

The Children Who Accuse Us

Article by Rosalie Salaün

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Youth-led street movements have forced climate warming up the agenda in the past year. School strikes and demonstrations introduced young people to politics for the first time and new discourses changed how people think about the climate. Speaking to activists at a recent meet-up in Marseille, Rosalie Salaün discovers an emerging movement in some ways similar but in others markedly different from those that came before it. Non-partisan, practical, and ambitious, it both testing new tactics and learning past lessons as it seeks to build ground on which it can win.

It is probably the first global social movement of children. A year ago, in Sweden, a teenage girl started a weekly strike, alone outside her school. Gradually, thousands of young people joined her to go on strike every Friday. The movement might be based mainly in rich countries but a mobilisation for climate justice, led by young people and organised at the international level, is still unprecedented. Beyond the iconic Greta Thunberg, millions of youngsters are involved in Fridays for the Future, Youth for Climate, and Climate Strikes. What follows is a portrait of a generation that refuses to be sacrificed.

Generation Z angst

Being born in the 2000s means having learnt a whole series of environmental protection practices at school. Climate warming is an essential feature of this generation's horizon, a fixed part of its future. It trusted the adult world to pursue all possible solutions to the threat. Now faced with an ever-increasing gush of worrying information, from relentless extreme weather events to repeated warnings from experts and international climate scientists, how are young people meant to process it all?

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horizon*

The cognitive dissonance generates anger and anxiety that lies at the root of young people's engagement. Taking action wards off the anxiety driven by climate warming and ecological crisis – a new form of anxiety known by the neologism 'solastalgia'. On the cusp of adulthood, many young people feel that their futures are in jeopardy. "When I was graduating from high school, I asked my parents what was the point of exams when we're heading for a collapse," sums up 20-year-old Sylvain from Youth for Climate Marseille.

Faced with flagrant generational injustice, their politics rejects exhortations to small individual actions, understanding the causes of climate warming to be systemic. Activism is their cure for the anxiety of becoming an adult with the sword of Damocles hanging over one's head.

Run-of-the-mill ecologists?

To look at them, you wouldn't think these young activists more representative of the European population than older generations of green activists. They are somewhat white, somewhat educated, urban – in short, more elite than working class. At a recent gathering in Marseille in September 2019, it was impossible not to notice the 15 and 16-year-old participants' fluency in at least one foreign language. They have an excellent command of the vocabulary of political strategy, moving easily from debating the European energy transition to improving their approach to activism. They seem to have only one obsession: organising their mobilisation, both within their own countries and at the European level. Some even have links with wider international networks. "We work with youth movements in the United States," adds Nathan, 20 years old.

Not all are new to the world of activism. Petr, 18, a Fridays for Future activist from Prague, has already been involved in the Czech Young Greens and the We are the Limits direct action group against extractivism and coal mining [read more on [Limity jsme my](#)].

For those starting out, activism can be a way to achieve personal fulfilment. Mahaut, a 20 years-old Youth for Climate Marseille militant, did not know how to make a change. "Activism seemed out of reach, I was the 'end-of-the-worldist' of my class. But once you're involved, you completely forget all the preconceived ideas, you don't stop. We are even more legitimate than we thought."

Making their presence felt

Linus, 15, helps organise the weekly Fridays for Future strikes in Germany. With Jakob, 18, they talk about their daily activism: leading national meetings, organising working groups, finding funding, and managing media relations. Between 400 and 500 local groups go on strike every week. On the March 15th 2019 day of action, 300 000 joined protests in Germany. Without pretension or false modesty, Linus and Jakob are well aware that this success is partly explained by the hyper-connectedness of their digital-native generation. Social networks are "agents of socialisation" as Sylvain puts it, connecting and assembling people from different places and backgrounds. Illustrating the generational gap, Nathan recounts: "I worked for months with people without seeing them, it wasn't that frustrating. My father told me he wouldn't be able to do that."

Everyone seems to find their place in the range of activist tasks. Ana, 21 from Porto, works on education actions. Evi, 19, from Thessaloniki, concentrates on public awareness. Ashley, 18, now in Finland after a few years in the United States, leads a local group that participates in climate strikes. In the small working group they formed that morning, everyone shares the same language and vision. Strategic issues seem to have already been resolved a long time ago and official demands such as stopping fossil fuels are agreed upon easily.

Tactical complementarity

The almost instantaneous consensus reflects a shared desire to leave partisan labels to one side. Mahaut and Sylvain explain: "In Marseille, the environmental activists were scattered and isolated." But, after meeting the same faces everywhere, and they decided to work together. A charter guides their decision and, as long as activists respect it, they can decide on their actions spontaneously and autonomously. "All modes of action are equally necessary at all levels", they underline. The same is true for Jakob and Linus, who claim to accept everyone regardless of their pre-existing affiliations.

The young activists recognise that different tactics are complementary. Political ecology has always had one foot in the institutions and one in social movements, an approach that at times causes tensions. But adaptability allows the young activists to overcome what seem like nothing more than old quarrels. When asked whether institutional advocacy or more radical activism is more effective, Petr sighs: "No one knows how to solve the climate crisis. Everyone is trying to work it out and all aspects of climate activism make a difference." Begüm, a Turkish 23-year-

old living in Germany, is active on various fronts. She promotes a zero-waste programme at university, participates in literacy workshops for migrant women, and represents a Franco-German youth organisation. “I come from a very autonomous and radical niche. I have participated in climate strikes twice. Climate marches are fine but helping concretely is more useful” she adds.

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“Everything is important, whether it’s civil disobedience or local activism” adds Nathan. He is putting his efforts into institutionalising informal networks to build a European coalition of young people for the environment and climate. “There is no point in going to meetings just to shake hands. Every two weeks, I join the climate strikes. We are the same movement. We need to make sure that politicians don’t stop paying attention as soon as young people aren’t in the streets.”

As part of the Greta Thunberg dynamic, the activists are familiar with conservative attempts to discredit and undermine. Though most have their families’ backing, as young people they struggle to be taken seriously by political and corporate opponents and potential partners. But Linus and Jakob admit that support from Scientists for Future has helped strengthen the legitimacy of their claims. Considering the emergency at hand, their choice to be everywhere becomes logical. This movement will try to advance its cause by all possible means.

Being radical

Against this background, how should we interpret the emphasis on radicality that is often found in these movements? Where do they stand on the political terrain? Their responses remain evasive as if they do not recognise themselves in any of the traditional political offer.

Petr waves away such questions, “If being anti-capitalist is defending your future, then yes, I am probably anti-capitalist. But I don’t define myself as such,” he declares. Similarly, Sylvain explains: “We can’t define ourselves and don’t want to define ourselves.”

Their rhetoric does betray common concerns though such as consensus on the need to end productivism and against inequality. Mahaut puts it this way, “A Communist party member once told me ‘I love ecology and I love industry’. That is no longer possible.” Begüm picks up the same thread, “We can’t rely on capitalist companies to solve environmental problems. Nor can the struggle for ecology be separated from anti-fascism, the two go hand in hand.” Petr slams Emmanuel Macron’s environmental policies while stressing the importance of women and queer people to Fridays for Future. Sylvain says bluntly: “If I can’t work, it suits me very well. Full employment is bullshit!” If their political positions are to be analysed, starting from how they perceive the world might be more useful than the conventional paradigms of recent decades. If it seems that the question of ideological affiliation is being postponed, it is because this generation is still shaping the new ground on which politics will take place.

Know your history

These activists avoid dismissing the achievements of previous generations. When the Generation Climate Europe project, a new coalition of youth-led climate and environment NGOs, is mentioned, Nathan is positive, “We expected to find ourselves facing a wall, but the foundations have already been cleared by those who came before us.” He particularly appreciates the chance to talk to the newly elected MEP Kim Van Sparrentak, former

spokesperson of the Federation of Young European Greens, and hopes to gain contacts and potential partners to support the project.

Even though their generation voted in large numbers for Green parties at the last European election, they do not necessarily consider themselves as linked to the political movement. But the activists are grateful to learn from past experiences. Some speak of a lesson in humility, aware that historical links will help make sure they do not reproduce earlier failings – at least in those cases where Green parties have reckoned with their failures and successes.

The struggles of recent years are also a source of learning for the activists. In early 2019, massive strikes in Hungary reinstated social rights that Viktor Orbán's government's new employment law – dubbed the slavery law – had withdrawn. The success of this mobilisation was built on convergence between student movements and trade unions inspired by May '68 in France. "Being an activist is a privilege. An organised structure and clear demands are needed to succeed," concluded one student involved in the dispute. At the age of 30, Kim Van Sparrentak recalls the help that the German anti-coal Ende Gelände movement received from elderly people from surrounding villages in June 2019. A similar phenomenon was observed during the occupation of a gas field in Groningen, the Netherlands, by the Code Rood movement in 2018: "Everyone has a role, the ways forward are not always the ones you think," the Dutch MEP points out.

The revenge of future generations

This does not preclude a clash of generations. Not everyone welcomes a movement that renders historical icons obsolete. Nils, a member of the Young European Greens executive committee, does not hide his frustration when asked about how certain green figures have reacted to the youth movements: "Daniel Cohn-Bendit says that the demands made by Fridays for Future are impossible. It is not for a 70-year-old man to tell young people what to do!" The former leader of May '68 pouring cold water over the dreams of the young: the irony is palpable. Misunderstandings between generations are nothing new, but the fear of climate chaos gives particular weight to the views of today's youth. They are the ones that will suffer the consequences, so why deny their right to act?

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Many media outlets reacted with scepticism to Greta Thunberg's appeal to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Although the United Nations response will not be binding, the potential recognition that the rights of children may have been violated as a result of state climate inaction would be highly symbolic. Like the young Swede and her accusatory speech punctuated by "How dare you?" young people do not want to be saddled with the consequences of the actions of those who preceded them. In this respect, the UN is paving the way, alongside initiatives such as France's L'Affaire du Siècle petition, towards a form of intergenerational climate justice.

Another question remains to be answered. What choices will these young people make when, in a few years, they have the opportunity to take on responsibilities in place of those they today denounce? What will remain of this social movement? Petr has already thought this through. He hopes to build a movement strong enough to survive the years to come. For this reason, he stresses that partying is part of effective, democratic and sustainable activism. "We also need to have fun, not just work. You need to shake things up a little to organise people." What could be more normal when you're young?

Some names have been changed.



Rosalie Salaün has been International officer and Spokesperson for the French Young Greens (Jeunes Écologistes). She has been a member of the board of Europe Écologie les Verts (French Greens) Feminism Commission since 2016.

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