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Movements for Climate Justice: Anticapitalism and critical the perspective on the Conference of the Parties

Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the main critical elements of the climate justice movements, in particular by referring to Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR). These movements argue that to adequately address the climate crisis and the inequalities it causes, it is necessary to overcome the capitalist system. Their criticism of the instruments (new technologies and carbon markets) put in place by politicians to combat climate change aims at introducing a social change oriented towards climate justice, which is the master frame of their collective action.

Keywords: climate change, Fridays For Future, Extinction Rebellion, Conference of the Parties, climate justice.

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Introduction

Since 2018, climate movements have captured the attention of the world by mobilizing millions of young students and adult people to join their climate strikes: they have stressed the urgency of global warming and asked politicians to listen to the science and take action (Svensson and Wahlström 2021). They usually act through both direct social actions and conflictual and global mobilizations: the first could be defined as forms of action that focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself, instead of claiming something from the state or other power holders (Bosi and Zamponi 2015). The second include the more transgressive protests of Extinction Rebellion (XR), and its strategy oriented at mass arrests, and the enormous protest campaigns of the FfF global strikes (De Moor et al 2020).

Starting from this frame, this paper aims to illustrate the solutions to face the climate change by the critical perspective of climate movements, focalizing specifically on the issues of Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, which represent the research topic of my PhD thesis. Particularly, my PhD research focuses on the development of two interconnected trajectories of analysis: the first aims at investigating the main characteristics of intergovernmental policies counter the ecological crisis, the second focuses on protest and opposition platforms supported by the climate movements. The latter can be defined as informal networks of interaction that engage in collective actions motivated by a shared identity or by concerns about environmental issues (Rootes and Brulle, 2013). Transnational movements, made up of different social realities, need to carry out a work of negotiation aimed at elaborating a master frame (or dominant frame) capable of combining and connecting the different realities (Andretta, 2005). For example, the coalition of movements, groups, and NGOs, called COP26 Coalition, which mobilized in Glasgow on the occasion of COP26, has been able to connect the many social articulations around the dominant frame of the climate justice.

Climate movements are strongly connected with theoretical-critical approach of political ecology, that identifies a line of studies which is rather varied from a disciplinary point of view (anthropology, sociology, history, geography, economics, philosophy, but also agricultural and forestry sciences, etc.) but clearly recognizable in its focus on the relationship between political, economic and social factors and environmental issues and changes (Pellizzoni, 2019).

To conduct the qualitative research on climate movements, I have prepared a panel of 50 privileged witnesses, activists of movements which fight the ecological crisis, that I interviewed with semi-structures interviews. My empirical research work has also enforced thanks to the experiences of participant observation at assemblies and mobilizations carried out by climate movements, conducted in Milan and Glasgow on the occasion, respectively, of pre- COP26 and COP26. Furthermore, I also experienced participant observation in Turin (Climate Social Camp) and in Naples (the last Global Climate Strike).

Starting by the literature on social movement, the political ecology studies and the first outcomes of my research, I will report the critical perspective of climate movements to counteract the climate change. I argue that, in their view, the intergovernmental policy arena of the Conference of the Parties is not adequate to address the ecological crisis; moreover, it is not enough implementing some specific politics to act efficiently in this field, because it is necessary to go beyond the capitalistic system by pursuing the achievement of the climate justice.

Pursue the climate justice for overcoming the capitalist system

The collective identity of social movements is the result of a negotiation activity through which specific identities recognize themselves as “similar” (Melucci, 1996; Pizzorno, 1966). Such work on meaning is functional in several aspects for a movement: symbolically constructing a collective subject (e.g. environmentalists, feminists, and so on), integrating the potential for structural

mobilization (movement organizations and other mobilization structures), convincing people who sympathize with the movement to take part in the actions, to persuade the broader public opinion of the correctness of its claims (Andretta, 2005).

The climate movement is highly heterogeneous, in fact its identity is negotiated by the subjects that compose it within the context of the framing process, which can be defined as a work of elaboration of the definition of reality that gives meaning to collective action (Benford and Snow, 1988; 1992; 2000). Through framing, mobilized actors «frame, or assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists» (Benford and Snow, 1988, 198). So, the concept of frame refers to an «interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the “world out there” by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within their life space or the world a large» (Benford and Snow, 1992, 137). The results of this activity are cognitive frames through which to know the portion of reality “framed” by a specific frame: the latter, if applied to collective action, allows us to perceive the world as unfair and provides the motivation to try to overcome this injustice (Gamson, 1992).

The climate movement is composed by numerous organizations and souls of movement (environmentalist, workers, feminist, anti-speciesist, etc.) which have built different frames; for this reason it is reasonable to believe that the process of negotiating meanings has played a fundamental role in the formation of its collective identity; the outcomes of this negotiation activity is the elaboration of a master frame, a dominant interpretative scheme that made it possible to combine and connect the different identities: it derives from the mechanisms of frame condensation, which redefines the numerous causes of a problem by unifying them (Tarrow, 2005) , and of frame bridging, which connects themes, experiences, problems, treating them as conditioned by the same events (Snow et al, 1986).

According to the outcomes of my research, the master frame elaborated by climate movements is the climate justice. On the one hand, it derives from the reduction of the causes of the environmental crisis to one main one, the capitalist mode of production (frame condensation); from the other, through the construction of a common cause, the connection of different experiences of injustice and multiple values is favored (frame bridging): the master frame built by the movements (adhering to the climate movement) acts as a bridge between the different sectoral frames: workers' rights, women's rights and gender issues, anti-racism, anti-speciesism, environmental justice, more generally social justice, and so on, come to converge under the climate justice.

To understand the master frame's binding function, it may be useful to report some data from my experience of ethnographic observation conducted in Glasgow, in November 2021, during the days when the twenty-sixth Conference of the Parties (COP26) was taking place. Civil society activists which protested the inaction of governments (engaged in the COP negotiations) in effectively countering global warming, had gathered in the COP26Coalition, which is:

a UK-based civil society coalition of groups and individuals mobilizing around climate justice at COP26. Coalition members include environment and development NGOs, trade unions, grassroots community campaigns, faith groups, youth groups, migrants, and racial justice networks, to name a few (COP26Coalition website).²

So, it is evident that all the climate activists' claims may be framed around the climate justice, which represents a way to think the world completely different from the capitalistic system. To go beyond the capitalism, it is necessary to intersectionally connect the numerous struggles and claims:

When we talk about climate and environment, we are also talking about oppressed minorities, racism, indigenous people ... The approach must be holistic: a phenom is never linked only

² COP26Coalition: <https://cop26coalition.org/about/the-coalition/>. (Last Access: 15/09/2023).

to a part of a factor or an actor ... If Cargill, the most important meat producer in the world, goes to deforest the Amazon Forest to provide products to KFC or McDonalds, in this large mechanism there are indigenous people, looted territories, the water problem, the animal question and therefore the anti-speciest issue (Interview to Brenda, XR);

Intersectional means that many struggles come together, it means that the collectives that come from the university, the anti-speciesism collectives, and the trans-feminist ones, unite the struggles; all this to conquer our spaces and to shout in the streets the environmental issues (Interview to Ida, LINK).

How mentioned, the climate activists have formulated the dominant interpretative scheme of the climate justice, which includes their numerous claims. In this context, one of the more important frames refers to worker's rights, considered in terms of both the trade union struggles and the workplace health:

All the people here are aware that the environment level cannot be distinguished from the level of work ([e.g.] if you close the coal plants you damage the workers who work there); they try to divide the struggles ... Maybe if you work in coal plants you have a minimum salary to support you, but you are killing yourself (Interview to Anne, XR).

The common objectives between those who lead environmental battles and the actors engaged in the struggle to promote better conditions for workers was one of the most debated topics during the Climate Social Camp in Turin (25-29 July 2022), where numerous activists for climate justice from around the world gathered to discuss the link between the environmental devastation of climate change and its impacts on civil society. Several arguments are related to this kind of convergence: first, it is fundamental to reject the dichotomy between environmental (and health) protection and employability, building a new model representing a social alternative to capitalism, and that can protect the workers guaranteeing both health and environmental protection. Second, the field of this

“alliance” between Fridays for Future and GKN was clearly outlined, removing any doubts about the commonality of the battlefield: it is in fact inadmissible to assume that there are separate struggles depending on whether they are focused on ecology, workers, on gender issues, or even on the rights of students or migrants. In reality, these are all central nodes of capitalist production: for example, in almost all cases, in the workplace there are male and female workers, migrants, there are harmful substances: this offers the possibility of constructing a socially articulated critique in these nodes, and it is important to put it into practice with the subjects who suffer the violence, harmfulness and all the other negative consequences of the capitalist model of production.

The intersectional character of the struggles conducted by the climate activists engaged in the climate justice, involve also, how mentioned, the gender, anti-racist and anti-speciesism issues, and so on. Also in this case, the protests of the activists are conducted around a critical perspective of the capitalist system, which is considered as a patriarchal, racist and speciesism model:

About the gender issue, women are one of the categories most exposed to the problems of the climate crisis, especially in the poorest countries. In many countries, women still have the role of care, and perhaps they must treat the sick of a pandemic that derives from climatic condition (therefore they are more exposed to contagion). If there is a problem of drought in Africa, women have the task of carrying water; women are more exposed to sexual violence during migration, they are left more aloof and are less protected (Interview to Brenda, XR);

The system generates inequality, in this sense environmentalist and trans-feminist struggles go hand in hand. Anti-speciesism, which pays attention to bodies, is a bridge between these two themes. All bodies are seen to the same matter, that's why anti-speciesism is a bridge. We need an emancipation of these bodies, it is a sort of alliance between bodies struggling to be able to survive, from environmental issues, to violence, to social inequalities (Interview to Ida, LINK).

According to what I reported, I argue that the dominant frame of the collective action negotiated by the climate movements is that of climate justice. Both Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion tend to adopt a holistic approach in solving the ecological crisis, which is able to prepare intersectional battles, with regard to environmental, workers, gender, anti-racist and anti-speciesism issues, in order to undermine the dominant system of capitalism, which pursues the sole purpose of making profit at the expenses of environmental and social devastation. For these reasons, FfF and XR activists do not define themselves as merely environmentalists, precisely because this term hides a sectoral nature of the claims: it is therefore more appropriate to refer to these organized groups of civil society as ecological movements who fight for climate justice.

So, I have highlighted the anticapitalistic perspective of climate movements; this criticism is accompanied by the idea of the necessity to fight for a social change oriented towards climate justice. In the next paragraph, I report the critical perspective of climate activists with regard to the global climate governance, and particularly on the Conference of the Parties (COP) system.

How the climate activists consider the global climate governance?

How affirmed in the previous paragraph, the critical thinking of climate movements is focused on an anticapitalistic perspective. Here I report another part of the critical discourse carried out by the activists, concerning the considerations on global climate governance, that is characterized by the institutional and regulatory international regime of the Conference of the Parties (COP), annually realized within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Starting from the second half of the Seventies, a radical paradigm shift has occurred in the international governance, from the Fordist Keynesian structures of Western policies supported by the Bretton Woods institutions to the affirmation of the Washington Consensus of

monetarist and neoliberal doctrines, at the basis of a new phase in the process of the capitalist accumulation (Moini and D'Albergo, 2016). Over the last three decades, the neoliberal paradigm led to a profound change in the context of global climate governance, making sure that the general regulatory criterion in adopting policies in this field was the market, capable of also taking charge of adaptation and mitigation measures to climate change.

The most recent shift towards a more aggressive version of the neoliberal paradigm has further strengthened the centrality of the market as a regulatory criterion to counter the effects of the climate change. This process has therefore further emphasized an approach based on privatization, commercialization and commodification of ecosystems and natural resources (Bakker, 2005). This relevant role of markets and private sector in addressing social and political issues, has favored a depoliticization of the decision-making process of the global climate regime, with the result of producing common sense, neutral or objective rules rather than proceeding through a political normative regulation that could reinforce values such as equity and justice (Garau, 2013). In this phase, liberalism is fully implemented by expanding the role of the market, the economic rationality, and the private gain, which are considered primary goals and the only mechanisms useful in protecting the public and environmental goods (Ciplet and Roberts, 2017). Also Emanuele Leonardi (2017) has criticized the “marketization” of the ecological crisis, which is led by the green economy device; this system entered into full force starting from the Kyoto Protocol (COP3), which implemented the carbon trading dogma. According to Leonardi, climate justice movements have many times denounced the low price of pollution permits, the fraudulent practice of double counting emissions and the colonial-like attitude of the countries of the global North which, having exhausted their share of air pollution, have come into possession of that due to the countries of the global South, hindering any alternative ways of development.

To highlight the critic to global climate governance addressed by the climate movements, I refer to my experience of partici-

pating observation in Glasgow, during COP26, when the climate justice activists converged in COP26 Coalition, and to some semi-structured interview that I have conducted with FfF and XR activists over the last three years.

According to COP26Coalition, that is the coalition between movements, groups, trade unions, people who fought for climate justice during the COP26 in UK, the Glasgow climate negotiations had to be defined a failure: their outcomes were not appreciable because they provided an occasion for multinational companies to act greenwashing policies. The aspect of the COP26 most criticized by climate movements was the climate finance: the rich Western countries didn't allow the payment of adequate investments, to help the poorer countries of the Global South in implementing mitigation and adaptation measures to face the effects of the climate change. Not only the amounts of the monetary promises, but also the type of financial instruments was not appreciated: in fact, the climate finance was not really oriented to achieve an ecological transition, but it consists in loans filtered through financial institutions, and these loans further weaken and indebted developing countries. The lack of agreement on loss and damage, a measure that provides compensation for vulnerable countries for the losses and damages suffered because of climate change, was the point that most agitated the protests of climate activists.

Another central aspect criticized by the activists was related to the measures in the energy topic: the negotiations within the COP26 were too oriented towards an economy fossil fuel based. To achieve an equal ecological transition, it was necessary to completely phase out of the fossil fuels energy sources, but the outcome which came from the activity of COP26 delegates has predicted a gradual phase down. Also, in terms of greenhouse emissions, climate movements were not aligned with politicians: the COP negotiations pursued the logic of net zero emissions, which is a misleading term according to activists; they believe that it was necessary to prosecute the real zero logic, without including the system of emissions compensation.

Climate activists contested also that the logic of the COP is the same of the capitalistic system: in fact, during the negotiations, politicians were only interested to find methods to reduce the emissions, throughout new technologies or market orientated and voluntary tools, without pursuing objectives in order to improve the conditions of women, poor workers, ethnical minorities (which are the most affected groups by the global warming effects). They also challenged the solutions to the crisis based on technological innovations and carbon markets, considered inadequate and potentially harmful measures to address the environmental issues.

Finally, the COP26 Coalition opinion about the COP26 was very negative because its outcomes were not good to pursue a real ecological transition: for example, the main goal of maintaining the increase of temperature under the cap of 1,5 degrees will be failed, in fact with the environmental policies currently in force, a growth of 2.7 degrees is expected. Also, the mechanism of COP system was contested because this policy arena is seen as not very inclusive, especially towards the representatives of the most affected people and areas (MAPA). The thought of COP26 Coalitions on the Conference of the Parties is in large part confirmed by the other climate activists I have interviewed also in other contests, over the last two years and a half. For example, the distrust of the climate activists regarding the COP system, was very strong also before the COP26 negotiations:

Within the COPs in general the decision-making power is in the hands of the governments; therefore, youth consultations and associations have a relative value in the COP. COP and pre-COP must be totally rethought; in fact, the UN's instrument of governance of the climate issue, through the annual COP, has not determined much. The Treaty of Paris, which envisaged a whole series of things, remained a dead letter, because it was not legally binding and evidently did not envisage a whole series of mechanisms which somehow forced the execution and acceptance of that treaty by individual governments, so we have no elements to say that these pre-COP go differently (Interview to Daniel, FFF).

The negative opinion about pre-COP COP systems is determined not only by the fact that in the last three decades the greenhouse emissions have increased, but also by the consideration that this intergovernmental policy arena is totally immersed in the capitalist system, with all its contradictions:

Now the COP is preceded by an event that calls together the young climate movements so there will be a series of conferences and debates that will also involve the climate movements [pre-COP]. The problem is that it is never a systemic breakthrough, the previous 25 COPs have all failed, and I don't think the twenty-sixth can go any better: until we understand that capitalism cannot be ethical, it cannot be good, and until this point of view is taken, these great global demonstrations and meetings remain just smoke and mirrors (interview to Gabriel, FFF).

To synthesize, we can assume that according to the climate movements, the COP could be defined as a big meeting where “poor countries vent, and rich ones make promises”. Another interesting element of this critical perspective, is that the climate activists argue that the COP's failure is assumed also by scientific data; so it is not an opinion, it is a fact:

They have completely failed, and what emerges from Glasgow at a scientific level proves it. According to the final report, if the policies proclaimed in Glasgow were to be respected, we would still go towards an increase in temperatures of 2.4 degrees, which means catastrophe. You don't even need my opinion, it's a scientific fact. I would also like to point out that since the day the COPs started taking place, emissions have increased tremendously. Governments keep meeting but emissions rise. So it's a failing situation (Interview to Andrew, XR).

The COP system is characterized by the paradox to the fact that the main important actors in the decision-making process are at the same time the most polluter States. So, it is necessary to rethinking the whole process:

The UN Council has 5 permanent members with the right of

veto and they are the main polluters, arms exporters, promoters of the capitalist system as we know it today ... we speak of green growth, which does not exist, we need to reconsider the concept of growth, reconsider the idea that a society can stand on economic growth, reconsider the idea that society stands on the economic pillar as the main foundation of the building of governance (Interview to Eliza, XR).

Some activists have concentrated their critical thinking on COP system referring to its lacking democratic accountability:

the COPs are a series of top-down assemblies made up of the elites of the States, which have the privilege of deciding laws and rules, of elites in terms of managing directors, bankers, insurance executives, pharmaceutical lobbies, extractive companies of oil, coal, gas (ENI, SHELL, IP) have been participating since these conferences began, and have much more bargaining and political power than Namibia, Tanzania, Botswana ... The COPs are not going to solve the climate crisis, they are just a circus that keeps the focus on the UN's work on the climate crisis but only lets the years and decades go by as the problem gets bigger. It would be solved by going with twisted decisions, going against the trend, what they said in Paris but then didn't put into practice (Interview to Tim, FFF).

On the same time, this activist explains how the main problem of the COP system is that it excludes the citizens in actively participating while the power positions of the most important governments and companies are guaranteed:

The problems that these meetings have is that any participation of citizens is excluded: there are only a few delegates from the countries that bring the interests of the government, which in turn does not have the political strength to face the crisis in its own countries, let alone in the international context; and then another very big problem is the representation of the lobbies of the industries, especially the fossil one, which in the last COP were so numerous that they almost exceeded the number of delegates from the countries. it is absurd, we cannot give our present and our future to these companies that continue to make extra profits

on our lives, and as if we were a wrong starting system to deal with the problem. It is obvious that you will never be able to solve the problem with this tool (Interview to Vincent, XR).

In their view, the intergovernmental decision-making process is not adequate to act around an ecological perspective:

In principle, a COP, or even worse a G7 8 or 20 (which occasionally make them on the climate), we are extremely critical of the structure more than of what is being addressed. A G7 that talks about the climate, the environment, ecology, makes no sense to exist: it is inherent in the ecology of talking to all people and creating a structure like the G7 where the richest decide for themselves and for everyone else, just because they have all the money, it's not smart. The COP is the same thing (Interview to Damian, XR).

It is also important highlighting, through the activists' observation lens, the behavior of the media mainstream, which often exalt some COP outcomes in terms of engagements of the governments, and avoid to clearly explain the real critical situation:

I am therefore skeptical even when [the COPs] are proposed by the media as successes. There is a narration that is reproduced but which does not even show the real criticalities, there is also always pursuing a problem and postponing it from year to year ... There is a lot of climate reductionism behind it. Focusing on emissions causes the concrete depth of the climate and ecological crisis to disappear in the places and ecosystems; one cannot speak only of climate and quantity of emissions, but the places where these emissions are produced, people and ecosystems destroyed, biodiversity lost, extractive industries that put local communities in difficulty must be seen. At the media level, staying alone on that issue is a bit dangerous, it becomes only an abstract and numerical discourse (Interview to Maria, XR).

In general, according to the outcomes of the research that I have exposed, the COP system is a harmful and failure meeting: harmful because it is not a democratic process and the power positions of both main States and big companies are maintained;

in this logic, there is not an ecological perspective and so the people and areas most affected by the climate change effects are not protected enough. Only the carbon market and new technologies are implemented, and this fact could be dangerous for the environment. Failure because in the last three decades the greenhouse gas emissions have grown up and with the current environmental policies in force the temperature will increase.

Conclusion

In this paper I have reported the climate movement's critical perspective on the capitalist system and global climate governance.

I have argued that, according to their view, to face efficiently the climate change effects it is necessary rethinking the whole system: it is in fact impossible obtaining an ecological transition without the deconstruction of capitalism, responsible of all a series of social inequalities. To pursue this goal, the climate activists have organized their collective action around the dominant frame of the climate justice. Both Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion tend to adopt a holistic approach in solving the ecological crisis, which can prepare intersectional battles (environmental, workers, gender, anti-racist and anti-speciesism, and so on issues), in order to undermine the dominant capitalist system, only focused on making profit, causing environmental and social devastation. For these reasons, FfF and XR activists do not define themselves as merely environmentalists, precisely because this term hides a sectoral nature of the claims: it is therefore more appropriate to refer to them as ecological movements who fight for climate justice.

After that, I have also analyzed the critical opinion of the climate activists about the global climate governance, particularly on the Conference of the Parties system. It has emerged that activists for climate justice consider the COP as a failure meeting: it is not a democratic process and the power positions of both main governments and big companies are maintained; there is not an ecological perspective and so the mechanism lacks democratic

accountability (the people and areas most affected by the climate change effects are adequately represented). Therefore, the choice to concentrate the measures to face the climate change in developing carbon market e new technologies tools, could be dangerous for the environment. Furthermore, over the last three decades the greenhouse gas emissions have grown up and with the current environmental policies in force the temperature will increase.

In conclusion, the point of view of the climate movement is totally irreconcilable with the one of the intergovernmental perspective: the latter intends to solve the ecological crisis starting from new technologies and market oriented tools, concentrating the efforts on reducing the greenhouse emission and not considering the possibility to correct the capitalist system, which is characterized by numerous social inequalities; the climate activists believe that, to really contrast the environmental crisis is fundamental rethinking the whole system, and this consideration is based on the idea that we need to realize a new word around the climate justice frame.

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