those building community power within alternative producer or regenerative communities clearly contribute to (rather than detract from) the forms of social mobilisation that also underpin the more state-focused approaches associated with a social democratic/socialist model of political economy. As such, collective organising is a shared goal, and therefore potential for collaboration, between those with otherwise potentially divergent strategic standpoints.

Third, ignoring the differences in assumptions held by alternative stances on political economy can be limiting. To take one example: many of what we have here termed radical activists felt disillusioned by the liberal forces within the UK's Climate Camp (Saunders 2012); and many socialist activists within XR have been frustrated by that organisation's prevailing depoliticising liberalism (Knights 2019). Bringing into focus the divergent frameworks of understanding, and the alternative approaches towards the political economy of capitalism by which they are (sometimes implicitly) informed, therefore also serves to make clear where the scope for cooperation and collaboration lie, *and where the sources of antagonism may be less easily reconciled*.

In explicating the critical political economy of strategic alternatives and debates within the environmentalist movement, we hope that the present paper makes a meaningful contribution to the necessary and ongoing

discussion that informs those efforts to envisage, and bring about, a more sustainable and just alternative to the climate crisis.

Note

1. Citizens' Assemblies are a kind of citizens' jury where members are chosen by sortition in order to be broadly representative of the citizens of a given country or constituency (XR 2020, Smith 2021). The assembly is then introduced to various climate-related challenges by invited experts. This is followed by deliberation over certain questions in smaller groups.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Critical Political Economy Research Network mid-term workshop (Limerick 2022), the Planetary Emergency and the Politics of Resistance workshop in Queens University Belfast (July 2022), and the In and Against the Ecological Crisis CSE Midlands workshop (University of Birmingham, November 2022). We are grateful to the participants of those workshops for their comments, especially Damian McIlroy, Calum McGeown, John Barry, and Amanda Slevin. The paper also benefited from early conversations with Abigail Rhodes, the very helpful and constructive comments from the two anonymous reviewers, and the editorial guidance of Graeme Hayes.]

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Oscar Berglund http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0068-8194
David J. Bailey http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2464-7293

References

Aronoff, K., *et al*., 2019. *A planet to win: why we need a Green New Deal*. London: Verso.

Bailey, D.J., 2009. *The political economy of European social democracy*. London: Routledge.

Bailey, D.J., *et al*., 2017. *Beyond defeat and austerity: disrupting (the critical political economy of) Neoliberal Europe*. London: Routledge.

Bailey, D.J., 2019. Extra-capitalist impulses in the midst of the crisis: perspectives and positions outside of capitalism. *Globalizations*, 1–15. doi:10.1080/14747731.2018.1558816

Bailey, D.J., Lewis, P.C., and Shibata, S., 2022. Contesting neoliberalism: mapping the terrain of social conflict. *Capital and Class*, 46 (3), 449–478. doi:10.1177/03098168211054802

Barlow, N., *et al*., 2022. *Degrowth & strategy: how to bring about social-ecological transformation*. Mayfly Books.
Bendell, J. and Read, R., 2021. *Deep adaptation: navigating the realities of climate chaos*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Berglund, O. and Schmidt, D., 2020. *Extinction rebellion and climate change activism: breaking the law to change the world*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot.
Beuret, N. (2019). A green new deal between whom and for what? *Viewpoint Magazine*.
Bomberg, E. and McEwen, N., 2012. Mobilizing community energy. *Energy Policy*, 51, 435–444. doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2012.08.045
Brett, M., Buller, A., and Lawrence, M. (2020). *A blueprint for a Green New Deal Introduc-* (Issue February). https://www.common-wealth.co.uk/reports/blueprint-for-a-green-new-deal
Brock, A., 2020. 'Frack off': towards an anarchist political ecology critique of corporate and state responses to anti-fracking resistance in the UK. *Political Geography*, 82 (April 2019), 102246. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102246
Buller, A., January 2020. Why the Green New Deal didn't get a hearing. *Jacobin*.
Casey, K., Lichrou, M., and O'Malley, L., 2020. Prefiguring sustainable living: an ecovillage story. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 36 (17–18), 1658–1679. doi:10.1080/0267257X.2020.1801800
De Moor, J., *et al*., 2021. New kids on the block: taking stock of the recent cycle of climate activism. *Social Movement Studies*, 20 (5), 619–625. doi:10.1080/14742837.2020.1836617
Douglas, R.M., 2020. The 'glass ceiling' of the environmental state and the social denial of mortality. *Environmental Politics*, 29 (1), 58–75. doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1685218
Farrands, C. and Worth, O., 2005. Critical theory in Global Political Economy: Critique? Knowledge? Emancipation?. *Capital & Class*, 29 (1), 43–61.
Flight Free UK, 2021. *Why flight free?* Flightfree.Co.Uk. https://flightfree.co.uk/why_flight_free/
Fraser, N. and Jaeggi, R., 2018. *Capitalism: a conversation in critial theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Gelderloos, P., 2012. *Veganism is a consumer activity*. Libcom.Org. https://libcom.org/library/veganism-consumer-activity
Gibson-Graham, J.K., 2006. *A postcapitalist politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
The Global Ecovillage Network, 2021. *About GEN*. Ecovillage.Org https://ecovillage.org/about/about-gen/.
Gunderson, R., 2020. Spectacular reassurance strategies: how to reduce environmental concern while accelerating environmental harm. *Environmental Politics*, 29 (2), 257–277. doi:10.1080/09644016.2018.1546642
Heathrow, G. 2022. *Grow heathrow - Transition heathrow*. Facebook.
Heglar, M.A., 2019. I work in the environmental movement. I don't care if you recycle. *Vox*.
Hestres, L.E. and Hopke, J.E., 2020. Fossil fuel divestment: theories of change, goals, and strategies of a growing climate movement. *Environmental Politics*, 29 (3), 371–389. doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1632672
Ishkanian, A. and Peña Saavedra, A., 2019. The politics and practices of intersectional prefiguration in social movements: the case of Sisters Uncut. *Sociological Review*, 67 (5), 985–1001. doi:10.1177/0038026118822974

Kirby, M., 2022. Modelling the fall and rise in the importance of the environment to the British public: 2006–2019. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 136914812210806. doi:10.1177/13691481221080651

Knights, S. 2019, October 23. Extinction rebellion: we need to talk about the future. *Medium*. https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/10/30/extinction-rebellion-we-need-talk-about-future

Korpi, W., 1983. *The democratic class struggle*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Litfin, K., 2009. Reinventing the future: the global ecovillage movement as a holistic knowledge community. In: G. Kütting and R. Lipschutz, eds. *Environmental governance*. London: Routledge, pp. 124-142.

McDonnell, J., 2019. A Green New Deal for the UK. *Jacobin*.

Melia, S., 2021. *Roads, runways and resistance*. London: Pluto.

Moschonas, G., 2002. *No TITLEIN THE NAME OF SOCIAL DEMocracy: the great transformation*. London: Verso.

Navarro, V., 2007. Neoliberalism as a class ideology; or, the political causes of the growth of inequalities. *International Journal of Health Services*, 37 (1), 47–62. doi:10.2190/AP65-X154-4513-R520

Neal, L., 2021. *Ecological contradictions of Labour's Green New Deal* (Berlin). No. 152; 2021.

New Economics Foundation. (2008). *A Green New Deal: joined-up policies to solve the triple crunch of the credit crisis, climate change and high oil prices. The first report of the Green New Deal Group*.

Pettifor, A., 2019. *The case for a Green New Deal*. London: Verso.

Powell, J. and Yurchenko, Y., 2020. The evolution of private provision in urban drinking water: new geographies, institutional ambiguity and the need for political economy. *New Political Economy*, 25 (1), 91–106. doi:10.1080/13563467.2018.1562432

Rilović, A., *et al*., 2022. Degrowth actors and their strategies: towards a degrowth international. In: N. Barlow, *et al*., eds. *Degrowth and strategy: how to bring about social-ecological transformation*. Mayfly Books, 110–128.

Saltmarsh, C., 2018. *Want to save the climate justice movement? Join a union*. Novara Media. https://novaramedia.com/2018/08/24/want-to-save-the-climate-justice-movement-join-a-union/

Saltmarsh, C., 2022. Deep adaptation - or climate justice?'. *Ecologist*.

Sanford, A.W., 2017. *Living sustainably: what intentional communities can teach us about democracy, simplicity, and nonviolence*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.

Sarkar, A., 2021. *The whole notion of your own personal carbon footprint is fossil fuel propaganda - literally! The first carbon footprint calculator was developed and popularised by BP in a $250 million campaign. Why? To individualise the problem, and let big polluters of*. Twitter https://twitter.com/AyoCaesar/status/1379700365784924161 .

Saunders, C., 2012. Reformism and radicalism in the climate camp in Britain: benign coexistence, tensions and prospects for bridging. *Environmental Politics*, 21 (5), 829–846. doi:10.1080/09644016.2012.692937

Schlosberg, D., 2019. From postmaterialism to sustainable materialism: the environmental politics of practice-based movements. *Environmental Politics*, 1–21. doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1587215

Schmelzer, M., Vetter, A., and Vansintjan, A., 2022. *The future is degrowth*. London: Verso.

Seyfang, G., 2005. Shopping for sustainability: can sustainable consumption promote ecological citizenship? *Environmental Politics*, 14 (2), 290–306. doi:10.1080/09644010500055209

Seyfang, G., Park, J.J., and Smith, A., 2013. A thousand flowers blooming? An examination of community energy in the UK. *Energy Policy*, 61, 977–989. doi:10.1016/j.enpol.2013.06.030

Smith, G., 2021. *Can democracy safeguard the future?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Sovacool, B.K. and Dunlap, A., 2022. Anarchy, war, or revolt? Radical perspectives for climate protection, insurgency and civil disobedience in a low-carbon era. *Energy Research and Social Science*, 86 (July 2021), 102416. doi:10.1016/j.erss.2021.102416

Srnicek, N. and Williams, A., 2016. *Inventing the future: postcapitalism and a world without work*. London: Verso.

Stahl, R.M., 2019. Economic liberalism and the state: dismantling the Myth of Naïve Laissez-Faire. *New Political Economy*, 24 (4), 473–486. doi:10.1080/13563467.2018.1458086

Wall, D., 1999. *Earth first! And the anti-roads movement*. London: Routledge.

Wood, E.M., 1995. *Democracy against capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wright, E.O., 2010. *Envisioning real utopias*. London: Verso.

XR, 2020. *Citizens' assembly - Extinction rebellion*. https://rebellion.earth/act-now/resources/citizens-assembly/. London: Rebellion.Earth.

Yates, l., 2020. prefigurative politics and social movement strategy: the roles of prefiguration in the reproduction, mobilisation and coordination of movements. *Political Studies*. doi:10.1177/0032321720936046