

Evaluating the success of contemporary environmental activism By Eve Nicholson, Hill House Sixth Form Doncaster

Abstract

This essay explores a brief historical transformation of environmental activism and the varying levels of acceptance it has met internationally. The main argument of this essay is that environmental activism is not sufficient to make the necessary global changes in accordance with current scientific recommendations. There are many flaws, not only from the unresponsive governments, but within the movement itself. The key argument of this essay is that there are fundamental problems in environmental activism, but also issues of public reception and acceptance of the movement. The essay offers a balanced evaluation, factoring in the positive impacts of the movement, but highlights the overlooked issues. This article focuses on Extinction Rebellion as the most pertinent example however there is scope to assess wider environmental movements.

1. Introduction

With the growth of the virtual realm of social media, through increased accessibility to technology, environmental activism has transformed into contemporary groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays For Future, which have captured the global media's attention. Environmentalism has become not only a fight for recognition, but a battle for change in environmental attitudes and wider political systems. The issue arises due to the generally poor diffusion of this idea to global socio-economic players such as national governments and international organisations, and this article explores the deeply rooted issues from the conception, to the acceptance of the movement. For example, the ability to balance economic development with environmental decline, and the conflict which arises is explored within this essay. This article does not offer the solutions to make wider change, but highlights the often-neglected need for societal reflection and recognition of all the dynamic factors involved in this global dialogue.

Contemporary environmentalism is fuelled by modern fears of climate change, arguably the biggest threat facing humanity. Rising sea levels (Marshall, 2018), and land temperatures threaten the consumerist West as well as the smallest contributors, such as the carbon negative kingdom of Bhutan (TED, 2016). As ecosystems are destroyed, environmentalists, feeling duty bound, seek to pressure international economic systems for world change. The earth has reached a tipping point where humanity must make a choice. By understanding the transformation of environmentalism in a modern context, this essay explores not only the issues surrounding environmentalism, but the issues within it.

Globalisation describes the increasing interconnectedness of the world, occurring through trade, communication, commerce, migration and the development of trans-national corporations (TNCs). Globalisation is a global process that has created global events as a by-product. As such, this essay is naturally divided into three sections of global events: pandemics, climate change, and natural disasters. This essay concludes by stating that both globalisation and global events affect many, if not 'all places', yet the extent of the impact of these processes upon different places is not equal, unveiling a limitation of the statement.

Through critically analysing the extent to which global events impact all places, geographers gain increased understanding of the processes present in creating globalisation (and therefore global events), allowing us to direct these processes to create international improvements, revealing the significance of research into this topic within the wider field as it has the potential to improve people's livelihoods.

2. The transformation of environmental activism and its contemporary pertinence

The rise of groups like Extinction Rebellion (XR) has been exponential. Environmental movements became globally recognised in the 1960s, evolving into today's debatable extremism. Then, as now, environmental revolutionists are considered unrealistic or radical by governments. Peaceful protests have transformed into tube disruptions and vandalism (BBC Three, 2018), as civil unrest grows in response to a lack of action from the elite global powers, such as governments or multinational firms. Today, climate activists are multidimensional, tackling the interconnectivity between environmental ignorance, political corruption and profit maximisation. Using social media as a tool to diffuse their message on a global scale has helped the movement flourish, but also has created a platform for criticism and false information which can erode the core message of environmentalism.

Previous wars rooted in religious, political dogma have triggered the mass genocide of peoples over centuries. But now, political organisations arguably face the world's biggest battle yet. The Nixon administration (Hudson, 2020) created the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970. An international conference (Stockholm, June 1972) gave the world the United Nations Environment Program, but little else. World powers historically prioritise capital over climate instability. The economic downturn of the 1970's birthed desperate mass production and legacy pollutants that impact local hydrological systems today (Barrett, 2019). It is uncertain when environmental duty will overhaul economic imperative. In the Hind Swaraj, Ghandi wrote 'civilization is such that one has only to be patient, and it will be self-destroyed', but, 'it is destroying the planet and our lives, it is destroying our future'. (Shiva, 2019). If the international community does not acknowledge this, the result may be the 'mass extinction' XR refer to.

The development of trade and migration (dimensions of globalisation) has fuelled these outbreaks of pandemics. The Silk Road, for example, facilitated the proliferation of the Black Death outbreak of the Plague as this international trade route connected once isolated communities, creating a large economic network which allowed for the trading of goods, whilst simultaneously allowing for the dispersion of pathogens too. The earlier Plague of Justinian moved along trade routes too, killing approximately 25 million people across Africa, Asia, Arabia, and Europe (Howard, 2019). The fact that even remote communities were afflicted with this disease supports the idea that globalisation affected many places from as early as 541 AD. However, it is too broad a generalisation to state that the disease affected 'all places'; some areas were devastated by the disease whilst others escaped unscathed. The differing impacts of the Plague upon different places therefore refute the statement.

3. Inherent issues with the movement

In the 'Declaration of Rebellion', XR state, 'we are in the sixth mass extinction event', 'we will face catastrophe, if we do not act swiftly' (2019: 3). Environmentalists suggest that to conserve biodiversity and reduce emissions is humanity's duty. Ironically, these calls come from VHHDs (high human development countries), areas privileged with access to global networks. Critics suggest that climate protestors are still likely to be enjoying imported avocados on toast and ordering fast fashion online. Although we have seen the appearance of social media accounts such as 'Fridays for Future Bangladesh' the children of such low-income countries are unlikely to consider how much methane was produced to feed them. Familial incomes may barely be enough to necessitate a carbon neutral lifestyle. Even so, their lifestyles will be far more sustainable than the consumer driven global middle class (Roberts, 2017). Although accessibility to social media is increasing in the global south, there is still a significant proportion of unheard voices and the discussion is dominated by the West, from Facebook to the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. Perhaps if their opinion had more recognition, there would be more apprehension towards slowing economic growth at the expense of the world's poorest.

Demanding global climate mitigation exacerbates the development gap. Conversely, activism may highlight the plight of the densely populated Bangladesh (Marshall, 2018) where climbing sea levels could reduce landmass by 1/5. Reduced glacial melting from the Himalayas has increased the rate of desertification, endangering the primary sector-based economy. But presently, the cost of preventing this may be the incomes of millions of factory workers, trying to provide for their family. Thus, activists who wish to halt production in rapidly industrialising nations are hypocritical. The iPhone used to preach sustainability came from a Chinese Foxconn factory. Certain activists do not understand the consequences of extreme activism on those low-income households in the global south who are trying to attain the global middle-class lifestyle enjoyed in the West (Hamel, 2019).

Cultural diffusion has meant that increasingly switched-on countries desire the western lifestyle. Emulating the American Dream comes with consequences. Environmental sustainability is not profitable, but depleting resources is. This is the biggest issue with environmentalism. People are myopic, but realistic. Someone working a low paid factory job, who's income might be paying for their children's education, will not stop because the ice caps are melting. For those in famine, veganism is absurd. The growth of the middle class in developing nations (e.g India and China) has had catastrophic environmental effects, increasing pollutants with rising demand for cars and meat. China now has the biggest demand for processed foods, meaning overcultivation and overgrazing in fragile ecosystems (Kuo, 2013). Yet, no one has the right to deny people a sufficient quality of life, which varies across different social indicators used by different organisations.

Some countries are leading the industrial change to cleaner energy, but it is uncertain whether we can rebalance the environment's tipping point. For producers, 'going green' increases production costs, which means potential wage reductions or unemployment. It is difficult for a firm to alter its profit motives in order to become more sustainable while ensuring job security (White, 2014). Many countries cannot afford to subsidise clean technology or invest in supply side policies (e.g providing greener infrastructure). These

technologies can only mitigate the inevitability temporarily and remain under-researched and inaccessible to LHDs (low human development countries).

4. External issues with the movement

Aversion to environmental politics has been attributed to the older generations' fear of change. Angela Merkel thought that German children protesting in 2019 were prompted by Russian agents (Frankopan, 2018). This reiterates XR's message. They demand international cooperation, thus the abolition of intergovernmental suspicion. Politicians generally agree that climate action is a burden on economic progress. At the Paris Climate Accord, Trump stated it was an 'example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the U.S to the exclusive benefit of other countries' (Frankopan, 2018). This tribal mindset is what XR believes prevents the necessary global cooperation. Governments have become complicit in climate failure, as they funnel tax revenue into infrastructure projects (e.g HS2). Once again, economic prosperity is valued over ecological balance.

Mitigation efforts have advanced in the past decade, with emerging economies like China set to become the 'renewable superpower of the world' (Dudley, 2019). However, this does not forgive environmental concerns of Air Quality Index (AQI) levels of 999, and the loss of 50% of China's vertebrates since 1970 (Yan, 2016), proving that green policies can be used as political tools to appease growing global environmental concerns. Plus, the movement has not been wholly accepted by governments, evident in certain significant political figures rejecting the theories and insisting that climate change is a concept created to make 'manufacturing non-competitive' (Cheung, 2020).

It has been equally as difficult to reach a public consensus on green changes. Climate change concerns are failing to universally reach the general public. Extremist activism often preaches doomsday prophecies. Communication breaks down between scientific findings and media reports, exacerbated by the persuasive and confusing force of the internet, coupled with false information. Only 28% of news stories reflect the scientific consensus (TED, 2018), because scientific jargon does not reflect the language of government policy or public opinion. The potential breakdown of food chains and water crises in the Sahel region (Muggah and Cabrera, 2019) are issues that may not impact the average western consumer in the short term. Many are not aware of their role in such degradation. It is uncertain whether society will comprehend the potentially devastating impacts before it's too late. The effects on the environment will be irreversible. So, for now, sea levels may continue to rise until the West truly feels the repercussions. Western diets may lose exotic foods when the soil degrades completely from overgrazing and cash-crop overcultivation. The Amazon may become a complete carbon source, rather than a carbon sink (Malhi, 2010). The nutrient cycle may fail, terrorised by the unquenchable first for imports to satisfy an instant gratification driven society (Clark and York, 2005). It is important to note that all these predictions are uncertain, we do not truly know how our ecosystems will respond to climate changes. Thus, environmental activists feel it is their duty that we do not risk the potentially devastating consequences.

There is some evidence that the movement has penetrated general attitudes, evident in the rise of green consumerism such as thrifting, or initiatives to reduce single use plastic consumption such as 5p plastic bags, the popularity of metal straws or reusable coffee cups (White, 2019). That said, there is a general lack of consideration regarding the life cycle assessments or the true environmental cost of certain 'sustainable' alternatives. Perhaps,

the economic shock of COVID-19 is giving consumers time to reflect on personal waste production. 2/5 of Britons are planning to live more ecofriendly lifestyles after restrictions are relaxed (Randall, 2020). This pandemic has helped demonstrate the impact of human activity on the environment yet could also exacerbate the problem, as there may be economic requirements to boost consumption to recover from the impending recession.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, grassroots movements inspired by contemporary voices such as Greta Thunberg and Boyan Slat are often unfeasible. Activists can scream 'how dare you', but it will not penetrate an ignorant world. A world still dictated by fears of the inflation monster and crashing markets. Although a social media movement has ignited the conversation, the extreme measures proposed by groups like XR are too controversial to ever hold water with policy makers economically, but the message still deserves international recognition. The movement's fundamental issues can be overcome if important political and economic stakeholders are willing to discuss and cooperate. In particular, the global south deserves a more significant stake in global discussion. Moreover, like most revolutions, this could climax within months. Environmentalism must become a fundamental part of everyone's lives.

As Shabecoff states, 'If environmentalism is to be an agent of necessary social transformation, it will have to transform itself' (1993: 309). Transform itself to relate to all classes, and allow people to be active in affordable ways. It should not be restricted to VHHDs who can afford to be sustainable. Change can occur in a multitude of ways; thus, environmentalism must become more adaptable and inevitable. It must become humanity's duty to save the planet.

6. References

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