

Opinion – Protest, Interrupted? Climate Activism During the Coronavirus Pandemic

Written by Luis Hestres

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LUIS HESTRES, AUG 4 2020

At the beginning of 2020, there was real momentum behind climate protests around the world. The use of mass mobilizations had become by then a critical tool in the arsenal of climate activists who had lost faith in politics-as-usual. The school climate strikes inspired by teen Swedish activist Greta Thunberg were being imitated by students around the globe. The United Kingdom-based Extinction Rebellion protests were spreading steadily to other countries. These and other demonstrations were meant to convey worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC), as theorized by social movements scholar Charles Tilly. The year 2020 promised to be busy with marches, sit-ins, strikes, and other WUNC-oriented actions. Climate campaigners were counting on these tactics to bring attention to their issue and advance legislative agendas commensurate to the scale of the climate crisis.

Then came the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the novel coronavirus spread across the world, social activity as we knew it ground to a halt in many countries. Governments in dozens of nations instituted social distancing measures meant to slow the spread of the virus. This included (and includes, as of this writing) the closures of bars and restaurants, mask mandates, and bans of gatherings with substantial numbers of people, such as sporting events and concerts.

The implications for global climate activism are obvious. How do you execute a mass mobilization-based strategy in a social distancing context? How do you express WUNC without taking to the streets? How do you maintain interest in an issue that has often taken a back seat to others in the middle of a pandemic?

I argue that the climate movement reacted in three different yet interrelated ways. First, climate advocates tried to tie together as much as possible the twin crises of the pandemic and climate change. Second, they moved significant portions of their advocacy work online. Finally, they tried to strengthen alliances with other movements, such as the anti-police brutality and anti-racism movements, that gained prominence after the murder of Minneapolis resident George Floyd at the hands of police officers. These strategies show a flexible movement trying to stay relevant in the middle of a pandemic that sucked the oxygen out of most other issues in the public sphere.

The Twin Crises of Covid-19 and Climate Change

If climate activists were worried that concern about climate change would shift amid the coronavirus pandemic, they need not have worried. According to a U.S. national poll conducted by Yale University and George Mason University, 73 percent of Americans still believe that climate change is happening, even in the middle of the pandemic. According to one of the authors of the study, Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz, climate change is central enough to many people's pool of worry that it hasn't been displaced." He added that coronavirus crisis could actually be contributing to public support for climate science because the Trump administration's stumbling response to the pandemic has underscored "that science matters, that expertise matters."

Nevertheless, given the amount of attention that the coronavirus pandemic was garnering, climate activists could be reasonably concerned that attention to and concern about climate change were diminishing. This may be one reason

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why activists began tying the two together. Climate activists began to join coronavirus and climate together rhetorically by arguing that the pandemic was just a preview of a world beset by untrammled climate change. According to activists, the pandemic had laid bare economic and social inequalities that would only be exacerbated by the growing climate crisis. Frontline communities, such as racial/ethnic minorities, indigenous people, women, low-income people, and other marginalized populations, were being hit first and hardest by the coronavirus—just as they were being hit first and hardest by the impacts of climate change.

In an open letter to world leaders, climate activists joined with dozens of environmental and other groups from around the world in calling for a “just recovery” from the pandemic. Their demands included the following:

1. Put people’s health first, no exceptions. Resource health services everywhere; ensure access for all.
2. Provide economic relief directly to the people. Focus on people and workers – particularly those marginalized in existing systems – our short-term needs and long-term conditions.
3. Help workers and communities, not corporate executives. Assistance directed at specific industries must be channeled to communities and workers, not shareholders or corporate executives, and never to corporations that don’t commit to tackling the climate crisis.
4. Create resilience for future crises. We must create millions of decent jobs that will help power a just recovery and transition for workers and communities to the zero-carbon future we need.
5. Build solidarity and community across borders – don’t empower authoritarians. Transfer technology and finance to lower-income countries and communities to allow them to respond using these principles and share solutions across borders and communities. Do not use the crisis as an excuse to trample on human rights, civil liberties, and democracy.

The demands in this letter skillfully weave together concerns about the coronavirus with longer-term concerns about climate change. For example, the demand to help workers and communities echoes long-standing demands from environmental justice advocates that frontline communities be compensated properly for prior harms done to them by polluting industries. The call for resilience for future crises has direct relevance to climate change, for which mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions clearly will not be enough—adaptation will have to be key as well. By tying climate change and the coronavirus together rhetorically, climate activists found a way to insert their issues into the conversation dominating most media coverage over the past few months, thereby ensuring its relevance in the public sphere.

Organizing During a Pandemic

Offline climate organizing did not come to a halt completely during the spring and summer of 2020, but the pandemic did limit severely the movement’s freedom of action. 350.org, one of the biggest and most influential global climate organizations, urged its supporters to “listen to science, on the climate crisis and this novel coronavirus.” Recognizing that “restrictions on public gatherings are serious to limit the spread of COVID-19, and ease the strain on hospitals and caretakers,” the group declared that “we don’t recommend participating in big public protests at this time.” Likewise, Greta Thunberg urged her followers on Twitter to “unite behind experts and science” and recognized that experts were urging a halt to public gatherings in order to flatten the curve of the virus.

The inability to freely organize mass offline events meant that climate activists and their allies had to get creative. One example of this creativity was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. The commemoration of this event would have originally drawn millions of people into the streets around the world. Instead, Earth Day was primarily celebrated as a three-day online streaming event featuring celebrities such as Joaquin Phoenix, Jason Mraz, Jane Fonda, Al Gore, Questlove, Aimee Mann, and others. The event was billed as the biggest online mass mobilization in history. Likewise, the climate strikes component of the movement made a big push to enhance its online presence. Extinction Rebellion, seen as one of the more radical offshoots of the climate movement, has also

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moved a significant portion of its activities online. The idea was to flood online channels such as Twitter and Instagram with references to climate action and to tie it to the idea of a “just recovery” that also advanced climate activists’ priorities.

Solidarity with other causes

Efforts to show greater solidarity with marginalized communities are not new to the climate movement. Significant portions of it have embraced the concept of *intersectionality*: the notion that multiple identities intersect to create a whole that is different from its constituent parts. As sociologist Patricia Hill Collins defines the term, “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena.” Intersectionality was at the root of much of the rhetoric surrounding prior mass climate mobilizations, such as the People’s Climate March in 2017.

The murder of George Floyd, however, galvanized anti-racist and anti-police brutality movements in the U.S. and around the world. Organizations led by members of marginalized and frontline communities immediately solidarized themselves with the post-murder protests. Large ‘green’, mostly white, environmental organizations (particularly in the U.S.) were forced to reckon with their own histories of racism and discrimination. For example, the Sierra Club, the oldest environmental organization in the U.S., spoke out against the racist views of founder, John Muir.

The climate organizations leading the charge of solidarity with anti-racism and police brutality protests saw parallels between the struggles that marginalized communities face against police and the struggles they face against the effects of climate change. The post-George Floyd murder protests have attained a certain social sanction during the pandemic, which has given climate activists some space to participate in offline protests that advance a common agenda of social and environmental justice.

What comes next

The next few months will be critical in determining the climate movement’s ability to organize and mobilize effectively during the pandemic. As societies chafe under social distancing restrictions, there may a strong temptation to return to the streets. Meanwhile, activists will also be pulled in the opposite direction by their own adherence to the advice of experts. There is also the question of whether, in the coming months, climate activists can sustain the momentum they built online during the pandemic. Creativity and social media savvy have built that momentum, but whether it can be sustained remains to be seen. The next few months should tell us a lot about how much a social movement can rely on digital mobilization and cross-cutting solidarity to display worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (WUNC) among its supporters.

About the author:

Dr. Luis E. Hestres holds a PhD in communication from American University in Washington, DC. He currently works as the digital strategist for the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, an anti-nuclear organization in the Washington, DC area. Before this, he worked for 5 years as an assistant professor of digital communication at the University of Texas at San Antonio. His work has been published in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Environmental Communication*, *Environmental Politics*, and *Social Media + Society*, and has been presented at international conferences such as the International Communication Association’s annual gathering.