

The Rebellion Hypothesis: Crisis, Inaction, and the Question of Civil Disobedience

Dr Samuel Alexander



Independent Discussion Paper

'On 31st October 2018, we assembled on Parliament Square in London to announce a Declaration of Rebellion against the UK Government. We were expecting a couple of hundred people. Instead, 1500 came to participate in peaceful civil disobedience. The energy was contagious! The next few weeks were a whirlwind. Six thousand of us converged on London to peacefully block five major bridges across the Thames. We planted trees in the middle of Parliament Square, and dug a hole there to bury a coffin representing our future. We super-glued ourselves to the gates of Buckingham Palace as we read a letter to the Queen. Our actions generated huge national and international publicity and, as news spread, our ideas connected with tens of thousands of people around the world. The XR project was resonating with a deeply felt need for community and solidarity. "We are the ones we've been waiting for," we chanted! Dozens of countries now have groups springing up, from the Solomon Islands to Australia, from Spain to South Africa, the US to India.'

– 'Our Story' from the Extinction Rebellion Website

Extinction Rebellion: principles and practices

The Extinction Rebellion is quickly emerging as one of the most active and prominent faces of the environmental movement around the world at the moment. You have probably read about it in the newspapers or online, or perhaps even seen it erupt in your city streets. If you haven't yet, you may soon. While a 'protest' on a particular issue may come and go, a 'rebellion' defines itself by the breadth of its opposition and the refusal to fade away, even in the face of slow progress or backlash from the state. Whether the Extinction Rebellion can live up to its name remains to be seen, but the forces of resistance do seem to be on the rise (Read, 2019).

The Extinction Rebellion (or XR) has three principles or demands:

1. *Government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change;*
2. *Government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025;*
3. *Government must create and be led by the decisions of a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice.*

All these principles deserve critical consideration and ongoing debate (see Farrell et al, 2019), and reasonable people can accept them, challenge them, or disagree with aspects of them. Indeed, XR itself views these demands as part of an ongoing process of discussion and refinement, and how the movement and its key issues are framed have not been free from criticism, even by sympathetic voices (see e.g., Resilience, 2019). What is clear is that achieving the goals of XR will raise all sorts of deep complexities and thorny challenges, which may only be resolvable—again, if resolvable at all—through the messy process of lived experience and experimentation.

Nobody has all the answers; a swift decarbonization of the global economy is an intimidating task, supported by the science but utterly unprecedented in human history; there is no detailed blueprint to tell us how to do it. But there is a clear distinction between XR and most other forms of thinking and practice in the environmental movement today. In the attempt to respond appropriately to climate breakdown and the broader environmental crisis (see Steffen et al, 2015), XR is explicitly holding up non-violent civil disobedience as an important and perhaps necessary part of the socio-political strategy for achieving a just and sustainable world (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a; Hallam, 2019).

The main argument of this essay is that XR and rebellions like it are almost certainly going to grow in coming months and years as more people around the world become politically frustrated, angry, scared, and directly impacted by inaction in the face of today's overlapping ecological and humanitarian crises. I call this anticipated growth in XR and related movements the 'Rebellion Hypothesis', and I explain and defend the hypothesis below. Although I sympathise with the broad goals of XR, my argument herein is not that this and related movements *should* grow – a question I leave open for readers to determine for themselves. My argument is that they *will* grow, as behavioural shifts in society (or psychological tipping points) are provoked by the ongoing deterioration of Earth systems

and rising existential threats to the community of life (Tollefson, 2019). Put otherwise, I will argue that inaction has diminishing marginal returns, which makes social mobilizations for change more likely over time, since the real and perceived cost/benefit analysis of the environmental predicament tilts in favor of collective action. Whether this mobilization occurs in time to avoid worst-case scenarios, however, is unknowable. Although my focus here is specifically on XR, my primary argument is about the rise of environmental activism more generally in coming years and decades, irrespective of whether these uprisings continue to march under the banner of Extinction Rebellion.

I will also assess the unsettling strategy of ‘civil disobedience’ – the practice of non-violently breaking the law to advance social, political, or environmental causes. Uncomfortable though it can make us feel, it is important for a society to understand the motivations for civil disobedience and evaluate the reasons given for practising this radical and disruptive strategy for societal change. Some commentators will be tempted to dismiss XR activists as mere ‘trouble makers’ or even ‘criminals’, but such reactions, though understandable, risk mis-characterizing these ethically-motivated actions that are designed to be confronting, inconvenient, and disruptive. Even though most of us probably have reservations and concerns about civil disobedience, we must nevertheless appreciate that many of the most significant social and political advances over the last century owe much to social movements that engaged in civil disobedience as a primary strategy (Chenoweth and Stephen, 2010). One might think especially of Gandhi and the independence movement from British rule; the Suffragettes Movement; and the Civil Rights Movement. These esteemed traditions raise the disconcerting question: might future advances in society also demand civil disobedience?

Deep history, deep future: An ecological acknowledgement of country

Before looking more deeply at XR some context is required to fully understand this movement. Accordingly, I would like to begin this Melbourne-based essay, as one often begins a talk, by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which I write – the Wurundjiri people of the Kulin Nation – and pay my respects to the elders, past, present, and emerging. These have always been lands where people have gathered for purposes of conversation, collaboration, and self-governance, and I feel honoured to be participating in that tradition, even though I find myself in the complex situation of occupying land whose sovereignty has never been ceded.

But what does it mean to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land? It is very easy to say these things; it is much harder to know what it actually means; harder still to apply and live its truth. Let us briefly recall the colonial history to which I refer. In 1788 the British Crown turned up in Australia as a military force, and despite seeing the diverse cultures of Aboriginal Australians living on this land, the Crown declared *terra nullius* which Australian readers will know translates as ‘empty land’ or ‘land that belongs to no one’.

It was assumed that this land was empty because there was nothing which the Crown recognised as ‘civilised people’ living in Australia, despite the fact there was an Aboriginal population of somewhere

between 300,000 and one million (Pascoe, 2014). Since the land was ‘empty’ according to these self-serving colonial assumptions, this gave a thin veneer of legitimacy to the occupation of Australia – an act of interpretive violence which of course soon evolved into acts of violence plain and simple. Indigenous populations do not often or ever freely give up their land or rights of self-governance to invading nations. Therefore, the stronger military powers have to resort to massacre and violence. Australian history is an example of a broader colonial history.

This colonial history, which still resonates in cultural and institutional reality today, is especially troubling in the context of the environment crisis we find ourselves in, so let me dwell on this connection for a few moments. Recent archeological evidence suggests that indigenous Australians have walked these lands for probably 65,000 years or longer (Pascoe, 2014). At once there is a striking lesson here: Australia’s First Peoples did not undermine ecosystems in fatal ways. I do not want to romanticize indigenous culture or suggest that Aboriginal Australians did not have ecological impacts. But the fact is that the First Peoples were able to live on this land for tens of thousands of years without degrading the land-base or destabilizing Earth systems. On the whole, ecosystems were able to regenerate sufficiently to allow for traditional cultures to be maintained over tens of thousands of years. It could be argued that this type of longevity or sustainability is the first and most important feature of any truly civilized culture: viability through deep history and capable of living on into the deep future. And yet, Aboriginal cultures were dismissed as uncivilized and primitive – invisible through the colonial lens adopted by the British Crown.

Compare this, then, with the industrial civilization which the British Crown brought with it and established, which is merely two or three hundred years old. Over this very short time frame – a blink of the eye in geological timeframes – human beings have become so destructive that we have become geological forces. So significant has been our impact that Earth scientists now speak of the ‘Anthropocene’ – the first geological era caused by humans (Steffen et al, 2015). In fact, industrial civilization is not so much an era as it is an event. Our industrial and extractivist form of life is decimating wildlife populations and driving ever-more species to extinction, deforesting the planet, destroying topsoil, disrupting the climate, emptying the oceans and poisoning waterways, overconsuming renewable resources and is overly dependent on non-renewable resources. Plastic is contaminating essentially every ecosystem on Earth, from the deepest reaches of our oceans to the most distant corner of Antarctica. In the haunting words of James Lovelock (2010), the face of Gaia is vanishing.

So, we might fairly ask ourselves: which way of life, in the greater scheme of things, is more civilized? Is it the dominant culture and economic system today, which in matter of a few centuries have degraded this rich ecosystem in ways that are threatening the viability of our species and all other species? Or is it the culture that was sufficiently civilized to live on the Australian continent for 65,000 years without destroying the planet?

I’m not going to suggest simplistically that we should try to return to the Aboriginal way of life, and it’s quite possible that the land-base could not support today’s population of 25 million living off the land in that way. But I want to begin by paying the most humble respect to the traditional cultures of Australia’s First Peoples, for their ability to live for tens of thousands of years on this land, and to suggest that there will be features of indigenous ways of living, in Australia and elsewhere, that

we have much to learn from, as we seek to respond appropriately to the range of deep environmental and social problems that modern, growth-orientated, industrial life presents. So it's not about a return to the past so much it is about honouring the past and learning from it, as we move into a complex and turbulent future (Norberg-Hodge, 2016; Pascoe, 2014).

And a turbulent future it promises to be (Gilding, 2011). Sometimes scientists put bacteria in a Petri dish, on an organic substrate, and watch as the bacteria grow in numbers until the dominant colony has consumed all the available resources or poisoned itself from its own waste. In a sense, the bacteria grow themselves to death, like a cancer cell, by undermining the life support system upon which they depend, killing the host. But suppose we were aliens on Mars with a strong pair of binoculars and we were watching the happenings on Earth over the last couple of centuries. Could not industrial civilization on Earth resemble the dominant colony of bacteria in the Petri dish? Are we not also at risk of consuming all the available resources and poisoning ourselves from our waste streams? It is a provocative metaphor but a useful one to get the analysis underway. And perhaps the background question that lies in the sub-text of this essay is this: can we, homo sapiens – so-called 'wise humans' – show ourselves to be smarter than common bacteria and avoid their fate?

In later sections of this essay I will reflect on the theory and practice of civil disobedience, both generally and in application to the Extinction Rebellion. But first I'm going to ground my primary argument by presenting what I'm calling the 'Rebellion Hypothesis.'

The Rebellion Hypothesis: why a new wave of activism may be coming

Let me try to unpack what I mean by the Rebellion Hypothesis. It seems to me that there is a collective rumbling in the world today; a growing anger and anxiety about the troubled future that is unfolding day by day, and a growing sense that, if governments are not going to act decisively in response to today's overlapping ecological and social crises, then ordinary people like you and me will have to be the driving force for change. But feeling anger and anxiety about environmental breakdown and the unfolding extinction of species does not automatically translate into collective action. The history of widespread apathy or half-hearted resistance testifies to this truth. I know people who share their sense of dread with me but who have yet to mobilize and connect with activist groups. And I know a huge amount of people who understand that the world is going to hell but who manage to distract themselves with modern engagements (Netflix, social media, etc.) in order to avoid facing the truth of our global predicament. We all see this social phenomenon which serves to entrench the status quo, and at times, I am sure, we all fall back into that default mode of apathy or inaction ourselves. It is easy to become disenchanted with the world and collapse into resignation or even despair (Bendell, 2018).

Why is it so easy to be complicit in ecocide and do little to resist? Even though the world is burning and billions of people are living in conditions of humiliating destitution, life for many of us in developed nations is relatively comfortable. Indeed, Australia is almost on top of the world in terms of prosperity,

having more or less ducked the Global Financial Crisis ten years ago and our fossil-fueled economy, for the time being, at least, continues to grow at a robust pace. Most of us have discretionary income to spend on an occasional meal out, or a few drinks in the weekend, or a new pair of jeans or shoes, and so forth. With important exceptions that must never be downplayed, not many Australians go hungry. And if our summer days reach infernal temperatures, we are generally able to turn on our air-conditioners and temporally hide ourselves from harsh ecological realities. The supermarket shelves are well stocked, there is petrol at the service stations, and on-demand streaming television is always waiting to sedate us if we need to self-medicate. Never in history has a comfortable and prosperous citizenry ignited a revolution. When life is good, people do not mobilise to overthrow the system that seems to give them what they think they want. On what basis, then, do I formulate the Rebellion Hypothesis? Why should we expect mass mobilization of people in coming years?

Let me explain by way of a simple parable. Suppose you are on a boat, with a large cake, and you suddenly notice that the boat has sprung a leak. The leak is slow and you do not panic. Instead, you cut yourself a slice of cake and it is delicious. As you finish the slice, you assess the leak again. A little water has gathered in the bottom of the boat, but nothing too alarming. So you cut yourself another slice of cake. This slice was also delicious, but perhaps not quite as good as the first one. Upon finishing your second slice you notice that your feet are wet, which is a bit unsettling. It seems the leak has gotten worse and yet you wouldn't mind another slice of cake. What do you do? Is it time to panic and act? Or do you have another slice of cake?

The point of this simple parable is to highlight how over time the costs of inaction can grow and the rewards of doing the same old thing begin to decline. This shift will eventually influence our behavior. To borrow the language of economics, we might say that inaction has diminishing marginal returns. At first, inaction doesn't seem to cost much and might even offer rewards. Over time, the costs of inaction rise as the problems get worse. In this example, each piece of cake isn't quite as good as the last, while at the same time, the costs of not addressing the leak are becoming ever more pressing.

At some point—the tipping point—it becomes clear that the costs of inaction outweigh the benefits of more cake. At that point, the person in the boat switches from being passive consumer into an engaged activist (of whatever form). The meaning of their life has become animated by the desire to stop the boat from sinking. They have come to see that their life will be better if they act – and so they act. Cake is no longer as important or as desirable as stopping the leak. So, they substitute one form of life for a different form of life, because the calculus has changed regarding actual or perceived costs and benefits.

Those people already engaging in individual acts of resistance or collective action have already passed their tipping points (Extinction Rebellion, 2019a). They have weighed up the costs and benefits of inaction, and concluded that inaction now costs too much. At some point the conscious or semi-conscious calculations regarding the question of whether to rebel produced a positive answer – whether that moment was last week, last year, last decade, or, for the more seasoned activists, even last century. Calls for a 'new environmental radicalism' will be heard more loudly (Hamilton, 2011).

The notion of a tipping point is normally used in relation to ecological systems, where small increments in damage can suddenly lead to swift and drastic change, often irreversible. I am using the same idea but applying it to the human psychology of activism. Every day we become more aware that our planet is dying, putting the entire community of life at risk. Whether it is the arctic or the Amazon burning, or a new species that has gone extinct, or a new climate report explaining why breakdown is happening faster than expected: each of these moments of awareness begin to add up, and yet often people don't respond with action or resistance. People can be bombarded with grim information about the ecological catastrophe unfolding, and yet remain locked in the ruts of life, doing today more or less what they did yesterday. Like the person in the boat, it is easier to continue eating or pursuing cake. This path is easily followed most of the time. But as Albert Camus (2000: 19) once wrote, "one day a 'why' arises – and everything begins in the moment of weariness tinged with amazement. 'Begins' this is important." One day a person asks: Are we the people we have been waiting for? If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Perhaps my argument is getting clearer. I am suggesting that there is a growing 'affect' for resistance and rebellion. When I speak of the Rebellion Hypothesis, what I am suggesting is that in coming months and years, more and more people will join XR or related movements as the costs of inaction continue to rise and the rewards of being a passive bystander decline. It seems to me that this is more or less inevitable because the costs of environmental damage will inevitably increase and become ever-more personal and immediate. A new economics of activism is dawning. Currently, so much of the violence being imparted by our industrial civilization is being externalized to other parts of the world or to others less fortunate or less powerful, including other species. This makes it easier to pretend that everything is fine and that we are not in an emergency. But as climate breakdown continues and the broader environmental crisis intensifies, the impacts will begin to be felt by more and more people, even in rich nations.

For example, when extended drought returns to (or intensifies in) Australia, as it seems destined to do, we will see farmers joining XR or related movements as their livelihoods are directly threatened by climate change. Their tipping point will pass, and climate inaction as we know it today will be intolerable – a direct existential threat to their way of life (Fookes, 2019). When those droughts lead to increases in food prices, the urban consumer might stop to think: hang on, this had been predicted by the scientists and it has begun to affect me personally – we had better act. Their tipping point will pass. When the icecap disappears in coming years or decades, and the threat of rising seas levels become not a theoretical possibility but a practical problem, people living in coastal regions of the world will realize that climate change is not an abstract problem but something that could wash away their homes. Others will be affected by extreme weather events, and their tipping point will pass also. When children realize that they will be inheriting an unstable climate system, or a world without panda bears and the Great Barrier Reef, they will mobilize and agitate, and soon enough they will enter the voting constituency and provoke a profound political shift. Their tipping point will pass. One could go on.

To some extent, this growing resistance is already underway – XR is hardly the first mobilization in this vein. Think especially of the noble work of the global School Strikes or, in Australia, the anti-

Adani activists. But my argument is that the costs of inaction are necessarily going to increase, and as the Earth system deteriorates, the benefits of passive by-standing are going to seem less and less rewarding and socially acceptable. In other words, ever-more people will experience a tipping point. Your neighbor, your colleague at work, a child or police officer, perhaps eventually more politicians. Each of them has a threshold or tolerance – and their tipping points are approaching. A cultural shift may be underway, even if it remains in its early stages. This cultural shift could eventually filter upwards and have political and macroeconomic effects. (One must also accept that this social energy at times might be misdirected in regressive ways as people look for minority scapegoats to blame for the harder economic times – a complex issue that is noted but deferred for analysis on another occasion).

We are all in a lifeboat called Earth. In the 1960s and 70s when the modern environment got underway, people noticed a leak in the boat and recognized it to be dangerous (Meadows et al, 1972). They spoke of a crisis in the future. Things continued to get worse but most people couldn't resist the cake. Not enough people mobilized to plug the leak. Now the boat is leaking disastrously, and water is up to our necks; some people are already drowning. Crisis has arrived. The future is now. And more and more of us are sick of cake. More and more of us have exceeded our threshold. To change the metaphor, the floodgates are threatening to burst and it is not clear that the growing energy of opposition can be contained (Extinction Rebellion, 2019b).

Furthermore, this growing force is going to lead to increasing pressure within the social system – like steam increasing in a closed system. As the resistance increases and becomes more energized, we can expect backlash from those still benefiting from the existing system (and again, we are seeing this already). But as the defenders of the status quo lash out and oppress the rising tide of resistance, what they will discover is that their actions in fact only mobilize more people, as the social license of the fossil industry, corporate greed, and the politics of denial fade and ultimately disappear. In other words, one day state and corporate blindness or apathy in the face of worsening ecological catastrophes will offend public morality, and perhaps that day is closer than we think.

Based on empirical studies, it has been estimated that only 3.5% of a population needs to mobilize and engage in collective action to induce deep structural and cultural change (Chenoweth, 2017). While such estimations need to be interpreted critically and cautiously—and every context and situation is different—the point is that surprisingly small social mobilizations can have far-reaching impacts. Of course, such deep transformations do not happen overnight, but the history of disruptive social movements shows that things can happen faster than one might at first think. The Environmental Movement may not need a Martin Luther King or a Gandhi to lead. Perhaps what is needed is a thousand or a million Rosa Parks to get things done?

Due to the momentum of global capitalism today, global environmental problems are almost certainly going to get worse before they get better, and this will only fuel the fire of rebellion. There is an ecological contradiction built into our society, our economy, and our politics: that contradiction is the assumption that limitless economic growth is possible on a finite planet (Hickel and Kallis, 2019).

But even the simplest of folks can grasp that when something cannot continue, it stops. We no longer need to ask, ‘can we change the world?’ – because the world is inevitably going to change and is already changing. The future is not what it used to be. One way or another, change is coming because the status quo simply cannot be maintained (Alexander and Read, 2019). We are in the process of witnessing a self-destructive civilization collide with environmental limits, and increasingly people are going to suffer under this perverse system, and increasingly people are going to see that better, freer, less impactful, and more compassionate ways of living are available. People will try to live those new worlds into existence. Both of these things—both suffering under the existing system and the prefigurative ‘new world’ imagination—are mobilizing forces.

My prediction or hypothesis, then, is that this collective rumbling—this emerging matrix of global social movements (Read, 2019)—is only going to intensify and amplify. At some point, it may ignite in ways that currently our imaginations cannot even begin to grasp. Or it may fade away into oblivion like other beacons of hope—think Occupy, for example, which rose as quickly as it fell (even if we can still debate whether Occupy induced valuable impacts and conversations that live on). Social movements have a tendency to surprise us. I am not sure whether forthcoming environmental rebellions will be able to save the world, but I feel they are destined to change the world as the world changes us.

What is civil disobedience and is it justified?

I have argued that the Extinction Rebellion and related movements are likely to grow over coming years. Let me now spend some time examining a defining feature of XR – that is, an openness to civil disobedience as a strategy for change. What is civil disobedience? And when, if ever, can it be justified?

In essence, civil disobedience can be defined as ‘a public, non-violent and conscientious breach of law undertaken with the aim of bringing about change in laws or government policies’ (Brownlee, 2007: np). For present purposes I will assume that for disobedience to be ‘civil’ it has to be non-violent, and indeed this accords with the explicit and unconditional commitment XR has to non-violence (Farrell et al, 2019). In an important aside, empirical studies show that movements committed to non-violent disobedience tend to be twice as successful in achieving their aims as violent demonstrations (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2012), thus XR’s principled commitment to non-violence is also pragmatic. One might add that it is also a diverse strategy, with Gene Sharp famously listing 198 ways to practice non-violent resistance (Sharp, 1973). Before engaging in such acts, however, individuals and groups should ask themselves: can civil disobedience ever be justified in a democracy?

It can be helpful to begin assessing civil disobedience in relation to basic democratic theory. Imperfect though it is, it can be said that we, in Australia, live in a democracy. Among other things, this means that citizens and permanent residents get to vote on who will represent them in government, and government includes a legislative branch that creates law and an executive branch that enforces it. (For present purposes I’ll leave to one side the judicial branch that interprets law). Since we all have, in theory, an equal opportunity to influence the law-making process through the ballot box, it

is generally assumed that we should obey the law because the democratic process is the best way to organize and structure society and develop public policy that serves the common good.

From this perspective, an opponent of civil disobedience might argue as follows: *we can't all break the law every time we disagree with it. Imagine how unstable society would be if that happened. If we don't like what is happening, we can campaign for change like everyone else, and if we succeed, we can vote the existing government out of power through the electoral process and vote in a new government.* In this way, democratic societies are said to have created the institutions and processes needed for their own peaceful, improvement. It may not be a perfect political system, but as Winston Churchill is reported to have said: 'It is the worst form of government, except for all the others.'

So, the main objection to civil disobedience is this: *if you disagree with a law or policy, don't break that law or policy; instead, campaign to get it changed through the democratic process. If you are permitted to break the law just because you disagree it, then why can't anyone break a law they disagree with?* At first instance, perhaps, this objection seems quite powerful. Indeed, the great philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that '[a]ll resistance against the supreme legislative power... is the greatest and most punishable crime in the commonwealth, for it destroys its very foundations' (Kant, 1970: 81). If people only abide by laws they agree with, then the rule of law would break down. To some extent, then, we might all have sympathy with the political assumption that we ought to obey laws – even laws we don't agree with.

But it is one thing to make that broad and pragmatic concession. It is quite another to suggest that all laws, always, ought to be obeyed. If obedience to law were unconditional and absolute by virtue of the democratic process, it would follow that civil disobedience is always unjustified. How might acts of civil disobedience be interpreted within the contested disciplines of legal and political theory?

First of all, one might argue that civil disobedience is potentially justifiable when the mechanisms of democracy are not working properly, such that laws do not represent the will of the people. This can occur when laws and policies are shaped by the undemocratic influence of foreign governments, billionaires, mass media conglomerates, or other corporate lobby groups (e.g. buying a politician's support) (see e.g. Mayer, 2016; Tham, 2010). In such cases, one might suggest that laws produced by undemocratic processes do not demand our political allegiance since they were not produced through fair, robust, and representative democratic processes.

There is also a second way in which it might be argued that civil disobedience is justified. That is, to recognize that there is a distinction between law and morality; or a distinction between what is law and what is just. Often, we might admit, there is much overlap between law and justice. The more overlap the better. But any thinking person knows that often in history, and no doubt still today, there are times when we see a clear difference between what is 'law' and what is 'just' – even if justice is an essentially contested term. In other words, democracy may be the best form of government, but this does not mean that a democracy always gets things right. Rather, democracy, when it is functioning properly, reflects culture, and there is *no reason to think that cultural norms and expectations are always just*. Put more directly, a functioning democracy can produce unjust laws when a citizenry knowingly and voluntarily votes for policies that are unjust (even if they are not considered unjust by those voting for them).

For example, we know that democracies have historically declared it illegal to engage in same-sex relationships, and today most members of liberal democracies recognize that such laws were and are in breach of basic human rights. In the past, laws produced in democracies have institutionalized slavery, ratified unjust wars, legally entrenched racial segregation, criminalized homosexuality or particular religious practices, prohibited women and people of colour from voting, and so forth. Again, what is law does not automatically overlap with what is just. Nobody can deny that unless you still believe in the ‘Divine Right of Kings’ – and I am sure no one thinks Prime Minister Scott Morrison is God’s infallible messenger on Earth chosen to lead us to the Promised Land.

At such times when a law or policy is clearly unjust (e.g. recognising ownership of persons as slaves), a case can be made that there is a place for civil disobedience in democratic societies, on the grounds that we must accept that even democratically produced laws sometimes get it wrong – sometimes *really wrong*. There is a rich and revered tradition in legal and political theory that recognizes and accepts these broad lines of argument (see review in Brownlee, 2007). In other words, it is widely accepted that there is a proper place for civil disobedience in liberal democratic societies. In fact, as we look back on social movements in history – whether it is Gandhi’s campaign for independence, Martin Luther King, Jnr, and the Civil Rights Movement, or Emmaline Pankhurst and the Suffragette’s Movement – some of the greatest leap forwards in social and political progress have been a *result* of acts of civil disobedience. It would show a gross lack of historical understanding to dismiss civil disobedience as a regressive social practice. The powerful but uncomfortable inference is that future acts of civil disobedience may also be required to advance our state of society.

Civil disobedience and the Extinction Rebellion

So how does this apply to Extinction Rebellion? There are, as I have just implied, two main ways to evaluate civil disobedience. On the one hand, an argument could be made that we live in democracies that are at least partially broken, such that the laws and policies that are produced are sometimes undemocratic because of the undue influence corporate interests have had on the legislative process – for example, the fossil fuel industry, the Murdoch media, or other powerful economic forces (see e.g. Market Forces, 2019; Tham, 2010; Cooke, 2019; Knaus, 2018; Rudd, 2019). This suggests that even if our culture wanted a strong climate response, vested interests would interfere with any such response and ensure that law and policy kept things more or less as they are. To some extent, this may be part of the reason why Australia’s climate policy is weak-to-non-existent. In cynical words often attributed to Emma Goldman: ‘if voting changed anything, it would be made illegal.’ One might say in the same vein: if lunatics have taken over the asylum, a case can be made that a citizenry might need to break their rules and establish new rules.

Perhaps the more powerful argument for civil disobedience, however, is that overall, Australian culture has yet to fully appreciate the magnitude of climate breakdown and the broader environmental crisis (perhaps due to powerful vested interests shaping public consciousness). After all, as I’ve noted earlier, it is still quite easy to distance ourselves from the impacts of these crises, and we also know that Australia has just voted in a government that celebrates coal and essentially denies that climate breakdown is a problem deserving of a response. For these reasons among others, the

Australian government is each instant losing some of its integrity.

So, we might draw an analogy here with the anti-slavery or civil rights movements in the US. Where once the state sanctioned and supported the moral wrongs of slavery and segregation, today the state sanctions and supports the moral wrong of climate breakdown. Activists who engaged in civil disobedience during the Civil Rights Movement might accept that white people were in fact voting for racist laws and public policy, but justify their disobedience on the grounds that racist laws and policies were wrong and deserved to be disobeyed. We cannot say that the anti-slavery activists or civil rights activists were wrong to break the law and engage in non-violent acts of civil disobedience. Those racist laws were grossly immoral, and they deserved to be disobeyed. Rosa Parks was right not to give up her seat on the bus on that fatal day in 1955 even though it violated the laws and regulations. According to Henry Thoreau (1982), who published his famous essay on civil disobedience in 1849, this strategy is not just a right but at times a duty. It is no surprise, then, that Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jnr, Emmaline Pankhurst, and countless other social activists have been inspired to engage in such acts and are now revered for their bravery.

Let us ask with Thoreau: are we expected to resign our conscience to the legislator? Why have a conscience, then, if we are simply expected to uncritically affirm all acts of government? We must be human beings first and subjects of the state afterward. As Thoreau (1982: 111) argued, 'it is not desirable to cultivate a respect for law, so much as for the right,' and indeed, Thoreau argued that respect for law can, at times, make us daily agents of injustice. In relation to his own time, he argued that one could not be associated with the US government without disgrace, for he could not recognize as *his* government what was also the *slave's* government. He concluded that if a government's law is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, Thoreau argued: break the law. 'Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine,' he declared (Thoreau, 1982: 120). 'Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence' (Thoreau, 1982: 122).

In the UK, after merely eight days of Extinction Rebellion activities more than 1000 people had been arrested for their civil disobedience. While no one should fetishize 'being arrested' as the only way to participate in XR, and the movement should recognise also that people have different 'biographical availabilities' for being arrested (Beyerlein & Bergstrand, 2013), the fact is that all acts of civil disobedience raise the possibility of being arrested and perhaps imprisoned. No doubt acts of civil disobedience will be perceived by many as annoying and inconvenient and unnecessarily disruptive, but that calculus always has to be weighed against the moral wrong that is motivating the disobedience (see Monbiot, 2019). Slavery and segregation were also 'inconvenient'... on those who suffered under racist laws! In that light, the inconvenience caused by 'sit ins' and Bus Boycotts pale in comparison. Similarly, when environmentalists engage in acts of civil disobedience to resist ecocide, the extinction of species, and the unfolding climate emergency, some sectors of society will no doubt be appalled and dismiss the activists as 'trouble makers' and 'criminals.' Civil disobedience may indeed be inconvenient to many people. But to evaluate the legitimacy of the civil disobedience, one has to resist superficial analyses and ask how that inconvenience compares to the future suffering, and indeed the suffering already being caused, by environmental breakdown (Spratt and Dunlop, 2019; Nixon, 2013).

I can now bring the analysis to a head. Just imagine, for example, that in ten years or twenty years or thirty years – it doesn't really matter when – we discover that our high-impact modes of production and consumption have led to even more alarming ecosystemic breakdown, a future that has mountains of scientific support (see e.g. Steffen et al, 2015; Spratt and Dunlop, 2017). Suppose the climate reaches its tipping point; Australia and other nations enter indeterminate and intensifying drought (just look at New South Wales presently); food production drops even as population grows, leading to mass famine and increased geopolitical tension and war; suppose in ten or twenty years the arctic icecap disappears and the methane release from the permafrost induces a swift jump in global temperatures. Suppose any number of such things happen and people begin to die. When we look back on today we will ask ourselves: Did we do enough? Were we complicit in a broken system? Should we have been so obedient given that we knew our gutless governments were leading us down a dead end?

These questions are not for me to answer – I am still struggling with them myself. I will remain a sympathetic critic and revise my views as new evidence and insight emerges. None of us can condemn or condone the actions of XR in advance of their particular, context-dependent manifestations. One might sympathise with XR in general while disagreeing with specifics, or vice versa. These are very personal questions (with social effects) which we must meditate on with due diligence. But my point is that if the future turns out how the best scientists are predicting it will turn out if business as usual continues (for reviews, see Steffen et al, 2015; Spratt and Dunlop, 2017; Spratt and Dunlop, 2019), then the younger generation might well ask us what we did to resist the foreseeable collapse of ecosystems and the humanitarian catastrophes such breakdowns will induce (and are already inducing).

Conclusion: on the right side of history?

Writing in the 19th century, Karl Marx announced that he had discovered the laws of history. He maintained that it was inevitable that as the contradictions of capitalism became ever more severe and transparent, eventually the working class – the proletariat – would rise up and overthrow the capitalist class and establish communism. I have always been suspicious of determinist conceptions of history, knowing that human societies do not follow predetermined laws. I feel that we will be what we make of ourselves and nothing else, as the existentialists argued, even if we are born into a world not of our own making. But when we freely act in ways that undermine the ecosystems that we (and future generations) depend on for freedom and prosperity, then our lives begin to be shaped not so much by human decisions as by ecological realities and geological forces. At least, human freedom is increasingly *contained and influenced* by those worsening realities and forces. We are living in such times today.

What Marx never foresaw was that capitalism would indeed fall, but not by way of revolution, but by way of deterioration and perhaps collapse. As the broad ecological crisis intensifies, and collapse situations become more common, challenging, and disruptive, I have argued that more and more people will face their psychological tipping points and become engaged in collective action. At some point, tolerance of ecocide will become intolerable.

What is the threshold of your neighbour? Your children or parents? Your work colleagues? Our politicians? I don't know, but my sense is that those tipping points are approaching – if not tomorrow, then next month, or next year, or the year after that. The Rebellion Hypothesis, as presented, is that every day more people are saying to themselves: 'I am an activist; I am a change-maker not passive consumer; I am responsible for participating in progressive social change; I want to be; I have to be.' The question we must all face, as global citizens on a dying planet, is whether our governments are meeting their fundamental duty to keep us and our children safe.

Rebellion, I am suggesting, has effectively become a law of history due to ecological realities. The climate crisis is already here, to some extent locked in, and certainly threatening to get much worse. Three hundred years of industrial momentum means that it is now too late for any smooth, non-disruptive democratic shift to some ecological civilization. For better or for worse, turbulence and disruption will define coming decades. Things are likely to get worse before they get better. But as this happens people will inevitably be mobilized as the calculus of apathy and inaction shifts and the activist is born. As Camus (2000: 19) declared: 'Everything begins in that moment of weariness tinged with amazement.'

In six months, or two years, or five years, or ten years, I invite you to reflect back on this essay and assess to what extent you think the hypothesis presented has been verified by growing global social movements or falsified by increased apathy. I feel confident, for the reasons I have outlined, that the future will confirm my prediction. If I am wrong, and the status quo endures, then all the worse for us. In short, I have argued that the logic of rebellion is becoming irresistible to more and more people and that this trend is destined to continue. And one implication of this is that we should not conceive of the Extinction Rebellion as something already riding the crest of a wave, but rather, XR represents a movement of movements that is still in its infancy. This entails a prospect of something much bigger that is still in the process of being born, even though it may be that the hour is darkest just before dawn. Still, the uncertain promise of a new dawn is not needed to justify the rejection of a world immiserated by capital's violent overreach.

In this essay I have invited you to ask yourself: what are the costs and benefits of inaction? What are the costs and benefits of resistance and rebellion? My argument has been that this calculus is already shifting in favour of resistance and rebellion and that this shift is now unstoppable, whether one sympathizes with XR or not. XR is part of this shift but the global movement and energy are broader than any one framing or articulation. The floodgates are holding for the time being, but the laws of physics will win out, as they always do. Participants in XR are early-adopters and if warnings of ecological science are to be taken seriously and prove even vaguely accurate, this movement – despite the negative press it will inevitably receive from some sectors in society – is likely, as George Monbiot (2019) argues, to end up on the right side of history.

With a nod to Thoreau, the Extinction Rebellion seeks to be a counter friction to the machine.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Associate Professor Peter Burdon for very helpful feedback on a draft of this essay. Thanks also to Benn Eden for permission to use the cover image. Instagram: @bennedenbenn

References

- Alexander, S & Read, R 2019, *This civilisation is finished: conversations on the end of Empire and what lies beyond*, Simplicity Institute, Melbourne.
- Bendell, J, 2018, 'Deep adaptation: a map for navigating climate tragedy', IFLAS Occasional Paper 2 (27 July 2019).
- Beyerlein, K, & Bergstrand, K, 2013. 'Biographical availability', *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, viewed 5 September 2019, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm012>
- Brownlee, K, 'Civil disobedience' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, viewed 5 September 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/civil-disobedience/>
- Brulle, R, 2014, 'Institutionalizing delay: foundation funding and the creation of US climate change counter-movement organizations' *Climate Change*, vol. 122, no. 4, pp. 681-694.
- Camus, A, 2000, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Penguin, London.
- Chenoweth, E, 2017, 'It may only take 3.5% of the population to topple a dictator – with civil resistance' *The Guardian*, 2 February 2017, viewed 5 September 2019.
- Chenoweth, E, & Stephan, M, 2012, *Why civil resistance works: the strategic logic of non-violent conflict*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Cooke, R, 2019. 'News Corp: democracy's greatest threat,' *The Monthly* (May 2019).
- Extinction Rebellion, 2019a, Official website, viewed 5 September, 2019, <http://rebellion.earth>
- Extinction Rebellion, 2019b, 'A movement of movements for the October Rebellion', viewed 5 September 2019, <https://rebellion.earth/2019/08/29/introducing-the-movement-of-movements-for-the-october-rebellion/>
- Farrell, C, Green, A, Knights, S, and Skeaping, W, (eds) 2019, *This is not a drill: an Extinction Rebellion handbook*, Penguin, London.
- Fookes, T, 2019, 'Fear of drought, flood, and fires leads farmers to plea for urgent action on climate change' ABC News, viewed 13 September 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-09-13/fear-of-drought-flood-and-fires-leads-farmers-to-plea-for-action/11508834>
- Gilding, P, 2011, *The Great Disruption: how the climate crisis will transform the global economy*, Bloomsbury, London.
- Hallam, R, 2019, 'Common sense for the 21st century: only non-violent rebellion can now stop climate breakdown and social collapse', pre-publication working draft, version 0.3.
- Hamilton, C, 2011, 'We need a new environmental radicalism' *Green Left Weekly*, 29 April 2011, Issue 878.

- Hickel, J & Kallis, G, 2019, 'Is green growth possible' *New Political Economy* (in press). DOI: [10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964](https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964)
- Kant, I, 1970. *Kant's political writings*, edited by Reiss, H. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Knaus, C, 2018, 'Australia's political parties got \$62m in "dark money" donations last year' *The Guardian* (3 September 2018).
- Lovelock, J, 2010, *The vanishing face of Gaia*, Basic Books, New York.
- Market Forces, 2019, 'Friends in high places: fossil fuel political donations' *Market Forces* (February 2019), viewed 7 September 2019, <https://www.marketforces.org.au/politicaldonations2019/>
- Mayer, J, 2016, *Dark money: How a secretive group of billionaires is trying to buy political control in the US*. Scribe, London.
- Meadows, D, Meadows, D, Randers, J, & Behrens, W, 1972. *Limits to Growth*, Signet, New York.
- Monbiot, G, 2019. 'History will be kind to Heathrow climate protesters who stop us flying' *The Guardian*, 4 September 2019.
- Nixon, J, 2013. *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Norberg-Hodge, H, 2009, *Ancient futures*, Sierra Club, San Francisco.
- Pascoe, B, 2018, *Dark emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of Agriculture*, Magabala books, Broome.
- Resilience, 2019. Articles on Extinction Rebellion, viewed 5 September 2019, <https://www.resilience.org/?type=Filter+by&s=%22Extinction+Rebellion%22>
- Rawls, J, 1971, *A theory of justice*, Belknap Press, Boston.
- Read, R, 2019, 'How a movement of movements can win: taking XR to the next level' *Rupert Read's Website*, 13 August 2019, viewed 5 September 2019, <https://rupertread.net/writings/2019/how-movement-movements-can-win-taking-xr-next-level>
- Rudd, K, 2019, 'Democracy overboard: Rupert Murdoch's long war on Australian politics' *The Guardian* (7 September 2019).
- Spratt, D & Dunlop, I, 2017. 'What lies beneath: The scientific understatement of climate risks'. *Breakthrough Institute*, September 2017.
- Spratt, D & Dunlop, I, 2019, 'Australia's climate stance is inflicting criminal damage on humanity' *The Guardian*, 3 August 2019.
- Sharp, G. 1973. '198 methods of non-violent resistance', viewed 5 September 2019, <https://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/198-Methods.pdf>
- Steffan, W, et al 2015, 'The trajectory of the Anthropocene: the Great Acceleration' *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 81-98.
- Tham, J-C, 2010, *Money and politics: the democracy we can't afford*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Thoreau, H, 1982[1849] 'Civil Disobedience' in Bode, C (ed) *The Portable Thoreau*, Penguin, New York, pp. 109-137.
- Tollefson, J, 2019, 'Humans are driving one million species to extinction' *Nature*, vol. 569, p. 171.