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Tensions between individual and system change in the climate movement: an analysis of Extinction Rebellion

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ABSTRACT

This article examines tensions in the climate movement between solutions that involve individual consumption and behaviour changes and those involving more transformative systemic change. Although they are demanding system change, activists in Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion face accusations of hypocrisy based on their personal choices. This neoliberal appeal to hypocrisy is used to discredit, divide, and undermine the climate movement. Focusing specifically on Extinction Rebellion (XR), I examine how accusations of hypocrisy take form, how XR activists and supporters respond to accusations of hypocrisy, and how XR activists justify living a low-carbon lifestyle despite a strong belief that only system change can adequately address the climate crisis. Then I explore the disconnect between XR's focus on system change and their lack of specific goals that would drive forward the systemic changes necessary. While many activists call for 'system change' what is missing is an understanding of what kind of system change is necessary and how it might be achieved.

Introduction

Between 2018 and 2020, the climate movement grew to an unprecedented size with large-scale global protests demanding government action to address the climate crisis. This growth was catalysed by the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report 'Global Warming of 1.5°C' (IPCC 2018), explaining that keeping temperatures within 1.5°C above the preindustrial level will result in substantially less ecological and social impacts compared to 2°C. This report contained stronger language and more dire predictions than previous reports, calling for 'rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society' (IPCC 2018). In response, climate movement organisations gained unprecedented momentum, with a number of groups calling for system change.

While this article focuses primarily on Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future plays a relevant role in the analysis, especially the face of the movement Greta Thunberg, and therefore requires an introduction. At age 15, Greta Thunberg was protesting alone at the Swedish Parliament every Friday, demanding action to address the climate and ecological crisis. This ultimately resulted in the youth-led group Fridays for Future carrying out 'school strikes for climate' on Fridays. Fridays for Future gained increased attention in 2019: approximately 1.5 million students participated in a global strike in March 2019 and around 6 million people participated in two consecutive general strikes in September 2019 (Taylor et al. 2019). Greta Thunberg has inspired millions, but has also

been a target for critics who scrutinise her lifestyle and how it matches with her calls to address the climate crisis.

Although the group had been active prior to 2018, following the IPCC 1.5°C special report activists in Extinction Rebellion (known as XR) initiated a wave of protests and acts of civil disobedience in the United Kingdom (UK) that spread internationally. Their strategy is to repeatedly shut down the centre of government and commerce (London in the UK) until the government meets their three demands. Their demands include: (1) tell the truth about the climate and ecological crisis, (2) reduce carbon emissions to net zero by 2025, and (3) create a democratic citizens assembly to guide the transition. In November 2018, over 6,000 activists shut down five major bridges in London (Taylor and Gayle 2018) and in April 2019 acts of civil disobedience resulted in over 1,000 arrests in London (Parroudin 2019). In October 2019, rebellions emerged in over 60 cities globally. XR once again shut down Central London and over 1800 activists were arrested over a two-week period (Dodd 2019). As I will describe later, media coverage of these events contained many accusations of hypocrisy, for example: why are XR activists drinking out of plastic water bottles, why did they go to McDonald's, why are they driving to London when it emits carbon?

Despite these accusations and other attacks, XR continues to argue that blaming and shaming individuals is counterproductive when the whole 'toxic system' needs to change. XR's goal is system change and, therefore, individual consumption and lifestyle choices are not their focus. This is because they believe that achieving net zero by 2025 would indeed require 'rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society' (IPCC 2018) and therefore must be government led. This system change would require shifting economic and social priorities, policies, and institutions in ways that would likely seem radical to many people.

While XR focuses on system change, the personal importance of individual actions to reduce carbon emissions varies among XR activists. Most reportedly live very low-carbon lifestyles (Saunders *et al*. 2020). Their official policy of 'no blame, no shame' intends to discourage the judgement of individuals and increase social inclusion. They acknowledge that most drivers of our climate and ecological crisis are systemic and the system determines individual's options and choices. While personal consumption and lifestyle choices remain important to many XR activists, encouraging individuals to adopt low-carbon living is not XR's goal. Despite this, XR activists are commonly labelled as hypocrites in the media for making personal choices that contribute to carbon emissions. Accusations from outside the movement abound and will be described below, but in some cases these accusations also come from individuals within the climate movement.

In this article, I examine a tension in the climate movement between focusing on individual change versus systemic change. There are many reasons why environmentalists and others continue to focus on individual solutions to climate change through green consumerism and lifestyle changes. While evidence illustrates these actions are far from enough to address the climate crisis and stay within 1.5°C or even 2°C of warming, those demanding system change face accusations of hypocrisy based on their seemingly contradictory actions. While there are many valid reasons to change one's lifestyle to reduce personal carbon emissions, a focus on these insufficient efforts distracts attention away from the systemic changes necessary.

I also examine what XR means by 'system change' and if this change would address the root drivers of the climate crisis. While many groups call for system change, using the common slogan 'system change not climate change', XR wants to change the 'toxic system' but through being 'beyond politics' in an effort to engage a diverse populace in civil disobedience. Instead of outlining demands designed for improving or eradicating the 'toxic system', they demand that citizens be given a chance to decide how to best tackle climate change through a citizen's assembly. However, average citizens are unlikely to favour the radical political and economic changes that would actually be necessary to minimise global warming, namely addressing the economic growth imperative that through continually increasing material and energy use is catapulting us deeper into the climate crisis. If the 'toxic system' is to blame, not individuals, why does XR not

pinpoint the problem with the system? Without doing so, does their agenda remain 'disconnected and incomplete' (Spash 2020, 67)?

In this article, I present the findings from my examination of the tensions between individual and systemic change in the climate movement and also discuss how a focus on individuals may serve to undermine the climate movement. Focusing specifically on XR, I also explore how XR might go beyond a seemingly a-political agenda to make the direct linkages to the system changes necessary to address the climate crisis. I draw from printed and online media and 25 personal interviews with XR activists conducted in the summer of 2019.

Research methods

Research informing this article comes from mixed qualitative methods. These include personal interviews with 25 XR activists in the UK, attending an XR 'Rebel Rising' training event with speakers and discussion panels, and attending an XR local group weekly meeting. In addition, I read book chapters and articles written by XR activists and supporters and followed XR related news and social media posts throughout 2019 and into 2020. Printed and online publications were analyzed for key themes related to system change, individualism, lifestyles, and hypocrisy.

Interviews were conducted over the summer of 2019. I identified interview participants in advance using Facebook. Looking at Facebook XR pages allowed me to identify active members who had participated in XR rebellions in London. Sampling depended on who was a part of the XR Facebook groups, who was active on the site, who viewed messages on Facebook, and who responded positively to my requests; therefore, it was not random. I initially sent a Facebook message explaining the study and requesting an interview to 72 individuals. Some individuals did not respond and others who did respond were travelling or unavailable during my visit.

I conducted 25 in-person semi-structured interviews with XR activists in the UK (Table 1). As XR activists travelled from across the UK to London for rebellions, I was in touch with people from across the UK. Ultimately, I conducted interviews in London, Stroud, Cardiff, and Pembrokeshire (a region in Wales). I chose London because the headquarters for XR are located in London and I was able to interview individuals working for XR full-time and in leadership roles. I selected Stroud because XR originated in Stroud, some of the founders and leaders reside there, and there is a large and active XR group. I also conducted interviews in Wales, in Cardiff and Pembrokeshire, because the XR groups had an active presence on Facebook and had participated in XR London rebellions.

The 25 participants were distributed fairly evenly across the four locations. While initial contact was through Facebook messages, I used communication through email or phone texts to set up meetings with participants. While my sampling was not random, there was great diversity among participants. Participants ranged in age from early 20s to late 60s, 14 were women and 11 were men and all participates were white, despite efforts many respondents mentioned focused on trying to increase racial diversity in XR. Although the sampling was dependent upon Facebook usage, the participants shared a diversity of experiences, views, and opinions.

My interview questions focused on participant's involvement in XR, their motivations for joining XR, experiences with accusations of hypocrisy, and views about individual and system change to address the climate crisis. My interviews ranged from 40 min to two hours. I took detailed notes or digitally recorded each interview. While attending the 'Rebel Rising' training day in East London and the XR weekly meeting in Pembrokeshire, I took detailed notes but did not record the proceedings. This research plan was approved in advance by the Internal Review Board for

Table 1. Interview participant gender, age, and location.

Male	Female	> 60	40–60	20–40	London	Stroud	Cardiff	Pembrokshire
11	14	3	7	15	6	5	7	7

human subjects research at Northern Arizona University. I transcribed the recordings and notes and coded the data to identify key themes. Accusations of hypocrisy and tensions between system and individual change emerged as key themes in most all of the interviews, as well as personal reasons to live a low-carbon lifestyle.

In the sections that follow, I will first examine how a focus on individual actions results in accusations of hypocrisy in the climate movement. This appeal to hypocrisy is used by others in an attempt to undermine the credibility of climate activists and also emerges within the climate movement, dividing activists. Data from interviews and from textual analysis will be used throughout this discussion. Turning then towards XR's goal of changing the 'toxic system', I will discuss what a focus on system change would likely need to entail to keep global warming within 1.5 or 2°C and how XR might focus specifically on these necessary changes.

Individual solutions and accusations of hypocrisy

It is not surprising that many people and major media outlets continue to focus on what individuals can do to reduce their personal carbon emissions. Ironically, so do several fossil fuel companies, including British Petroleum who introduced the personal carbon tracker app VYVE in 2020 so that individuals could do their part to reduce emissions. This focus on individual actions is not surprising for several reasons: it is used to shift blame away from industries and governments and it is in line with neoliberal ideologies that continue to shape how the climate crisis is perceived as a problem and the identification of appropriate solutions.

If we live in a world where outcomes are determined by aggregate freely-made individual decisions, then solutions to problems should focus on these individual decisions. Neoliberal ideology and the sanctity of individualism have become naturalised in capitalist societies over the past several decades. For many people these notions are now commonsense, as neoliberalism has become the dominant 'hegemonic' ideology (Gramsci 1971). Individual choice is sacred and emphasised through a focus on entrepreneurship and consumerism (Harvey 2007). The neoliberal project has also socialised the individualisation of subjects in ways that undermine collective action and organised efforts to improve societal well-being (Centeno and Cohen 2012). Lastly, neoliberal ideology continues to promote scepticism about government programmes and policies or other collective endeavours to address social problems.

Green consumerism emerged as the ultimate neoliberal solution to climate change. As explained by Swaffield and Bell (2012, p. 258), this creates 'neoliberal environmental citizen' who … 'promote pro-environmental behaviour but only in ways that were consistent with a neoliberal account of how social or behavioural change can be and should be achieved'. The underling belief is that individuals can solve the climate crisis through making different consumption choices that reduce carbon emissions. This involves buying items such as energy efficient appliances and lightbulbs, hybrid cars, and solar panels. In media responses to the IPCC special report (IPCC 2018), reporters focused on changes people can make in their individual behaviours and personal consumption. For example, a CNN article highlighted 'what consumers can do', listing changes in personal transportation (e.g. buy a hybrid car) and housing (e.g. buy a more efficient air conditioner), among others (Mackintosh 2018). This solution supports increasing consumption and profits but in a way that is supposedly environmentally sustainable ('green' growth). However, as I will discuss below, green growth remains an illusion as even green consumption increases carbon emissions when overall production and consumption continue to increase each year (Gunderson et al. 2018).

In addition to green consumption, many environmentalists consume less or change lifestyle behaviours to reduce personal carbon emissions. This includes buying fewer material goods or no new material goods – what Greta Thunberg calls 'shop-stop' and others call 'buycott'. This also includes driving less or not at all, limiting or refraining from air travel, and reducing or eliminating the consumption of animal products. According to a study by Saunders et al. (2020), the vast majority of XR activists they surveyed adopted a range of pro-environmental behaviours including:

boycotting, changing their diet, consuming less, reusing products, reducing energy use, and buying used or second-hand goods. Of the over 500 UK activists surveyed, about 90 per cent had adopted most of these behaviours. Saunders *et al.* (2020, p. 25) also identified that there had been extensive 'commentary hostile to XR focused on supposed hypocrisy of XR activists' especially from right-wing media outlets and conservative politicians.

While this study focuses on accusations of hypocrisy directed at XR activists, it is critical to acknowledge that these accusations have been directed at many people in the climate movement, especially leaders and figure-heads. In particular, Greta Thunberg has faced many accusations of hypocrisy. Overall, Greta Thunberg lives a very low-carbon lifestyle, as she does not use air travel, eats vegan, and does not purchase any new material goods. In many ways, she represents the quintessential climate citizen. Yet she still faces accusations of hypocrisy. For example, as described by Khatun (2019), in September 2019 a photo of Greta Thunberg eating lunch on a train with the following Twitter post went viral:

> Oh she looks so frightened about the immediate climate catastrophe. As she sits there on a train, surrounded by plastic containers and processed foods. A picture paints a thousand words. This tells you she knows nothing about what she speaks of

One supporter (among many) responded by trying to describe the scene more accurately:

> that's a vegan salad, there's reusable water bottles, unpackaged fruit, and she's travelling by train which produce 80% less greenhouse gas emissions than cars, the only travel more environmentally friendly is walking or cycling but you carry on bullying a 16 year old

In addition, Greta Thunberg faced accusations about her journey by boat across the Atlantic to attend the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York City. Critics called her a hypocrite because the making of the boat was not carbon neutral, the crew used plastic water bottles, and some of the crew flew back to Europe (Rossiter 2019).

As stated by Sinclair (2019), 'if you're involved with Extinction Rebellion (XR), then sooner or later you will be accused of hypocrisy'. For example, a group of XR activists were attacked on social media and in the news for eating at a McDonald's restaurant during one of the London rebellions. One article titled, '"McHypocrites" criticised for ordering McDonald's during Extinction Rebellion protest' (Roberts and Middleton 2019), describes some of these accusations including how television talk show host Piers Morgan stated 'they are shameless hypocrites going to the epicentre of mass produced food' and another broadcaster Julia Hartley-Brewer tweeted 'You. Couldn't. Make. This. Stuff. Up. If. You. Tried'. In general, XR activists have also been called hypocrites by critics and in the media for using plastic to hold food or water during rebellions and for using any fossil fuels to travel to rebellions.

Leaders and figure-heads associated with XR have faced increased scrutiny and accusations of hypocrisy. One of the founders of XR, Gail Bradbrook, was attacked in the media for having flown to Costa Rica for a health-focused retreat. One article about her was titled 'EXSTINKER: Extinction Rebellion founder blasted after 11,000-mile flight to Central America for luxury break away' (Sabey 2019). Celebrities who participated in XR rebellions were also targeted and accused of hypocrisy. For example, actress Emma Thompson was called a hypocrite after she flew over 5,000 miles to London to participate in an XR rebellion (Chakelian 2019).

The XR activists I interviewed shared many examples of accusations of hypocrisy they either personally experienced or had heard about. Many discussed the accusations directed at Emma Thompson. For example, one respondent explained 'they were being all critical of Emma Thomson flying to be part of the XR rebellion. Caring about that stuff is like rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic. We need system change'. Many described accusations from police officers. An XR activist interviewed stated: 'The police asked me if I care about climate so much, how did I get here? I told him, I walked. We did walk. We walked all the way there. 150 miles'. Another described how a police officer asked her if she was vegan

and told her she should be if she really cared about the environment. In addition, residents impacted by the London rebellions often responded with anger calling XR activists names and accusing them of being hypocrites. As one respondent described: 'A person from their car was angry we were blocking the road and yelled "how did you get here?" and I told them the train. There are so many critics. Asking if Greta's boat is really carbon neutral? Give me a break'. These accusations of hypocrisy were clearly frustrating for the XR activists interviewed, who defended their goal to change the system through collective action and discredited individualism and the notion that the climate crisis could be addressed through green consumption.

Responses to accusations of hypocrisy

Some members of the media and XR activists have publicly responded to these accusations, defending the XR activists in question and explaining that XR is about system change, not individual change. For example, Chakelian (2019) explains we are all hypocrites because, despite our beliefs, we are forced to participate in a harmful system:

> It's about policy change, and the empowerment of people to make such changes, rather than individual actions. They're not demanding we never eat in McDonald's, and pretending that they have no legitimate cause if they do so themselves is disingenuous. Also, yes, they are hypocrites. We're all hypocrites. We live in an imperfect society that does things in ways we don't like – that's why anyone protests at all, after all.

> But the whole point of Extinction Rebellion, school strikes and the modern climate crisis movement as a whole is that governments have let us down. Without the adequate, radical policies and global cooperation, we're in a position where whether we go to McDonald's or not, the earth is going to die soon.

In a defensive article titled 'The Real Problem of Hypocrisy for Extinction Rebellion' in *Medium*, Sinclair (2019) argues that XR activists are not hypocrites due to their stated focus on system change, not individual change:

> There is no hypocrisy. Driving to XR protests, or using vinyl banners, or eating a Pret sandwich at an XR road block – these are not hypocritical actions. Hypocrisy is a matter of preaching one thing but practising another. But what XR preaches is a radical change of the system within which we must make our choices, not of the choices we make within the system as it stands. The rebels therefore practise strategic, non-violent, disruptive civil disobedience designed to bring about system change, not changes of private choice. And it is a core Extinction Rebellion principle that individuals are not to be blamed or shamed for their choices within the system as it stands.

> So there is no hypocrisy. And yet the charge of hypocrisy resurfaces over and over again. This is not only because people are strongly motivated to avoid facing the frightening truth of XR's claims, though they surely are. It is also because part of the genius of contemporary liberal capitalism, one of its key stabilising mechanisms and indeed one of its key attractions, is that it fosters a culture of individualised rather than collectivised responsibility.

> Yet if the socioeconomic system effectively forces many people to live far from their jobs without adequate public transport or safe cycling routes, they will drive their cars to work. If the system makes it much cheaper to fly 200 miles than to take the train, people will fly. Thus the charge of hypocrisy – mistaken though it is – may be at its most damaging not when opponents level it at Extinction Rebellion protesters, but when sympathisers level it against themselves.

In addition to explaining why XR activists are not hypocrites, Sinclair (2019) highlights the role of neoliberal ideology and specifically individualism that drive these accusations of hypocrisy in order to discredit and undermine the climate movement.

In constrast, other XR supporters admitted to being hypocrites, but explained that it is due to being "stuck" in the current system. In another public defense against accusations, a group of 100 celebrity XR supporters, including Benedict Cumberbatch and Jude Law, wrote an open letter to the media stating:

> Dear journalists who have called us hypocrites. You're right. We live high carbon lives and the industries that we are part of have huge carbon footprints. Like you, and everyone else, we are stuck in this fossil-fuel economy and without systemic change, our lifestyles will keep on causing climate and ecological harm.

The letter later argues that instead of focusing on accusations of hypocrisy, more attention needs to be paid to actually addressing the climate and ecological emergency (XR 2020). Defenders continue to publicly rebut accusations of hypocrisy by emphasising the focus on system change and how the system currently forces people who care about the environment to be hypocrites.

The XR activists interviewed shared similar sentiments as those expressed in the media, explaining how individual consumption and behavioural change is not the goal, and in many cases distracts from the work that needs to be done for system change. Some felt that the focus on individuals was strategically used by vested interests to undermine efforts for system change. Many also expressed that the whole system is pushing people to consume more and that the only change that will work is government intervention to change the system. Examples of these statements from interviews are listed below:

- 'Not using plastic is a distraction. It is not going to stop climate change. It puts the onus on the consumer. It's purposeful by those in power'.
- 'You can recycle all you want, shop local, but unless you get the system to change from the top and all levels it won't be enough. Blaming individuals is not enough'.
- 'If everyone does a little, then very little will be achieved. We need to change from the top down. Only government can do it'.
- 'Tree planting is useful, but we need massive structural change. We need to be told, no you cannot buy petrol. It needs to come from the top. The only way it is going to work is from the top. We need to demand they change transportation'.
- 'It's not about individual change. Look at the fashion industry. It's not about changing the buying habits of people. That ignores the advertising'.
- 'Consumer choice driven action is like swimming against the tide by yourself'.

Another interview respondent described how system change is the only answer, as she had spent a lifetime trying to 'live outside the system' but found that 'it is not really possible'. She explained that 'every time you find an alternative way to live out of the system they come and smash it. That's why you have to change the system'. Many XR activists interviewed explained that the environmental movement had already tried other tactics (e.g. education programmes and incremental reform) and failed and that radical system change is the only solution. Therefore, individual changes in consumption and behaviour are not sufficient and only 'top-down' government involvement can fix the broken system.

XR has a list of ten core values and principles and number eight on the list is 'We avoid blaming and shaming'. On their website (Extinction Rebellion 2020), this principle is explained:

> We live in a toxic system, but no one individual is to blame. Blaming and shaming will not serve us in the long run. Whilst a specific campaign may seek to highlight the damaging role played by an institution, including individuals serving that institution, our starting point is that we live in toxic system that has damaged everybody. We can point out behaviour that is unhelpful, exploitative or abusive, and we won't tolerate such behaviour, yet we don't hand away our love or power by blaming and shaming. This is also true in our interpersonal and group dynamics as well as our relationship to ourselves.

This principle was explained by the XR activists interviewed and most all agreed with the principle and felt it was critical for the organisation. One respondent explained, 'we have a zero-guilt policy'. This policy applies to others as well as to themselves. It should be noted that, despite this principle, some XR activists I contacted refused to speak with me because I had travelled by air to conduct my research. They explained they had decided not to associate with any people who use air travel. While most XR activists I encountered supported the principle of 'no blame, no shame', a few did not follow

the principle and expressed strong disapproval of others. For example, one XR activist circulated (via Facebook) the photo of Greta Thunberg having lunch and expressed condemnation that she was using plastic food containers. Some activists continue to hold others to a high standard, scrutinising their individual actions.

Some of this focus on the 'lapses' of individual activists could also be related to personal feelings of guilt about one's own carbon footprint. Those who attack may do so because they are feeling guilty bad about their personal choices and want to condemn environmentalists who have made similar choices. Thus while some accusations might be directed out of disagreement and anger at those demanding 'radical' changes to address the climate crisis, others might stem from guilt that the accusers feel themselves. In any case, the accusations continue from outside and within the climate movement despite certain aims to avoid blaming and shaming others and a stated focus on addressing the 'toxic system' not individual behaviour.

Personal justifications for low-carbon living

Despite their position on the need for system change and the inadequacy of individual changes to address the climate crisis, most of the XR activists interviewed felt strongly about personally living a low-carbon lifestyle. The majority were vegan, did not fly, re-used and shared material goods, and biked or walked instead of driving. However, these personal changes were seen as secondary to the goal of system change. One respondent explained, 'I have made some personal changes myself due to climate change and also am focusing on changing the system. Although I am less concerned with being a perfect climate citizen'.

Many respondents emphasised that they lived this way for themselves and because they want to, not because they believe it will solve the climate crisis. Another respondent explained, 'I like to do individual actions, but I don't kid myself it will change the world'. Only one XR activists shared a fatalistic ambivalence about adopting individual consumption and behaviour changes, stating 'I say be who you want to be. We are facing something so massive, so why not'. In other words, individual actions are so inconsequential in comparison to the looming catastrophe, that one might as well enjoy life and not worry about how every single action contributes a small amount of carbon emissions. However, this was a minority view, as the other participants expressed how it was personally important to them to reduce their carbon footprint as much as possible.

Given that the XR activists interviewed strongly believed that system change is the only way to address the climate crisis, why did most all of them insist on living a low-carbon lifestyle? Many respondents stated because it was the 'right thing to do' and they did not want to be 'part of the problem'. One respondent simply explained, 'it's virtue ethics'. This refers to a moral philosophy that emphasises adhering to one's moral character rather than attaining any specific outcome. In other words, even if the individual's actions do not make a difference and are relatively inconsequential, low-carbon living is still the right thing to do. Interview respondents all demonstrated low-carbon choices before or during their interview, such as ordering and eating vegan lunches or riding their bicycles to meet me. It was clear that individual choices were personally important to most all of the individuals interviewed.

One justification for these choices is articulated by Knights (2019, p. 529), who argues that even though individual actions are relatively 'inconsequential', personal carbon emissions reduction is still 'morally obligatory' based on the following argument:

(A) To remain a member of a harming group is a moral wrongdoing;
(B) The performance of consumption actions constitutes remaining a member of a harming group;
(C) Therefore, the performance of consumption actions is a moral wrongdoing.

In other words, by living a high-consumptive and carbon-intensive lifestyle, individuals are members of a harming group, and a 'virtue-based' perspective illustrates the 'moral wrong-doing

of remaining a member of such a group' (Knights 2019, p. 544). Baatz and Voget-Kleschin (2019) make a different justification for individual actions (even when 'inconsequential') based on a notion of moral equity and not exceeding an individual's 'fair share' of carbon emissions entitlements. Baatz and Voget-Kleschin (2019, p. 577) argue that an individual's (e.g. A's) carbon emissions are morally wrong if: '1. A exceeds her fair share of emissions entitlements, and 2. by emitting, A contributes to a harmful activity'. This justification takes a more global perspective and enforces the notion of climate justice. However, most XR activists interviewed justified their lifestyle because they did not want to be a member of the harming group (Knights 2019), rather than any justification based on global equity. Despite these beliefs, many of the XR activists interviewed explained that they did not use their personal ethical standards as a basis to judge others and attempted to adhere to the 'no shame, no blame' principle.

Why system change? What kind of system change?

Those who live a low-carbon lifestyle do so with difficulty, as their lifestyle goes against the dominant economic and cultural tide and every day they must carefully manoeuvre against the forceful current. In addition to the personal challenges involved in changing one's lifestyle to reduce carbon emission, evidence indicates that individual changes will not be sufficient to address the climate crisis. It is not that these actions would not be beneficial and contribute towards emissions reductions, but they will not be enough to keep warming within 1.5℃ or 2℃. Even coordinated individual actions at a massive scale would leave the industries, infrastructures, and production processes that create the *majority* of emission intact.

What is the actual extent that individual consumption and behavioural changes can reduce carbon emissions? Dietz *et al*. (2009) estimate that individual and household-level changes may be able to reduce emissions by around 7 per cent. Jensen (2009) claims that if every person in the United States (US) did everything individually promoted, 'U.S. carbon emissions would fall by only 22 per cent'. Moran *et al*. (2018) estimate that a shift to green consumption could reduce European emissions by 25 per cent. The Center for Behavior and the Environment (2018) estimates that the widespread adoption of 30 different behavioural changes could mitigate from 19 to 36 per cent of global carbon emissions between 2020 and 2050. Yet, global emissions need to be roughly halved by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050 in order to stay within 1.5℃ (IPCC 2018). In other words, lifestyle changes alone will not come close to reducing emissions at the rate and scale necessary to keep temperature increase within 1.5℃ or even 2℃. While individual consumption and behavioural changes are insufficient, this does not mean that they should not be pursued, only that they are far from a panacea. In addition, evidence suggests that in some cases adopting personal and household actions to reduce carbon emissions can result in reduced support for climate policies (Werfel 2017).

The full potentnial of individual actions also remains limited due to a growing economy where increased production drives increasing consumption per person. A key relationship that undermines the effectiveness of green consumerism is that in most cases production and marketing drive consumption (Wiedmann *et al*. 2020). In other words, consumer choices rarely reshape production and therefore 'buying green' or 'voting with your dollar' is far from an effective mechanism of social change. As explained by many scholars, the idea of 'consumer sovereighty' is a myth (Galbraith 1958, Schnaiberg 1980). Galbraith (1958, p. 136) states there is a 'dependence effect', where consumption is driven by the desires created through advertising: 'wants thus come to depend on output'. This power was recognised long ago and has only increased over time. Individuals are subjected to the 'manipulation of needs by vested interests' and instructed 'to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements', fulfilling manufactured 'false needs' (Marcuse 1964, p. 3,5). Total expenditures on advertising have risen to over $205 billion annually in the US (Griner 2017).

In addition, the state continues to allow widespread advertising and advertising aimed at children, subsidises industries, and encourages consumption to stimulate the economy. The state

operates in support of capitalist growth and therefore wants citizens to be avid consumers (MacNeil and Paterson 2012). This creates a context in which constantly consuming is the norm as well as consuming more over time – thus production and consumption *per person* has increased over time in affluent nations (Wiedmann *et al.* 2020). Even if there were widespread education programmes to promote a low-carbon lifestyle, it is unlikely that a mass voluntary conversion to low-carbon living would occur as increasing production levels, advertising to sell products, and a materialist culture continue to encourage high consumptive living. In addition, these lifestyle changes may not be possible or manageable for everyone depending on their economic status, location, occupation, or the options available.

The economic growth imperative, driving increasing levels of per capita consumption, also impairs the potential for technological innovations to reduce carbon emissions. Annual GDP growth depends on increasing production each year and therefore selling more each year. Production and consumption are going up each year and technological means to 'green' this process have resulted in paradoxical outcomes. For example, a 'transition' to renewable energy has not occurred as renewable energy has largely been used *in addition* to fossil fuel use rather than displacing it, resulting in increases in total energy use (York and Bell 2019). Energy efficiency gains are in many cases offset by increases in total energy use, known as the 'rebound effect' (Santarius 2012). In both cases, increasing economic growth (and associated production and consumption) undermines the potential of technologies to reduce total carbon emissions.

While advocates of green growth argue we can 'decouple' economic growth from carbon emissions; global, permanent, and absolute decoupling remains elusive and technological gains are unlikely to sufficiently reduce emissions while maintaining economic growth (Parrique *et al.* 2019). In other words, there is little to no chance of staying below 2°C in a growing economy and continuing to allow economic growth represents a very risky gamble with everything at stake (Hickel and Kallis 2019). Increasingly, climate scientists and scholars argue that economic growth is *incompatible* with the necessary reductions in carbon emissions to avoid catastrophic warming (e.g. Anderson and Bows 2012, Parrique *et al.* 2019). As Wiedmann *et al.* (2020, pp. 7–8) explain in *Nature Communications*, 'the profit-driven mechanism of prevailing economic systems prevents the necessary reduction of impacts' and we must 'replace GDP as a measure of prosperity' and '[e]xpect likely shrinking of GDP if sufficient environmental policies are enacted'. More and more scientists agree, economic growth must be curtailed. Why then focus so much attention on individual solutions that overlook this systemic problem?

Increasingly scholars and politicians argue that a focus on individual consumption choices, for example the use of lightbulbs and plastic straws, is a purposeful distraction employed by vested interests to deter climate policies that would impact industry. As Jensen (2009) states, we are 'victims of a campaign of systematic misdirection'. When asked about changing lightbulbs to mitigate climate change in a 2020 primary debate, Democratic presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren stated:

> This is exactly what the fossil fuel industry hopes we're all talking about … They want to be able to stir up a lot of controversy around your lightbulbs, straws, and cheeseburgers, when 70% of the pollution of the carbon that we're throwing into the air comes from three industries.

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency approximately 78 per cent of US carbon emissions come from industry, transportation, and electricity production and 10 per cent come from agriculture, leaving 12 per cent coming from commercial and residential activities (EPA 2020). While individuals do contribute to energy and transportation sector emissions (Greenberg 2019), these industries are responsible for significant emissions and also shape the options that result in individual emissions. Given that the majority of emissions are out of the control of individuals and beyond the influence of personal choices, scholars argue that lifestyle changes will not be sufficient as a primary mitigation strategy and represent a distraction from the necessary systemic change (Petersen *et al.* 2019).

Based on the evidence presented above, accusations of hypocrisy aimed at XR activists and the overall appeal to hypocrisy reveals a logical fallacy. Individual actions cannot solve the climate crisis and the only way to address the *majority* of carbon emissions (which *must* be addressed in order to limit global warming to 2℃ or below) is to implement systemic changes. Yet lingering neoliberal notions of individualism and solutions to social problems through consumption choices have convinced many people otherwise. In other words, this 'neoliberal appeal to hypocrisy' is being used to attack and undermine the credibility of groups like XR, despite the clear mismatch between their stated demands for system change and criticisms of individual consumption choices. Even some people who are part of the climate movement are convinced by this appeal to hypocrisy, despite the logical fallacy. This appeal to hypocrisy is significant as it can divide and weaken the climate movement.

Yet there is also a clear mismatch between XR's position on the 'toxic system' and their specific demands. As illustrated above, increasing evidence illustrates that it is likely impossible to limit warming to 2℃ in a growing economy. This indicates that we need a planned economic contraction and a reduction in material and energy use to reduce carbon emissions to the extent necessary (Hickel and Kallis 2019). Yet XRs three demands – aiming to be 'beyond politics' – fail to identify economic growth and the capitalist system that demands this growth as problematic. Thus, they also fail to demand the necessary system changes that would abandon the growth imperative and reshape society based on protecting social and ecological well-being. This illustrates yet another example of 'ideological denial', (Petersen *et al*. 2020), where environmentalists who care deeply still fail to understand the scope of change necessary to address the climate crisis (Foster 2015). While this denial in XR may have been strategic in order to increase diverse participation across political parties, most participants remain politically liberal (Saunders *et al*. 2020) and their failure to make the linkages to the necessary structural changes will limit their potential. As explained by Spash (2020, p. 67),

> new environmental activists have not yet substantively addressed the structure of the economic system, its consumerism and dominant corporate institutions, the political processes and politicians that maintain it, nor how such a system of political economy can realistically be transformed.

Although XR claims we have to fix the 'toxic system' in general terms, they fail to say why the system must change and how specifically it should change and how this change could happen. In contrast, ecological economists, ecosocialists, and degrowth scholars have done significant work identifying how we can change our economic and social structures to prioritise well-being, stay within ecological limits, and minimise global warming (e.g. Kallis 2018, Hickel 2020; Stuart *et al*. 2021).

Some scholars contend that the actions of activists like those in XR are pseudo-activities that only serve to reproduce the same system of unsustainability (e.g. Blühdorn 2017, Gunderson 2021). Given their lack of engagement with the structural changes that need to be made, XR and other climate groups do not demand what is necessary to limit global warming (Spash 2020). This failure makes their actions mere spectacle (Gunderson 2020), serving only to raise awareness that there is an issue rather than demanding the structural changes necessary. Indeed, many sources have reported that XR has effectively increased awareness of the climate crisis and changed the climate discussion in the UK. However, this discussion still fails to recognise that economic growth will continue to undermine technological solutions and that growth must be strategically reduced to avoid climate catastrophe. The climate movement at large still fails to focus on the crisis in a way that would indicate awareness of the drivers of problems and reflexive and appropriate responses. As stated by Blühdorn (2017, 56), what these climate activists are calling for 'is not the kind of action radical ecologists or the believers in reflexive modernisation had had in mind'.

While Gunderson (2021) identifies green consumption, lifestyle changes, do-gooders, and other forms of misplaced individual action as pseudo-action, Gunderson also offers a prescription for directed 'revolutionary reforms' indicating a possible pathway forward. If the climate movement were to demand specific structural changes to reduce energy and resource use and minimise

global warming (e.g. work-time reduction, advertising restrictions, reducing total energy use – see Stuart, Gunderson, and Petersen 2020, 2021, Gunderson 2021), then the movement would indeed take on a more transformative form that would have to challenge power and ideology. If efforts, such as the civil disobedience actions of XR, were focused on these specific pathways and demands for structural change it would result in a more connected and complete agenda (Spash 2020). While efforts focused on individuals surely continue to represent pseudo-action, where actions do indeed 'contribute to the stabilisation of the order which they intend to attack' (Blühdorn 2017), there is still a possibility that degrowth and ecosocialist views will move from the margins towards the centre of the climate movement as more scientists and activists argue that we *must* end economic growth in wealthy countries to address climate change (e.g. Hickel 2020, Wiedmann *et al*. 2020, Stuart *et al*. 2021). While there are many challenges to this shift within the climate movement, the possibility is worth pursuing as increasing evidence suggests that continuing along the path of perpetual economic growth is incompatible with keeping global warming within 2°C (Hickel and Kallis 2019, Parrique *et al*. 2019, Stuart *et al*. 2020).

Conclusion

As public opinion polls show increasing and majority support for climate action and world leaders consider which solutions to pursue, these tensions between individual and systemic change in the climate movement must be addressed. There is no doubt that fossil fuel companies and other vested interests will continue to direct attention toward individual behaviour change to stave off structural changes that might impact profitability. Yet a focus on individual actions is misguided, as it leaves the majority of emissions in place and also contributes to accusations of hypocrisy that divide and undermine the climate movement. We need system change. But if groups like XR truly are focused on system change, their demands must clearly address the problems with the growth-oriented capitalist system that continue to push us deeper into the climate crisis. It is a sign of increased awareness that the climate movement and related organisations are now focusing more on 'system change' and government action, yet this systemic focus remains too general and fails to pinpoint the driver of the crisis.

This analysis suggests that the tension between individual and system change in the climate movement is largely manifested through lingering neoliberal ideology, guilt, and an ongoing focus on individualism and green consumerism as the solutions to climate change. Most perniciously, this focus remains an effective distraction from the policies and systemic changes that could most effectively limit global warming. A focus on personal choices about lightbulbs, plastic straws, and even air travel continue to detract attention away from proposals to reign in the overproduction causing climate change and ecological overshoot. While there are many valid reasons to reduce one's carbon footprint, believing it is a sufficient solution remains false – a false narrative that companies like British Petroleum hope we all believe as we track our personal carbon footprints. However, this diverts attention from the structural changes necessary, changes that threaten the powerful actors of fossil capitalism. This system change must not only become the focus of the climate movement, but must be explicitly articulated and pursued. Without changes that prioritise well-being and curtail growth, we are likely locked into a future with warming well beyond 2°C.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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