

# UK: for Extinction Rebellion, 'Life or death'

Friday 3 May 2019, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 19 April 2019).

**All disagreements aside, Extinction Rebellion is right to try to shut down the centre of London. It's "Life or Death", as they say. There is no middle ground. Either we drastically transform our metabolic relationship with the planet, or we prepare our extinction.**

Complaint about '[inconvenience](#)' in this context is pathetic. The transformations needed to avoid extinction will be more than inconvenient. The hard ecological limits we are encountering exclude, as a condition of survival, many of the choices and specifically capitalist freedoms we have taken for granted. We're not just talking about a delayed commute across London. The danger, if we don't take control of this situation in a democratic way, is that we end up with what Christian Parenti calls the "politics of the armed life-boat": climate militarism, segregation, bloodier borders, twenty-first century despotisms propped up by the illusion of 'natural security'.

The fact that thousands of young people are prepared to put their bodies in the way of extinction, to risk arrest and years of surveillance and potential harassment by the authorities, is therefore a sign of life. It shows a recognition of the scale of the crisis, and that 'moral capital' and 'winning the argument' are worth very little in the stakes of power. The majority of carbon emissions in the entire history of humanity followed the UN-backed summit resulting in Kyoto, during which period the world's leading capitalist states were nominally committed to averting climate change. Simply being on the right side isn't worth a dime.

It also recognises the crucial strategic point, made by Frances Fox Piven: disruptive capacity, the ability to withdraw our cooperation from the system and jam it up, is often one of the few sources of leverage that ordinary people have. Taken together with the school student walk-outs, and the ferment of activity around a 'Green New Deal', we can perhaps see a new social movement in gestation.

Yet the tactical repertoires of low-key disruption, though important, are hardly new. The idea of taking control of public spaces for a combination of street theatre and militancy, pre-dates the anticapitalist movement, let alone Occupy. And in this case, unlike past direct action protests such as the campaign against the Newbury Bypass, and certainly unlike most industrial action, the disruption is largely symbolic. There is very little real disruption to the flow of value predicated on fossil consumption.

Moreover, I have to admit that, as grateful as I am that Extinction Rebellion has done what it has, I'm a bit worried by the fact that the overt goal was to get thousands of young people arrested. Four hundred have been arrested thus far, although the police are treading lightly for now. I think there's a real risk of burnout and demoralisation here. It isn't clear what the next steps are, or how the campaign assures its longevity in the face of repression, attrition, indifference, the dull compulsion of economic forces, and so on. How does one prepare people for endurance, for hardness, for long periods of difficulty and setback? How does one mediate between the brief euphoric moments of apparent advance, based on headline-grabbing initiatives like this, and the ultimate goal?

Unfortunately, none of us have worked this out yet. Perhaps the only way to find out is to get stuck in and see. But we needn't do so theoretically or historically blind. There are about two centuries of social movement history behind us, and that experience has been concentrated in diverse theoretical repertoires. Surely, the counter-extinction campaign can do better at this point than [vacuous, watered-down autonomism](#)?

What alarms me most, though, is that with Extinction Rebellion, we seem to have regressed politically. It is a campaign wherein, thus far, branding (what Paul Gilroy once called 'logo-solidarity') trumps political substance. The hard-sell — breathless and extravagant claims about triggering an international rebellion, as though they had never heard of Bhopal or the landless workers movements — takes the place of strategic specifics. There has been a seeming aimlessness in regard to choice of targets. It's one thing to shut down bridges, or superglue oneself to Buckingham Palace, but what leverage is there in heckling shoppers in Oxford Street? And why chain oneself to Corbyn's fence, unless one is really hoping to be offered a nice cup of tea?

Even so, Extinction Rebellion are undertaking audacious actions where others aren't. If they are leading, it's because the Left has hitherto failed on this issue. Climate change should, for example, be a major concern of the labour movement in this country. It will impose, one way or another, drastic economic transformations. If the workers' movement can take some control over the necessary process of adaptation and mitigation, then it can bring its experience, its historical memory, its resources to bear in helping forge a post-carbon economy. If it doesn't, it will be decimated. It really shouldn't be left to school students to go on strike, and young people with spare time and resources to risk arrest. But the issue has been evaded by even the left union leaders, who have reacted to the issue with conservative and sectional reasoning. Unite should be fighting for a green transition, but it would rather devote its considerable lobbying power to fighting for Heathrow airport expansion. It is fighting a conservative strategy to add small groups of union members, not by organising the unorganised, but by supporting the expansion of fossil-guzzling industries where it is already well-organised. That's a tragic and totally unnecessary self-own. It pins the fortunes of the organised working-class to the least sustainable industries, to industries that *have* to decline dramatically.

With the broader Left just now germinally recuperating its political forces after years of recession, and having only belatedly foregrounded this issue, that leaves the leadership of the most militant part of the climate movement in the hands, currently, of hippy-moralists who appear to have a simpleminded and depoliticised conception of 'power' and 'the system'. So, good luck and full solidarity to the hippy-moralists. They're doing the right thing, right now.

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**Richard Seymour**

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