**Crisis, deliberation, and Extinction Rebellion**

*Critical Studies on Security*

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Keywords: climate change, emergency, Extinction Rebellion, securitisation, Anthropocene

The environment is one of the political issue areas identified earliest in the post-Cold War context as susceptible to securitisation (see Deudney 1990), defined as a way of treating an issue that emphasises existential stakes and licenses exceptional ameliorative measures (Wæver 1995). In global environmental politics, such a quality has become unmistakable, amid developments increasingly represented as a climate emergency or crisis, deepening through inadequate response. This sense of crisis and a corresponding need for urgent action has ballooned as a topic of mass activism. In the past year, commutes in London and elsewhere have been disrupted by the direct action of Extinction Rebellion (XR), a transnational social movement organisation most active in the United Kingdom which campaigns for action against this “unprecedented global emergency” (Extinction Rebellion 2019b).

The levels of attention and mobilisation XR has achieved, bringing thousands to the streets and capturing substantial UK media coverage, have been widely admired (Hensby 2019). At the same time, even sympathetic commentary – including some by academics – has voiced concern that XR’s alarm-sounding raises the spectre of the classically recognised dark political consequences of invoking security, with the mobilisation of crisis concepts militating against deliberative or inclusive politics. While admirable, XR’s activism thus has also been interpreted as partly incoherent, naïve, or myopic. XR depoliticises the climate through its calls for crisis action, bringing forth a “privileging of moral action over political analysis” which hazards strengthening troubling power dynamics (Doherty, de Moor, and Hayes 2018). This mirrors the intended subduing of contentious politics and resulting empowerment of existing elites which securitisation is seen to summon (Williams 2003).

We do not wish in this brief intervention to dismiss such concerns or render normative verdicts on XR. Rather, amid the dominant presence of a crisis concept in climate politics, we want to make a broader social-scientific point about how we understand the possible political implications when a sense of emergency is mobilised. As scholars we must be sensitive to the kinds of political effects previously theorised to accompany proclamations of crisis. Equally, we must be attentive to how these concepts and their implied effects might, amidst major social transitions, be undergoing change. Here, we follow climate-change social scientists like Rebecca Elliott, who urges scholars, beyond bringing past disciplinary knowledge to events so palpably transformative, to focus on “new project[s] that climate change pushes us to take on” (2018, 302). In security studies, this means placing a “priority of phenomena over theory” (Neal 2008, 87) by letting empirical climate politics inform our understandings of what, in the Anthropocene, “emergency” is entailing.

If the growing sensation of climate emergency demands security imaginations that avert crisis’s dark political implications (McDonald 2018), climate activists’ increasingly explicit articulation of inclusive goals in crisis governance seems a significant, though evolving, empirical development. Past work on deliberative thinking in crisis has emphasised the role of thinking through potential emergencies beforehand (Scarry 2011), but XR is attempting to accomplish something different. XR comprises a variety of viewpoints, but its discussion often employs elements of a familiar securitarian “grammar” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 23–29) emphasising grave danger and the radical changes needed to effect a way out. But, perhaps unexpectedly in such a view, XR also has demonstrated effort to twist the political implications of these meanings in more deliberative and inclusive directions. We note three areas of such grappling.

First, XR’s simultaneous demand for a state-declared climate emergency, unambiguously “bringing the (nation) state back in” (Doherty, de Moor, and Hayes 2018) to the centre of climate politics, has been interpreted as incompatible with its aim of achieving net-zero carbon emission policies through citizens’ assemblies (Extinction Rebellion 2019a). This represents a “tension between bottom-up and top-down” (Colvile 2019) in light of the heavy-handed, even authoritarian, state steering often envisioned as necessary to decarbonise economies. Reflected here is the lurking implication that emergency resists being governed in any inclusive or democratic way, since the crisis concept itself imminently contains the necessity of swift, decisive action. Yet in mobilising the idea of climate crisis, XR renders such democratic disenchantment and its remedies quite differently. Here, climate crisis does not emerge from the weaknesses of liberal pluralism (as would justify, in Schmittian terms, the exception which securitisation invokes), but rather from neoliberal political economy and the institutional infirmities of representative, rather than deliberative, democracy. Outlining a deliberative-democratic way to address a climate crisis issue “too controversial and difficult for politicians to deal with successfully by themselves” (Extinction Rebellion 2019a) may risk the radical goals XR envisions, opening the movement to accusations of naïveté. Still, XR’s statements reflect a seemingly firm orientation that effective action toward climate crisis rests not just on deep social consensus about the problem, but also on direct, deliberative public guidance of state response. This perhaps relates to a distinct time element in the conceptualisation of climate crisis, which blends urgent aversion of catastrophe with longer-run visions of adaptation that encounter the demands of a broader climate justice agenda. Thus it does not necessarily follow that such an emergency be “dealt with decisively by top leaders” (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 29). This reformulates the political implications of crisis toward a dedication to more substantive democratic procedure and social consensus-building in breaking parliamentary deadlock.

Second, perhaps the most trenchant criticism of XR is that it needs decolonising, having downplayed or erased present effects of climate change on the Global South or people of colour, and lionised forms of direct action risky for those outside a white activist base (Josette 2019). By centring its activism on gaining responses from the British state and warning of future danger as others face present peril, XR has been accused of engaging in the kind of insular responses, in reference to a bounded community, that securitised politics suggests. It is important, however, that these potential implications of crisis politics are being challenged, toward the envisioning – and perhaps the practice – of a more dedicatedly inclusive crisis politics. A collective of organisations under the name Wretched of the Earth has welcomed the emergence of XR as an “encouraging sign… there is both a collective consciousness of the immense danger ahead of us and a collective will to fight it,” but has pressed the need for explicitly politicising the exclusionary and colonialist power dynamics that fomented crisis through driving “the distribution of resources of the entire planet and the structure of our societies,” and for recognising how “communities in the Global South continue to lead the visioning and building of new worlds free of the violence of capitalism” (Wretched of the Earth 2019). These critiques seem to have achieved some impact. XR made decolonisation and inclusivity a focus of its People’s Assembly after its London actions in April 2019 (Hayes and Doherty 2019), its recent handbook includes discussion of indigenous experiences of ecological destruction (Ibrahim 2019), and XR’s latest strategy documents acknowledge a need to diversify the movement (Extinction Rebellion 2020). Though the ultimate result of such challenges of course remains uncertain, this reckoning with such possible implications of climate emergency politics is emerging as a growing theme.

Third, XR’s activism presents a tension about the meaning and form of extraordinary politics, which has emerged as a site of thinking and debate within the movement. Ultimately, XR expresses its aim as one of moving “beyond politics” regarding the climate, echoing the classical securitarian implication of putting aside routine politics as inadequate to meet the security task. In XR’s case, this is through calls for governments to “create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on climate and ecological justice” (Extinction Rebellion 2019a). Surpassing politics as we know it is supposed to make new, swift action possible, while being deliberate, processual, and embedded in existing institutions. XR cites several instances in which such mechanisms have been integrated with existing parliamentary systems, and provides justifications including transparency, equality, impartiality, and representation (Extinction Rebellion 2019a). However, the stated need for this system is often presented as indisputable and emanating from the emergency situation, creating friction with the movement’s focus on deliberation. As XR’s handbook states: “We need to change our way of politics, and the culture and habits of how we relate to one another. This isn’t about a fancy diagram of new institutions but about changing how we do politics… Act, don’t ask. Learn by doing. Get on with it. Time is short” (Ross 2019, 179–80). It is also unclear how these systems will be held to account once established, and whether sampling of participants through sortition is enough to substantively ensure equal representation. Activists are also confronting how these institutions would exert meaningful power over the parliamentary democracies within which they are to be embedded, which in the long run are likely to attempt to curb their transformative potential. These issues therefore seem highly likely as ones of ongoing debate.

For scholars to view these tensions as doomed contradictions, we suggest, is too simple – especially given the empirical work of activists to develop new ways to govern crisis against the evident shortcomings of both traditional emergency thinking and, perhaps more pointedly, politics as usual. This may ultimately offer, in the teeth of crisis, to redeem some emancipatory potential for security rather than its draconian dangers. The capability of people amid the tumult of ecological breakdown to build “new solidarities” (Elliott 2018, 301) would challenge our views of security’s tendency to strengthen the boundaries of existing communities amidst a fear of enemies, as climate mobilisations go beyond the goal of mitigating carbon emissions and toward concepts of environmental integrity, social transition, economic distribution, and climate justice. This speaks to a future beyond simply averting climate catastrophe. Such outcomes, though, are no more certain than their opposite. It is depressingly realistic to imagine that our earth, and billions of its most vulnerable people, will be plunged into escalating insecurity amid uninhibited capitalist or neo-colonial accumulation, with fear mobilised to effect narrow and exclusionary responses. Yet the deliberative vision of crisis governance that XR has grappled with suggests a different possibility: that the political implications of a concept as seemingly timeless as that of crisis might shift as we experience the Anthropocene.

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