

activists

Activism, the very idea...

*Is the concept of activism itself a key block
to mass action on climate?*

Anthea Lawson and Rupert Read

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A dialogue between Anthea Lawson and Rupert Read

There is a lot of activism happening at present: Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil, anti-war activism in relation to Ukraine, and much more. This dialogue takes a step back and asks whether activism needs rethinking at this moment. In particular, it asks whether some of what we try to achieve via activism could be better achieved if the concept of ‘activism’ weren’t getting in the way of mass action.

Rupert Read: I am starting from the awareness that has grown in me of the need for something which does the same kind of job as Extinction Rebellion did, but without some of the baggage: something with the potential for a much wider appeal. I’ve been thinking, therefore, about what the barriers to entry are in activism, and trying to develop a proposal for a [‘moderate flank’](#) to take advantage of the space that Extinction Rebellion’s success in consciousness-raising has opened up. Those barriers are things like: feeling like you need to get arrested, feeling like you need to be a hippie, feeling like you have to be left wing, feeling like you have to be Green, feeling like you have to be bought into the whole agenda of identity politics.

Anthea Lawson: We’ve both taken part in Extinction Rebellion; you’ve been a media spokesperson and argued for it on Question Time; I helped block Waterloo Bridge in the April 2019 ‘rebellion’; we’ve both been

arrested. Extinction Rebellion did something extraordinary in shifting public awareness of climate change, but we're both now looking with and beyond it, too. My enquiry into the ways that [activism can end up perpetuating the status quo](#) in my book *The Entangled Activist*, includes the same proposition you're considering: the possibility that the very idea of 'activism' is putting some people off getting involved.

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Rupert Read: And that's really how the idea of this dialogue came into being. What if we explore this, the very idea of activism, as possibly the ultimate barrier to entry? Maybe what we need to do to get mass *action* on climate is actually to get beyond the requirement to be an *activist* at all. My belief is that if we're going to get somewhere this decade, it will come through exploiting the space that Extinction Rebellion and Greta have opened up: through something like a new, mass, distributed, genuinely inclusive, semi-joined up 'moderate flank.' Therefore, thinking about these barriers to entry is really important. That's why I started thinking about the question of whether there is something in the warp and weft of activism itself that could itself be a barrier to entry; and that's what took me to your book, Anthea.

Anthea Lawson: I wrote *The Entangled Activist* to explore the many ways in which campaigning ends up repeating and replicating the problems that activists want to fix. I'd been a journalist and then, working for campaign groups, I'd done investigations into oil companies, banks, illegal logging, and environmental and human rights problems. Looking at who is responsible and using that to try and get policy change. Sometimes we got policies changed. Quite often we didn't. But I was starting to notice some of the ways in which we were using the tools of the system in ways that might help reinforce aspects of the system. The frame I came to, as a way of looking at all of these different ways in which we're repeating the status quo, is entanglement. Now it might seem a bit obvious that activists are entangled in what they're trying to change. But it's quite counter-intuitive to the activist mindset, because we like to think that we're good and right and everyone else hasn't 'got it' yet. It's counter-cultural for activists to consider the ways in which they're part of the problem.

One of the examples I looked at was our entanglement with the people we are speaking to. We think we can just chuck our message out there and it will land, and we don't always think more carefully about that. I became interested in drawing on psychoanalytic thinking about what of ourselves we are projecting onto other people. I was looking at the projections that are going back and forth between activists and the people who are hearing their message – let's call them, for argument's sake, *not-activists* because that's crucial for this discussion. In the moment in which someone speaks or acts as an activist, a line is drawn, whether you intend it or not, across which you're then seeing each other in a particular way. You are being seen as the activist, and you are seeing the other side as the person who is not the activist. That

might be somebody receiving your message, it might be somebody you're blaming for the problem, it might be a person whom you're impeding when you're blocking the road. I looked at what is going on in this interaction and these projections that are flying both ways, and whether is it actually helpful to what we're doing.

I interviewed people about how they perceive activists and the same stuff was coming up again and again. Being hypocritical, being righteous, being angry. Those things are the cliché of activism, they're lazy journalism, but there are also some truths in it. Righteousness is key, in its real meaning of defining yourself as right specifically in opposition to someone else who is wrong. And that is a description of the dynamic that so often occurs. Extinction Rebellion explicitly tried to say that we're not going to 'blame and shame', we want to draw people in. But it was still happening. Every form of activism I've ever done, whether it's professional or grassroots, out in the streets or lobbying in institutions, there has been a perceived feeling, whether admitted or not, of some kind of superiority. So that's where I think this enquiry meets what you're saying about the need to have a much wider movement that's accessible to more people.

Rupert Read: The thing that is exciting to me about your approach is that you're drawing attention to the ways in which activism can create resistance and can be counterproductive. And then one can start to imagine – and you do some of this in the book – how to reduce some of those things, as Extinction Rebellion tried to do. But then the point that I started to reach – really it was at your book launch that crystallised it very clearly for me – was the thought that even if all that gets done really well, becoming aware of the shadow in activism and so forth, is there still going to be a problem? The idea of activism is out there and will somehow lag behind even the best and most careful and most reflective activists. We have limited control over it, however well and smart we behave. What occurred to me, as an activist who has been among activists for so many years, is maybe I'm missing the fact that there's a sense in which the *very idea of activism is the ultimate barrier to entry* here. The vast majority of people are just unlikely to ever get on board with something if it's going to require them to be regarded or labelled as an activist.

Anthea Lawson: There are a couple of things to say at this point. One of them is that there are always going to be a set of reasons, which we can look at through different lenses, as to why some people are not going to be comfortable doing activism even if they're aware of the problem. Climate psychologists, for example, are interested not just in outright denial, but in the ways that people can disavow or not act on what they do actually know, which Stanley Cohen called 'implicatory denial'¹ and Kari Mari Norgaard calls 'knowing and not knowing'.² Grief, guilt, anxiety and despair can cause us to adopt psychological defences and coping mechanisms that interact in complex ways with our context.³ We might get stuck in the gap between

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our professed values and actually acting on them because of processes going on in our own psyche, which suggests the values-action 'gap' isn't really a gap at all, because it's filled with a tangle of confusions and fear.⁴ There are also social processes of not-acting on knowledge, in which people are influenced by each other's attempts at emotional management to keep at bay their own fear about the changing climate.⁵ Sociologists offer reasons for non-participation, too, though in their focus on the collective they have tended – with a few exceptions⁶ – to start with social movements and look at how they attract and retain participants, rather than why they fail to. (Not least because it's hard, sociologically, to frame a group who are linked by what they don't participate in.)⁷

Rupert Read: Sure; but isn't that just so interesting and telling. There has been plenty of work on why people become activists, but hardly any on why they *don't*. So the question that motivates our dialogue, which both of us suspect as harbouring an answer in affirmative - i.e., the very idea of 'activism' is itself a major barrier to entry into serious, mass climate action - has been to say the least under-researched.

Anthea Lawson: Motivational theories have changed over time, and the research can, as a starting point, be read 'inside-out' to look for the inverse of the theories it suggests for participation. From the sixties to the eighties there was a focus on explanations that assumed a 'rational actor' who would weigh up the efficacy of taking part.⁸ In this view, someone not taking part may not think the potential outcome is 'worth' the cost of doing so. (This trend was in part a reaction to the earlier emphasis on social movements as irrational uprisings.) Since the nineties there's been a swing back towards a more 'emotional' view, this time taking emotions more seriously on their own terms and looking at how successfully – or not – movements can harness people's emotions and meaning-making capacity.⁹ The political orientation of an individual's family, and networks they have access to also affect the likelihood of participation.¹⁰ And work in the last decade on student protests against tuition fees and participation in the recent youth climate strikes has started to ask specific questions about non-participation, suggesting reasons for it that are not all the direct inverse of reasons for participation. These include not identifying with the image of activist, worry about being undermined by the extreme fringes of a group, ambivalence about typical protest behaviour and worry about 'loss of self' in the group.¹¹

Psychology adds to the list of reasons why people might support an issue but not become active on it. Personality psychologists report that those who score lower on 'openness', for example, who are less willing to try new ideas and experiences, are less likely to be drawn to change the status quo.¹² 'Personal political salience' is a propensity to attach personal meaning to political events and correlates strongly with participation in activism; it is linked to openness.¹³ Life stage matters too, it's no surprise that the most active are

young adults and people in midlife with an opportunity for reappraisal of priorities, with low participation in the parenting years.¹⁴

Then social psychologists look at questions of how people identify themselves and the impact of their self-identity on their likelihood of joining in. We desire membership only in groups we view positively, and are less inclined to adopt the opinions of stigmatised groups; typical ‘activism’ is associated with negative stereotypes that make us not want to join.¹⁵ We create and perceive boundaries around groups, so the existence of groups with an identity can repel outsiders (and even insiders).¹⁶ Identity isn’t static, however; if people’s identities develop so that they begin to identify with a group (let’s say, ‘people who care about nature’) and then, especially, with its politicised version (in this case, ‘the environmental *movement*’), they’re more likely to join collective action; the inverse can be read as inhibiting factors.¹⁷

The point is, I think a lot of people who do activism make an assumption that if someone is not active, then they don’t care. I certainly used to. But in the light of all those perspectives, it just doesn’t follow. And yet, there is this gap between caring and action. The other thing we have to look at is what makes people activists. In very simplistic and crude terms we can say that some people do it because they are fighting for the conditions of their own life. They’ve had to turn to activism and there are plenty of examples of that. Then there is turning to activism from a position of conscience, but where you’re not currently being affected personally by that issue. Environmental activism, in the UK, has to a great extent, historically, fallen into the latter version. It’s not the only kind of environmental activism. There are lots of examples of people, often marginalised people, who are living in places that are more polluted and are fighting for the conditions of their life. But what it will take, in terms of climate breakdown in the UK, to wake more people up to feeling that they need to do it because they are under direct threat? I know you’ve looked at this in some of your other work, especially in [your writing about children and care for future generations](#), which tries to bring that home. And yet we’re still faced with the reality that it is not close enough to home for a lot of people. And so I think that is part of the picture of how activism is perceived.

Rupert Read: Yes, totally. And that’s an issue. We desperately need to bring home [the vulnerability story](#): the truth, probably best expressed in narratives of actual and potential climate disasters that feel psychologically close by. What I also think is that a lot of people now are concerned, and do care. Some of the care is thin. Some of it is quite thick, it goes quite deep. A lot of people I encounter nowadays, including in business contexts, are hungry to know what to do. They are really concerned and they want to do something, and they’re not sure what. So as we’ve been discussing, one question that has been nagging at my mind is: What if taking action is perceived by many of these people as making them an activist, and that’s actually a key reason why

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they won't cross the value-action gap? But as well as drawing attention to that and asking: 'is it really so bad being an activist?' (because of course it's not!) maybe there's also a strong pragmatic case for saying something like: 'you know what? What matters is not you becoming an activist. *What matters is you taking action.* If you don't want to be regarded as an activist, that's completely cool.' Actually, what we need in workplaces, communities and businesses is a lot more people to take action. And by taking action without regarding themselves as activists – with all the psychology that as you say goes along with that fear – they may provoke less counter-reaction than activists often provoke.

Let me very briefly mention a couple of examples, in case what I've said here feels overly abstract. Corporate lawyers (in-house counsel) in LAWYERS FOR NET ZERO, or neighbours in my local nature reserve group (we collectively own the reserve) will in most cases quite simply never conceptualise themselves as activists; and why should they. They are simply taking action: where they work, or live. This is what the majority of the 'moderate flank' will look like.

This exemplifies in fact a central thrust of my thinking with the moderate flank concept, of which my '[Parents for a future](#)' book is one possible part. An awful lot of people in their professions and communities, in religious organisations and so on, need to take action on the ground: to go much further than they have done before. To be willing to challenge their employers on questions like commuting, questions like: What's your product? What are you doing with your profits? Is your supply chain robust? If that were to happen at scale – and it could, it seems to me, in a distributed way – then that could add up to a lot more change than we've seen in the last few years. ~~We've~~ had this historic consciousness-raising that I played a little part in [with Extinction Rebellion](#). But the actual amount of change on the ground, in institutions, through government, etcetera, has been a lot less satisfactory. The idea of the moderate flank is to make it happen on the ground. What if the frame of 'taking action', or something like it, rather than the frame of 'activism', is actually the way that we can enable that to happen?

Anthea Lawson: Yes, and I think this goes beyond semantics. I think it's about where it's taking place as well. Let's say some movement was to arise – and there are people working on projects that might start blooming very soon; there are all sorts of things out there already. But if it is somewhere where people are not, and I'm using *where* not just geographically, it will still go into the 'activism' category. Which is why the point about workplaces is so interesting, and about schools. For lots of parents, schools are where you have your locus of meeting people and sociality – around the thing that you are doing, which is looking after kids. Things that can be done in places where people are already, where they are spending their time and doing their work, feel less like they are this 'other' form of activity.

Rupert Read: That's a great point. Activism – especially in the environmental movement but perhaps more generally – is so often about: 'we're going to go and do something and make something that needs to happen, happen.' Perhaps in Westminster, or on an oil rig, or whatever. What you're saying is: actually if you're just acting in your workplace, school, religious organisation or local geographical community, then that is more of a natural thing to be doing. That's going to make sense, at some level, to an awful lot of people. And that's what we need: An awful lot of people to take action. The 2020s, it seems to me, are bound to be a decade in which there is a rise in activism. Which is inspiring. But I think if we stake everything on that rise in activism, we're almost certainly going to fail. What we need additionally is these *huger* numbers who do, or will, see activism as a barrier to entry, to start to act where it's pretty easy for them to act. [Workplaces are absolutely key](#) because that's where most people spend so much of their time, and, as Marx of course famously observed, have so much of their power. If we actually started to get this mass action in workplaces – an example I've talked about in some of my writings is Lawyers for Net Zero, who are trying to do this kind of thing and are very much going down this track of that being action rather than activism – then hope would sprout everywhere.

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Anthea Lawson: What's another word for action in a workplace? We have this amazing technology for that: it's called a trade union.

Rupert Read: It's absolutely clear: there are ways of taking action in the workplace – through trade unions, through professional associations, or simply through acting 'directly'.

Another thing which I think is key, is people need to be taken into this in a way that makes sense to them and doesn't feel like too much of a big ask. For most people, joining Extinction Rebellion, let alone sitting in a motorway, is miles too big of an ask. But doing something in your workplace, including as you say, perhaps starting off with protecting your own rights (e.g. the right not to have to commute unreasonably), well that's not such a big ask. And if people try to make these changes in their workplace, if they try to take action in their workplace and that action gets thwarted, they might be willing to escalate a little further.

They might be willing to do, for example, short symbolic workplace stoppages, and that's obviously where trade unions and professional associations could come into the picture in a very helpful way. And if that were necessary in some places and at some times over the next few years as I think it may well be, it would be much easier to get a lot of people to see that that makes sense and is something they could do, rather than going out there and saying from the top down, 'come on the situation's desperate, let's go on strike now, or even more, let's all get arrested.' We're talking about moving beyond the activist frame by lowering barriers to entry and making it seem more natural

and easy: something that makes sense as an extension of where they already are and what they're already doing. Many more people may be willing to do this than are willing to jump into the deep end as activists.

Anthea Lawson: The awful truth is that there are climate effects happening already. Things do happen and people do become radicalised. Climate impacts are going to be happening more and more and, as people awaken, in whatever ways that's going to happen, having a menu of things to do is useful. Because at the moment the menu can feel like it's only got things on it that people don't fancy doing.

Rupert Read: Absolutely. Circumstances can drive people into activism. It would clearly be a total mistake for anyone reading your work or my work or this conversation to think, 'oh what these people are really saying is that activism is bad or passé or something'. On the contrary, activism is more necessary than ever. There will almost certainly be more of it in the 20s. The question is, will it be enough? And to that my answer is no, it's not going to be enough. We need a balanced movement ecology and, as you say, a menu of meaningful options – new as well as old activities –for getting involved. Ways of getting serious. Ways of seeing how, along with lots of others doing the same and different stuff, in the same locale and in different locales, if we're all very broadly moving in the same direction, that could actually be enough to make the kind of meaningful changes that we need to make. That, it seems to me, is an exciting prospect.

Circumstances are, I think, driving many millions to want to take action. It would be a tragedy if a majority of them were put off from doing so by thinking that the only legit way of doing so were to become one of those 'activists'.

Anthea Lawson: Yes that's right. And I'm thinking about some of the pretty scary legislation being put forward by the government at the moment. Part of the context we're in at the moment is they are seeking to make protest a lot more difficult, through the Policing Bill. The Nationality and Borders Bill is trying to make it much harder and really raise the stakes for a lot of people who are feeling in a very frightening situation, with respect to citizenship, about speaking out. These are problems in themselves that people are protesting about. And they are another set of reasons why we need a wide menu of things that people can do when they're worried about the planet. My point is, we're talking about protests being off-putting because of the identity of it, because you don't see yourself doing such things, but there are really practical reasons why people might not want to do more serious actions that, for example, risk arrest.

Rupert Read: Part of what we're talking about here, to be frank, is a set of fallback options for people who are going to be scared by full-on protests

in the wake of these laws. But it's also about thinking somewhat beyond the concept of protest. And thinking – and this is very much my experience recently – that more and more people are looking for something positive to do. One of the reasons why [Insulate Britain didn't go down that well](#) with a lot of people is that it felt, to too many, like it had a very negative energy. Sure: In theory it was about something positive, insulating Britain. But what it turned into being about, was sitting in roads and blocking traffic.

Activism is also about building new alternatives. And I think that's where a lot of people feel more comfortable.

What I'm feeling and experiencing and hearing from a lot of people is, 'we want to actually try to start making positively the differences that need to be made'. And it's quite easy to see how that could turn into a huge agenda in geographical communities, in workplaces, etc., which looks beyond the concept of activism as we know it. It's about actually doing the stuff, taking the action that needs to be taken, and it's about frankly not taking no for an answer to a much greater extent than it was in the past. People are realising more and more this is about whether we have any resilient future, this is about whether my kids have a future. That doesn't necessarily mean that they're prepared to get arrested. But it does mean that they want to do stuff, they want to do it soon, and they want to see how the things that they're doing can actually directly make a positive difference to the state of the world.

Anthea Lawson: I think that's really important. Otherwise most people aren't going to be doing it when the pressures of time and work and family are high. What you were saying about Insulate Britain reminded me of Joanna Macy's three pillars of the 'great turning', the move towards ecological sanity and justice. One is the holding actions, it's the great 'no', and I think a lot of people understand activism in that category. Doing a great protesting 'No!': sticking your body to the road, or shouting your head off on a march. It's me with my suit on marching into MP's offices and giving them what-for. It's grumpy as hell, and rightly so. But the second pillar is the building new alternatives. And I think that's where a lot of people feel more comfortable. And the third pillar is the existential, spiritual underpinning, where we realise that the profoundest changes are perhaps located in the way that we show up in the world, and the way that we relate to other people, to the rest of life, and indeed, to ourselves.

Rupert Read: And this is the point I make at the end of my [first *Perspectiva* essay](#) on the moderate flank. This is the interesting sense in which the moderate flank, as I try to characterise it, can actually come to be seen as more truly radical than the radical flank. Because it moves from this kind of primarily negative angry energy into [this much more positive creative space](#). And what I'm seeing and hearing a lot of now, is: that's what people actually want to do. They realise that our so-called leaders are not going to save us and they actually want to try to create that positive alternative system. And again that may look a lot less like what we know of as activism.

Another case where what emerges looks little like what the idea of ‘activism’ has led us to expect is ‘contemplative activism’, and/or engaged eco-spirituality. These growing trends tend to defy conventional expectations of activism directly, in inviting us to not just do something, but (also) to sit (t) here.

It may be that doing the inner work, seeking to be the change and embody a paradigm-shift, come to be recognised as leading-edge forms of action; forms that overcome the dichotomy between pausing, mindfulness and contemplation on the one hand and action on the other. In case anyone thinks this a recipe for quietism, please pause and think again. My belief is that really [dwelling wisely in our eco-grief](#) or our eco-anger may end up being far more powerful in its transformative results than moving directly from felt anger to expression of that anger.

Anthea Lawson: I always want to be careful when I’m talking about anger because while it’s useful...

Rupert Read: Absolutely. It’s an energy, as they say.

Anthea Lawson: ...it’s not for me or anyone to say that anyone else’s anger isn’t justified. None of us know anyone else’s situation. But it often gets turned into that type of shouty “No!” activism.

Rupert Read: If it becomes your identity and if it becomes what the campaigning is all about, then you’re probably on a hiding to nothing. Sometimes, there is even the risk that some activists want to remain ‘pure’, even at the cost of winning. That being identified as the angry righteous ones against the status quo is more important in a way than actually changing the world.

Anthea Lawson: I like the image of a fire, for the anger we bring to activism: if you’ve got loads of fast-burning fuel going on your fire, then you’ll get engulfed. It’ll take you with it: you’ll burn out quickly and not have anything left.

Rupert Read: That’s one of my concerns about where the school climate strikers are at now. I think that they’re just so angry at chronic inaction, and it’s totally understandable. It’s totally justified. I worry that they’re going to burn out and they’re not going to attract others. I think that what we desperately need is a balanced portfolio of emotions. We need the anger. We need the grief. We need the fear. We also need the determination, of course. And we need the love and the care, and that needs to be suffusing it all. And if you keep returning to that, well that takes you into this positive dimension more. We were playing with this term before, Anthea, of ‘recovering activist’. Which is a sort of jokey term. But it does feel to me as though it has a little

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bit of truth in it. When I look back at my time over the last generation, and especially over the last few tumultuous years...There can be a lot of wounding, and you say this in your book, in being in activism. And some of that's probably inevitable and some of it's probably good. But is it possible that we could find ways of helping to lead and energise ways of doing some of the stuff that needs to be done, which are a bit less tied up with anger, with a kind of negative resistive takedown energy, and a bit more about creating the new world. And then it might be easier to recover. We might have less to recover from.

Anthea Lawson: I feel like I'm having lots of conversations with younger activists, people in their early to mid-twenties, who are feeling really burnt out by what they've been doing the last few years. I'm in my mid-forties and I've been through a twenty-year cycle of my own with campaigning. And I also wanted, as part of the research for the book, to talk to people who'd been doing their campaigning for a long time. The important lesson I picked up is the idea of practice. And practice specifically as opposed to 'goal'. Now this is tricky. There is a paradox here, because of course we've got a goal! We've got some very clear goals. We want to survive. We want a livable planet. And there are plenty of sub-goals within that.

And yet, doing the stuff that we do – and I'm calling it 'stuff that we do' rather than activism – with a strong attachment to the goal, and that incendiary energy: it does increase the likelihood that we're not going to be able to keep going. Whereas somehow, holding the goal in mind and knowing that we are going to do what we can, we can last longer like that. This brings in the point that we're not going to do it on our own. When we bring that energy of 'well, *I've* got to do this'. Again, that is very hard to sustain. Some of the nourishment comes from doing things together. But we are in an individualist society and we've had forty years of neoliberalism reprogramming our brains to tell us that it's all on us. We all have to become an entrepreneur of the self, put ourselves out there, just to make our way. And we think we have to do that with our attempts to change things with our activism too.

Rupert Read: The means kind-of is the end, and in philosophical terms a purely utilitarian approach does not do it. The approach needs to be Kantian/deontological, or virtue ethical. It needs as you say to be about the practices that you're following, or the kind of people that you're trying to be, the kind of self that you're trying to manifest along with others.

Anthea Lawson: That's right. I feel like a virtue ethics is closest to what inspires me to be able to feel like I can do what I'm doing.

Rupert Read: Me too. So look, this has been a fruitful conversation. But if this thought really has something to it, Anthea, then why hasn't this been spotted before? One would have thought that this should have been the kind

of thing that activists or academics would have noticed as a possibility before but as far as we can tell that hasn't happened very much. Do you have thoughts about this?

Anthea Lawson: I think those are two different questions. Let's take academics first: in one sense they have looked at this, yet at the same time you could say they haven't. As we said earlier, they tend to focus on why people do do activism, and you can read into the copious work on motivation to join social movements some of the ways that activism repels people. But it's rarely explicit, in the terms that we're discussing. And then the question is for activists ourselves: are we taking seriously the aversion to activism? I think the answer is largely (and with a few exceptions) no, but why not? You would think we would, as we are in the business of communication: surely it's important to consider how we are received. I think there are a number of reasons for this. One of them is the way that progressives and left leaning people tend to be unwilling to look at the interior of human nature and use some of the insights of psychology. Now part of this is what our culture does. We have a polarising culture that separates the material from the mental, for example.

Rupert Read: A lot of activist types, for example, do not want to be labelled as spiritual. Despite what I said above about the growth of 'contemplative activism' etc., and despite this crisis gripping us endemically now being self-evidently a spiritual crisis as much as it is one of political economy.

Anthea Lawson: Exactly, and desire (not to self-identify as 'spiritual') is all part of the mainstream activist mentality. Because of course, we want to be serious about changing the politics and we're so focused on the politics. But I think part of it is the polarisation of the culture coming through us. Everyone else is looking at our inner lives, it seems. The insights of Freudian psychology were picked up by advertisers very quickly: the commercial world was using these insights from the 1920s in order to sell stuff back to us. The neoliberals are quite comfortable to actively change our consciousness – including our sense of what 'society' is – in order to create the profit-making environment they want. Thatcher once said: 'Economics are the method. The object is to change the soul.'

You can look at it in Foucauldian terms, and 'governmentality', and the state creating us as the citizens that it wants in order to best keep the system going that those in power want. And so sometimes it feels like the Left and progressives are the last people to be actually looking at the interior of things. And looking at the interior of our attempts at change is what we have to start doing if we're saying, 'well, *why are* people being put off by what we're doing?' For ten years, the gateway drug to thinking about the psychology of how our message has been landing is 'framing', which the [Common Cause Foundation](#) initiated in the UK, building on research about

values. Now others like Neon and PIRC are doing good research on framing. Climate Outreach is doing it for climate communication, segmenting the UK population according to the messages that work for them. And it turns out that quite often campaigners are putting out duff messaging. Framing is about the deeply held mental pictures that people have of the world and you can activate unhelpful frames if you talk about, for example, migrants in a way that activates people's hostility towards them. It's really easy to get that wrong. So people are starting to come to that. But I think the deeper questions, of why is it that people are so put off by what that we're doing and who we seem to be, are uncomfortable.

Rupert Read: Yes that's right. People don't want to face that. And, of course, we shouldn't exaggerate about the reluctance to look at this question. There have been people who have done interesting and important work on this stuff before. Tom Crompton's important work is relevant, yes. Chris Rose. George Marshall. Bayo Akomolafe with his post-activism concept. Extinction Rebellion itself, as you mentioned earlier, made this heroic effort to step beyond what in the spiral dynamics terms would be the sort of 'green' level to the 'teal' level, and to be genuinely inviting and non-hostile and so on. But I think Extinction Rebellion between 2019 and 2021 gradually backslid into a classic 'green' orientation. It became angrier. It started erecting pro-identity-politics barriers to entry.

And, for me, the key explanation has to do with what you just said. It has to do with the discomfort of activists to actually look at what we are talking about. Activists are busy, but also they don't want to turn the mirror onto themselves. If you're going to ask a question like, 'is the concept of activism itself a key reason why what we're trying to achieve is not being achieved?' that's so uncomfortable!

Anthea Lawson: It also doesn't help that we have this pattern of valorising and putting on a pedestal what is most 'activisty'. When I say 'activisty' I mean the stuff that we hold as the cliché, the big protesting 'No!' I've done some workshops where you get people to constellate themselves in the room according to the question, 'do you consider yourself an activist?' One end of the room is 'definitely activist', and the other end is not. It's interesting what happens, because people are not placing themselves according to what they've actually done. There are big discrepancies in what people have done and where they put themselves, which is according to *what they think counts as activism*. There are people who've done loads, and don't think they're activists. Now the relevant for thinking about what a moderate flank looks like is that when we are saying, 'yes, *this* is activism, and *that* is not', there's a risk that we don't see a whole load of work that is happening already. And we charge in on white horses and go, 'right, come on, we need to start up a movement'. Because even with our wanting to do something that isn't too 'activisty', there is a risk that, still primed with our ideas of what counts as activism and

and what doesn't, we won't notice what's already going on. I think that's why it's important for all of us to be really vigilant with our ideas of what counts as activism and what doesn't.

Rupert Read: And that perhaps really is a good place to end, for now at least. That the price of not being captured, not being made unfree, by concepts like activism is eternal vigilance. We need to reflect and to consider uncomfortable possibilities. We need to consider whether the very thing that many of us want to identify as is part of the reason why we're not succeeding in making the kind of changes that we so badly need to make. And if that's right, then we need to make sure that we make space for what comes after activism. That tries to really change things in the serious way that we need without buying into the constraints of this concept. We need to enable the unleashing of action at scale, especially at the meso-level, of collectives: workplaces and communities, and so forth, that is so necessary, in the absence of anything remotely like adequate state leadership.

The meso-level, the huge realm of civil society, is where I see the greatest potential for a new, mass, distributed 'moderate' flank. If first-order activism is pressuring government etc to get things changed, and second-order activism is working to get change occurring at the meta level (e.g. through a spiritual shift, or through seeking to make possible a post-growth economy), then we might call the meso-level 'moderate flank' that I have in mind, and that is starting to emerge, 'zero-order' activism: because it majors on just doing stuff. And in that way it need not present as activism at all. It need not be thought of as activism. And the intriguing thing is that one can see it joining up with second-order activism in a way. For it is a shift in spirit: away from the idea of trying to demand change of others (traditional macro-level activism), but without being reduced to the dead end of purely personal change (the micro-level). When we seek/make change collectively by just doing stuff, we are simultaneously manifesting a different philosophy that has quite a lot in common with 'second-order activism'.

Anthea Lawson: Yes. That sounds right. I like the focus on finding a point that's neither just 'demanding change of others' nor retreating into our own personal project of self-improvement. And I think that in order to maintain the vigilance that you speak of, Rupert, we also need to develop our awareness of what we've been seeking in activism including that lovely togetherness that is prefigured wherever collectives make community. If we look at the alienation of modern consumer life, where we might be spending lots of hours working, and the culture has been turned into something where we have to pay money to do a lot of things, then being able to get together with a whole bunch of people and have some fellow feeling and do something that feels useful is amazing. It's life-giving. It's restorative and that is obviously a really good reason to do it. But also we can get attached to the stuff that comes with the activist identity. And so being conscious of what is good about

these things, but also what they are creating in their wake, can be helpful.

Rupert Read: Totally agreed. Let's leave it there. Thanks Anthea!

Anthea Lawson: Thank you!

Thanks to Jonathan Rowson for editorial comments which improved earlier drafts.

Endnotes

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18. For a recent example, consider Emma Cradock's Living Against Austerity, 2020 (Policy Press). Her chapter on barriers to activism briefly mentions that some people find an activist identity and framing unappealing (p.101); but her focus is firmly on material barriers.

19. Jonathan Smucker is critical of Occupy in this respect in Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap for Radicals, 2017 (AK Press); see also Paul Chatterton, "'Give up Activism' and Change the World in Unknown Ways: Or, Learning to Walk with Others on Uncommon Ground," Antipode, March 2006. Extinction Rebellion has recently been researching and questioning the barriers to its growth.

20. Tom Crompton, Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values, 2010, (COIN, CPRE, Friends of the Earth, Oxfam, WWF).

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