



February 2022

FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE: ACTIVISM OR EXTREMISM?

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Summary

As the climate crisis worsens, activist groups such as Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion have organised large-scale protests to push governments and individuals into actions. However, while these groups may have good intentions, some of their activism might have crossed into extremism. Their protests received harsh criticism from politicians, journalists, and society, possibly even alienating many potential supporters.

Key points

- With the belief that climate change poses a major threat to humanity, these groups are working to bring attention to the urgency of the crisis and the need for action.
- However, some of their protests have resulted in injuries and arrests leading to a few political commentators to label the groups as eco-extremists.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the number of environmental activist groups across Europe, who are motivated by concerns regarding the effects of climate change. In particular, these groups have directed their attention towards governments, who they accuse of not doing enough to address the issue. Two groups have emerged as leaders in this movement: Last Generation, based primarily in Germany, and Extinction Rebellion, which operates mainly out of the United Kingdom. Both groups have also loosely formed branches in the Czech Republic. Despite their efforts, these groups have faced criticism from several prominent lawmakers and the wider public, who argue that their actions are excessively destructive and alienating, leading to a decline in support for their cause. Nevertheless, their campaigns have brought the issue of climate change to the forefront of public discourse and have prompted governments to take stronger actions to address this critical global issue.

Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, we will be using the terms eco-activism and civil disobedience to describe the actions undertaken by both of these protest movements. We define eco-activism as “a form of engagement in social and/or political campaigns with the aim of preventing damage to the environment” (Kraja, 2018). As for civil disobedience, we are using the definition “the use of non-violent means to raise an issue, but with deliberate refusal to obey the laws or protocols set by governments” (Britannica, n.d.).

On top of these definitions, it is also important to define eco-extremism as it is one of the tools that these organisations are utilising to promote their cause. We are defining eco-extremism as “the use of violence or illegal means by individuals or groups to further their environmental or animal rights causes. It often involves acts of sabotage, vandalism, and arson against businesses or organisations that are perceived to be harming the environment or animals” (Eagan, 1996).

Last Generation & Extinction Rebellion

In the past five years, there has been a significant increase in the number of left-wing activist groups focusing on climate change and pushing for further government action through protests and other forms of activism. The leading group in this surge of climate activism is Extinction Rebellion, an organisation that originated out of England in late 2018. Following their lead, the group known as Last Generation (Leitze Generation) in Germany was formed in 2021 via a subsection of participants in the 2021 Hungerstreik der Letzten Generation. Both groups operate similar to one another, occasionally joining forces in their activism. Last Generation have been dubbed Klimakleber, “climate gluers” (Smith, 2022), due to their tendency of gluing themselves in acts of civil disobedience. However, this nickname can easily apply to Extinction Rebellion as well, who also pursue this form of activism.

Both organisations state that there is a climate emergency, and demand that citizens should have the opportunity to decide their own future via citizen assemblies. Both organisations similarly want the world governments to declare a climate emergency and work towards achieving climate targets. Extinction Rebellion also wants governments to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas

emissions to net zero by 2025. Last Generation also believes that there should be a debt cut, and that payments should be made to states of the Global South as a compensation for climate change.

Last Generation have two variations on the goals that the group is hoping to achieve. Firstly, they have goals that they are aiming to achieve within Germany, and secondly, goals for the broader international community. For the goals within Germany, Last Generation wants the German government to enforce a speed limit of 100 km/h on the autobahn, stating that this action would save up to 5.4 million tonnes of CO₂ annually. Secondly, they want the German government to introduce a permanent 9-euro ticket for all public transportation. Last Generation's goals for the international community are more widespread than the ones previously mentioned. Firstly, demanding governments and scientific organisations to admit that the current global climate target is doomed and that it will exceed 1.5 degrees. And secondly, demanding that the Global South be forgiven of all debt.

In their effort to achieve these goals, both Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation pursues a program of civil disobedience and preaches a path of nonviolent resistance. Between January and October 2022, Last Generation performed 370 various protests and actions, the majority of these being targeted at major transport routes or other important areas to increase their visibility to the public (Smith, 2022). Both groups typically glue their hands to roads or attempt to ruin famous paintings in publicity hunting displays of civil disobedience.

Examples of activism

For both Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation, the preferred form of activism tends to be civil disobedience, which is typically done by members of the groups blockading roads and other various places in protest. Last Generation takes it a step further by often gluing parts of their body to the road to make it harder to remove them. In September 2022, activists from Extinction Rebellion were arrested after they glued themselves around the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons, London (Brown, 2022). They undertook this protest to call for a citizens' assembly on the issue of climate change. In a similar style of protest in October 2022, two activists from Last Generation entered Berlin's Natural History Museum and glued their hands to one of the dinosaur displays in an act of civil disobedience (DW, 2022). When making a statement about the incident, the group said that "unlike the dinosaurs, we hold our fate in our own hands." Both organisations pursue headline-grabbing protests in order to gain publicity about their cause.



Image 1: Two activists from Last Generation entered Berlin’s Natural History Museum and glued their hands to one of the dinosaur displays in an act of civil disobedience (NBC News, 2022).

Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation have performed several attention-grabbing protests since both organisations formed in 2019 and 2021 respectively. Following the trends of their contemporaries such as Just Stop Oil, both organisations participated in the trend of defacing famous paintings. Last Generation undertook this act of protest against a Monet painting in Potsdam by throwing mashed potato on it, before continuing in their typical fashion of gluing their hands to the walls in order to prolong their protest (Smith, 2022). Extinction Rebellion chose a Picasso painting that was on loan in Victoria, Australia, with two protestors gluing their hands to the painting.

Both Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation have undertaken several other acts of activism to promote their causes, with the preferred one being road blockades to cause the utmost annoyance to the public. Last Generation has undertaken these road blockades in numerous German cities, with the main focus being Berlin and Munich. Extinction Rebellion, a much larger organisation, has targeted many city centres throughout the world with their blockades of roads. The organisations have been heavily criticised for their disruptive behaviours. In response to these criticisms, Last Generation have stated that while they understand the communities’ frustration with their actions, the climate emergency is too important not to act.



Image 2: Climate change protesters from Extinction Rebellion on Whitehall outside HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) building in Westminster (Walker, 2021).

Examples of extremism

Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation both preach a form of non-violent form of activism and claim that their protests do not fall under the category of extremism. However, some of their protests have resulted in injuries and arrests leading to a few political commentators to label the groups as eco-extremists. These commentators point to Last Generation's protests in Berlin and Munich in December 2022 as extremist actions when members glued themselves to the runways at Berlin and Munich airports. This resulted in partial disruption to the flight schedules at Munich airport (DW, 2022). Following this brazen act, Last Generation stated that the reason for gluing themselves to the tarmac was to call on the German government to stop subsidising air travel and to instead promote cheaper train travel. While this is not the first act by Last Generation labelled as an act of extremism, it is definitely the most extreme act they have committed to date.



Image 3: Activists of Last Generation glued themselves to the tarmac of the airport to protest for a speed limit on highways as well as for affordable public transport, in Munich, Germany (Reuters, 2022).

The main source of the criticism that Last Generation faces centres around one particular protest in which the group blocked a bridge over the A100, a busy route to the German capital. During this protest, a cyclist was hit by a truck and subsequently died at the scene. Emergency vehicles could not reach the victim due to the blockade by Last Generation (DW, 2022). This is despite the group stating that they always intend to leave room for emergency vehicles to make their way past the protests. Last Generation received even more criticism from politicians and journalists for how they reacted to the death of the cyclist, with one member who participated in the protest stating that if the group had not been forced to take such radical action by the government's lack of action, the incident might not have occurred.

A similar incident occurred during an Extinction Rebellion protest in Prague in April 2022, when the group protested at the top of Wenceslas Square. Members of the group proceeded to lay on the road leading to a traffic jam, in which an ambulance could not make its way through (iDNES, 2022). The protesters had to be physically removed from the road in order to allow the emergency vehicle to pass. Later a spokesperson came out to state that while the ambulance was delayed, there was no impact on the patient. However, it has led to similar criticism about the effectiveness of these protests compared to threats posed by blocking emergency vehicles from proceeding.

Extinction Rebellion have also organised other protests, which have resulted in several of their members being thrown in jail or facing criminal charges. The most prominent protest that saw seven Extinction Rebellion members facing jail time was when they used chisels and hammers to break glass panels at the Barclays Bank headquarters in Canary Wharf in April 2022 (Mare & Limbu, 2023). The group of seven women caused \$100,000 worth of damage to the building during their protests and were found guilty by a jury on a majority of 11 to 1. Actions like these have seen the organisation receive criticism from all sides of politics, even the sympathetic Green party.

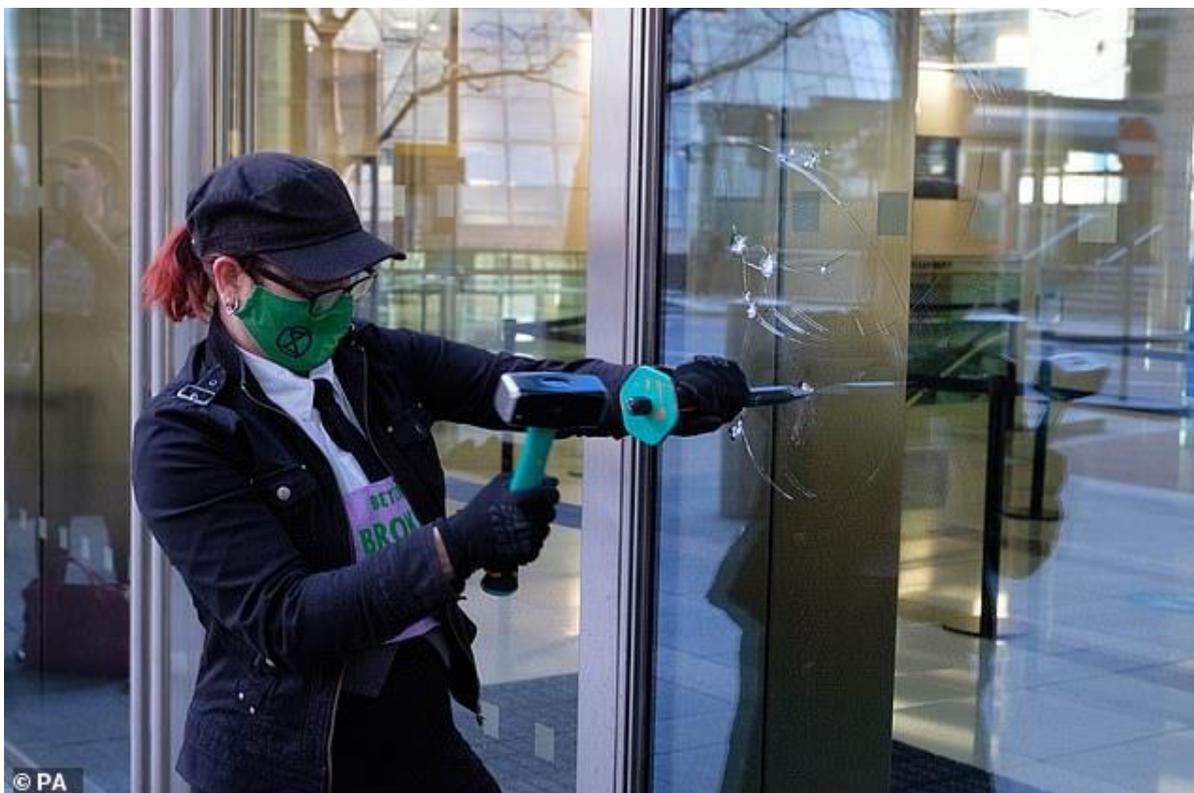


Image 4: Extinction Rebellion Co-Founder Fined For Smashing Barclays Window (Mare & Limbu, 2023).

Conclusion

As the climate crisis worsens, left-wing activist groups such as Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion have organised large-scale protests and activism to push governments and individuals into actions. However, while these groups may have good intentions in their efforts to save the planet, some of their activism has crossed into extremism, such as Last Generation members gluing their hands onto runways at Berlin and Munich airports. These extreme protests have received harsh criticism from politicians, journalists, and society, ultimately alienating many potential supporters.

In response to this criticism, Extinction Rebellion has shifted its approach to focus solely on pressuring governments to take action on climate change. This new age of activism seeks to avoid divisive tactics that could harm their cause and instead focuses on effective methods of political pressure. With the belief that climate change poses a major threat to humanity, these groups are working to bring attention to the urgency of the crisis and the need for immediate action.

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