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'They don't quite understand the importance of what we're doing today': the young people's climate strikes as subaltern activism

Benjamin Bowman

Abstract

Background: Youth-led movements like #FridaysforFuture and the school strikes for climate (henceforth referred to as the climate strikes) are leading calls for action on climate change worldwide. This paper reports on a thematic analysis of protest signs, and interviews with young climate strikers, at a climate strike in Manchester, UK, in 2019.

Results: This paper explores the ways in which dominant, adult-centred frameworks for conceptualizing young people's environmental activism tend to obscure the complexities of the climate strike movement. In contrast, this study examines the complex political activism of climate strikers as a 'subaltern group', who take political action in a wider context of intersecting categories of oppression and marginalization – including youth as a category of marginalization – and in the historical context of environmental racism, the enduring legacies of colonialism, and global inequality during contemporary capitalism.

Conclusions: The article develops a theoretical model for future research, based on a model of two constraining frames that limit analysis of the climate strikes in particular and young people's environmental activism in general. This paper contributes to a step change in methods for the study of this remarkable movement in a global context.

Keywords: Young people, FridaysForFuture, Climate change, Protest, Direct action, Politics, YPAR

Introduction

> *'[My parents] think that me getting this day of education will be more important than making a stand against the systematic oppression that is happening… I think it's really important to do this because if we are successful and, say, however many years in the future I have all these amazing stories to tell my grandchildren about what I did to help.' – Mickey (age 17)*

Mickey was a climate striker who was interviewed at the 20th September 2019 climate strike in Manchester, UK. The 'stand', as Mickey calls it, was the largest mass protest for action on climate change in history. Mickey was one of an estimated 4 million demonstrators worldwide [1, 2]. Amid intersecting crises of climate change, ecological collapse, environmental degradation, global climate injustice and mass extinction, much attention is being paid to the global movement of activists like Mickey, who are undertaking youth-led and youth-centred public demonstrations demanding meaningful action on climate change.

This article examines the concept of young people's climate activism in the broader context of literature on environmentalism on the one hand, and on young people's politics on the other. I explore the climate strikes as a polyphonic movement, and argue that the politics of young climate strikers are exceptionally complex.

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However, I argue that this remarkable complexity is typically lost in adult reporting of the strikes 'the continued dominance of top-down information flows' [3] regarding climate change, and a problematic framing of young climate activism as an admirable 'display of public engagement' [4].

In this article, I construct a theoretical model that brings these together as two constraining frames that limit our ability to comprehend and conceptualize the climate strikes in particular, and young environmental activism in general. I define the two constraining frames as, first, a mainstreaming frame, often manifest through top-down ontologies and approaches; and, second, an engagement frame that limits the consideration of young people as meaningful political actors.

As such, this article hopes to contribute to the large existing body of literature that defines environmentalism as a category of political approaches that take many, sometimes contradictory, political forms. For instance, in her work on environmentalism, Laura Pulido conceptualized a fundamental divide, and tension, between subaltern environmentalism on one hand and mainstream environmentalism on the other [5]. Pulido defines the subaltern as 'those who are highly marginalized both economically and socially', and whose lives are 'structured by domination' [6]. For Pulido, furthermore, 'the issue of positionality is most important in distinguishing mainstream and subaltern activism' [5]. I follow Pulido's approach and use positionality as a starting point for a contextualizing the work of young climate activists like Mickey, who are found to negotiate complex, intersecting and sometimes contradictory positions with regard to their political action. I use the term 'subaltern' in order to reflect the intersections of environmental injustice with, among other factors: structural racism [5, 7]; the marginalization of indigenous people in conquered, settled and colonized regions [8–11]; the enduring legacy and modern effects of colonialism [12]; and the work of young people themselves [3, 10, 11, 13, 14].

A case study is undertaken in order to illustrate these concepts with empirical data. The method involves interviews and photographs of protest signs at the 20th September 2019 Fridays For Future demonstration in Manchester, UK. Research findings are considered within a wider field of the studies of environmentalism, and especially subaltern environmentalism. Supported by empirical findings, and in light of the continued dominance of engagement approaches in this field of political activism studies, this article calls for a step change in methodologies for working with young climate strikers, and in conceptual approaches that centre on young people rather than frame their politics in adult terms. I write this article in the first person, as a reflection on the researcher's social location as a fundamental factor in the analysis [15].

Background: young environmentalism is subaltern activism

In an open letter to the journal *Science*, an international group of thousands of natural scientists wrote that: 'the world's youth have begun to persistently demonstrate for the protection of the climate and other foundations of human well-being' [16]. The letter continued, '[it is our] social, ethical and scholarly responsibility to state in no uncertain terms: Only if humanity acts quickly and resolutely can we limit global warming, halt the ongoing mass extinction of animal and plant species, and preserve the natural basis for the food supply and well-being of present and future generations' [16]. By 'the persistent global demonstration of young people' and 'enormous grassroots mobilisation' [16] of young people, the open letter refers to a movement commonly called Fridays For Future, which encompasses Fridays For Future, Youth for Climate, Youth Strike for Climate, School Strike for Climate, and variations of the above, including hashtag variations (e.g. #FridaysforFuture, #YouthStrike4Climate) and local movements.

Though the 'persistent' global movement of climate strikes is often referred to as an emergent movement ('*begun* to persistently demonstrate' [15]), as a form of young environmentalist activism it has roots in a long history of diverse environmental struggles. Intersectionality, the theoretical concept rooted in the investigation of 'the ways in which the structures of race, gender and class intersect' [17] and the 'need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed' [18], reveals how structures of privilege and disadvantage interact 'to form a system of interlocking oppressions' [19]. Young environmental activism must be understood in the context of broader political movements, and conceptualized with intersecting oppressions in mind.

Climate activism is bound up with the 'the disproportionate racialized and classed impacts of environmental damage' [8]. Writing on the development of environmentalism in the United States, for example, Foster explains that economic, social and political inequality between communities has meant the worst destruction is dumped on 'poor, powerless and minority communities' [20]. In such communities, grassroots campaigns that could be considered environmentalist have historically been formed by 'groups and associations of black and brown people' [7], and these movements are distinctive from mainstream environmentalism as well as from white grassroots movements [7]. The environmentalist politics of such communities are frequently collected under a conceptual term 'environmental justice',

which refers to a paradigmatic approach to environmentalism that frames environmental discourses 'around concepts like autonomy, self-determination, access to resources, fairness and justice, and civil and human rights' [21]. The development of the term environmental justice itself is tracked back to Black and Latino activists in the United States, in coordination with civil rights campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s [21, 22], and alongside Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty movements [8]. Furthermore, the term environmental justice weaves in a history of activism, organization and struggles by people of colour recorded since the 1800s. These struggles include the fight for worker's rights and land rights, the right to outdoor spaces, for workers' health and safety, and campaigns to prevent pesticide poisioning, the dumping of toxic waste, and other forms of environmental destruction that inflict disproportionate damage to people and communities racialized as people of colour [21].

The dedicated study of young environmentalist activism gained momentum in the 1990s, when young people were found 'playing increasingly important roles in investigating, planning, monitoring and managing the environments of their own communities' [23], especially in locations where environmental issues intersect with colonial regimes, economic exploitation and structural racism. Youth is a category of marginalization that intersects with these others. For instance, young people have historically been prominent among environmentalists in the global South, for, as Bajracharya explains, 'children constitute nearly half the population of the South. They are the worst-affected victims of resource degradation and environmental pollution' [24]. The intersection between youth and the deleterious global status quo, as Orlando Fals Borda writes, makes environmentalism particularly attractive to young people in the global South as an approach that addresses ecological problems while also striving 'to bring about a new ethos, a better kind of society and social relations in which unity may coexist with diversity' [25]. Youth is global. In the North, too, oppression brings young activists together, from the grassroots activism of children mapping chemical and radioactive pollution in the USSR [26] to the divergence of young environmentalists in Finland from the mainstream in their emphasis of 'international solidarity and grassroots democracy' and being 'overtly critical of the "consumer society"' [27]. Intersectionality, as a conceptual approach, helps us weave a global tapestry of young environmental activism together as young people orient their action towards 'a system of interlocking oppressions' [19].

Young environmentalist activism is not monolithic. Nevertheless, the activism of young people has characteristic features. One characteristic of young activism is that, because youth is a category of marginalization that intersects with others like race, class and gender, young environmentalism can be called 'subaltern activism', distinguishable from mainstream environmentalism [5]. For this reason, young environmentalism shares a characteristic with environmental justice movements – and especially movements led by people of colour – which be placed in contrast to 'mainstream environmental movements… [that] have largely continued to frame the goals of the environmental movement in narrowly constructed, technocratic, and dehistoricized ways' [8].

For instance, as Hamilton Faris defines it, 'colonial-capital processes' and 'histories of empire' [13] endure in mainstream environmentalist movements. It is characteristic of young activists that they often attempt to 'link the histories and continuities of colonialism to climate change and understand that the root causes are shared' [28]. The schism between mainstream environmentalism and subaltern activism has many facets. These include the distrust of the mainstream for embodying 'white, bourgeois values' [7]; experience that mainstream environmentalism 'artificially compartmentalizes people's troubles' in order to render minority environmentalism 'not environmental' [7]; and the 'exotification' of activists like Indigenous young people [13] in order to discursively centre (and soothe) mainstream (white, settler) environmentalists as benevolent protectors [8].

Environmentalism is, in the literature above, broadly divided between mainstream environmentalism and subaltern environmentalism, with the latter being more oriented towards 'a system of interlocking oppressions' [19]. Young environmentalism, as subaltern environmentalism, requires an integrated approach to youth as a category of marginalization. In the next section, I outline what I call an engagement approach to young people's politics. The engagement approach, I argue, constrains young people as political actors. It also limits the ability of researchers to conceptualize the rich, complex (and sometimes contradictory) positionalities that are indeed (according to Pulido) 'most important in distinguishing mainstream and subaltern activism' [5]. I attempt to sketch out an engagement approach as it pertains to the climate strikes, as well as the main limitations of the approach, ahead of this article's case study.

'Listen to the science': top down information flows and the constraints on young agency

Young people are complex political actors that demonstrate an 'expanded toolbox for political action' [29] including everyday making and 'Do It Ourselves' approaches to politics [30, 31], 'engaged scepticism' [32–34], 'networked citizenship' [35], 'lifestyle politics' [36], and various other forms of constructing political identities, belongings and behaviours. Often, this complexity

is obscured by constraining forms of academic interpretation. To date, 'suprisingly little attention has been given to analysing expressions of dissent among youth' [37] in the current period of mobilization.

As a case in point, it has been claimed that:

> *"A simple but unambiguous message emerged as a common denominator of these individual groups: "listen to the science"'* [38].

One possible (but, in this case, unreferenced) source for the slogan in the above may be the Lausanne Climate Declaration of 400 young climate activists. The activists at Lausanne declared three demands and of those, 'listen to the best united science currently available' was third in the list. 'Ensure climate justice and equality' was, incidentally, second [39]. Yet, boiling down the climate strikers' demands to a mere matter of asking politicians to 'listen to the science' reproduces the long established and continued 'dominance of top-down information flows' [3] with respect to climate change. It reinterprets climate change as a problem to be solved by technocratic governance, in accordance with the knowledge of scientific elites. The complexity of young people's demands is lost in the search of this common denominator, and in doing so, I argue, the subaltern facets of the climate strike movement are lost too. 'Climate justice and equality' is lost, but 'listen to the science' is retained, and in doing so, young environmentalist demands are recast in the familiar 'narrowly constructed, technocratic, and dehistoricized ways' of the mainstream environmental movement [8].

In the next section I provide a case study in order to explore these concepts, illustrate claims and contribute to methodological developments in this field of political science. Fieldwork took place in Manchester, UK, in 2019. In the case study, I undertake a qualitative method in which analysis centres on positionalities. The case study is an exploratory study, and following analysis, I suggest ways that future work on the climate strikes can develop further.

Method: protest signs and interviews at the youth strike 4 climate

As I have argued elsewhere, 'more-or-less binary concepts of political action, such as the framing of instrumental political goals as distinct compared to expressive political goals, are familiar in academic research concerning young people's politics, but may limit researchers' ability to understand young people's complex political subjectivities' [29]. In this method, the primary research aim is to ask, 'how can we explore young people's complex political subjectivities?' The second aim of my research is to provide a case study in which young people's political action is not framed in binary terms, but rather, as a complex negotiation of positionalities, building on Pulido and Peña's approach, explained below.

Fieldwork was carried out at the 20 September 2019 Fridays for Future climate strike in Manchester, UK. The primary mode of data generation is based on the established method 'Caught in the Act of Protest: Contextualizing Contestation', or CCC method [40]. In this project, the CCC method is modified, especially since CCC uses teams of researchers including a 'pointer' who selects participants in order to minimize selection bias [41]. I did the research alone, and so lacked a 'pointer' and was unable to comply with this recommendation of the method. Nevertheless, working alone in a large protest site allowed me to undertake a loosely systematic sample. I gained permission to take a photo of their sign from 66 sign holders. Of these, 33 were invited to an interview and 10 agreed.

In accordance with the criteria for research agreed with my institutional Ethics board, I only selected over-16 s for participation in interviews. In the Protest for a Future study, researchers record that 'the 14-19 age group is significantly over-represented' at climate strikes [42]. In this study, too, there were very many young people aged under 16. Future research could take up the opportunity to work with young people aged under 16. In this study, I excluded them from the sample. Older participants, which means those over the age of 35, an age range selected to match the age ranges in the 'Protest for a Future' study [42], were included for the primary rationale that they are also engaged in the situated practice and meaning-making process of the demonstration. The exploration of qualitative data through interviews selected only interviews with young participants aged 16 to 35.

Sign photos and sign holder interviews: positionality, terminology, method design and ethics

I consider that my position in the 'system of interlocking oppressions' [19] provides context for all interactions in the research, and therefore must inform all aspects of the research [43]. As such, my 'relational positionality' [44] as a University researcher who presents as white, male and in my 30s, informs my approach, and also many of the limits, to this study. Qualitative research is an 'inherently problematic' social situation introduced by the researcher which calls for 'balance between the risks and benefits that can be achieved through practices of openness and transparency' [45]; in this study, I considered that although 'categories [that] capture key individual characteristics are often taken for granted and seen as natural distinctions' [46], these categories are socially

constructed schemes of classification [47]. I introduced myself in a transparent way to each prospective participant as a researcher interested in signs at a youth-led climate strike.

By 'sign', I refer to banners and other displays held or worn by a demonstrator. These displays were typically cardboard and/or wooden boards either held aloft on a handle or held in the hands, printed with a slogan and/or illustration. Signs used many different materials including cloth, paint, sticky tape, packing crates and so forth. The sample also includes one metal street sign. If a sign had two sides, or was accompanied by other displays, these were taken as an ensemble as much as possible.

Photographs were taken in such a way as to leave out the faces of the sign holder and others around. On some occasions a person was visible in the background. I digitally edited any photos in which a face was visible to blank them out. I used a tablet computer in order to show each demonstrator the photo for their approval.

When I interviewed a participant, I asked between three and five structured questions relating to the sign, how it was made, and the motivation behind making the sign. The variation in number of questions is because many participants responded to structured questions as an invitation to talk more generally, and so sometimes their answer to one question effectively answered the next question, too.

Participants were offered the choice of providing a pseudonym or first name to be credited as the creators of their sign. It must be said that participants, as a rule, did not tend to respond with strong feelings about being credited, nor about providing names or pseudonyms. Where a pseudonym has not been provided participants are anonymised in this study with a random pseudonym chosen by the researcher.

Signs represented an accessible source of primary data as well as an opportunity to recruit interview participants. The primary dataset consists of photographs of the signs ($n = 66$). These were coded according to visual theme, what the sign was made of, theme of written message and overall message of the sign. The initial process of analysis, reported here, was informed by the work of Blackwood, Lanza and Woldemariam and aimed 'to understand, qualitatively, the social and political action of political protest as mediated by text and signs' [48], interpreting the signs in context of the social situation and the practice of protest. In an analysis approach modelled on grounded theory the researcher developed 'emergent categories… from successive levels of analysis' [49]. The researcher collected the photographs of signs to identify themes, topics and practices evident in the signs. The secondary dataset, consisting of interviews, are then analysed according to the themes arising from the signs, in a subsequent level of analysis.

Following thematic analysis, an exploratory analysis was undertaken of activists' positionalities as they were explained in the interviews. In their work on environmentalist activism, Pulido and Peña define positionalities as 'a person's location within a larger social formation,' arguing that 'positionality is key to how people experience, articulate and respond to environmental issues' [50]. This is in contrast to the analysis of issue formation, and in this case study, careful attention is paid to the social formation of youth as a category of marginalization [31, 33, 51–53].

The findings and analysis are presented as preliminary. To quote Appadurai, young people have 'the right to the tools through which any citizen can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens' [54], and in this study I have not shared methodological tools with young people as co-researchers. As I have argued elsewhere, it is imperative that researchers develop youth-centred and participatory research on the climate strikes [29]. Therefore, I present these results as an exploratory study that may contribute towards that development.

Findings: a thematic analysis of the signs

Every sign in the sample (66 signs) had some written text. Fifty-one signs had a distinct picture or image. Of the different messages in written text, the most prevalent code in the sample was *imperatives*, i.e. calls to act or to undertake action. Twenty-eight of the sampled signs were written with imperative messages. The next most prevalent theme was *direct action or solidarity* ($n = 20$ signs). Ten of the signs with a written *imperative* also called for *direct action or solidarity* ($n = 10$). In other words, half of the signs in the *direct action or solidarity* theme cross over with the primary *imperatives* theme. These included general imperatives (like 'RESPECT EXISTENCE OR EXPECT RESISTANCE', 'STOP PISSING ON YER CHIPS', and 'Care for the earth') or more specific ones (like 'CUT THE CARP & SAVE OUR REEFS'). Imperatives crossed over with calls to direct action or solidarity (as in 'if not us then WHO? STAND UP FOR THE AMAZON + INDIGENOUS RIGHTS' and 'WAVE S OF SUPPORT').

Fourteen signs in the sample were coded with imperatives to *wake up*, or similar phraseology, like 'WAKE UP! ACT NOW!!! / FRAGILE' and 'Bat signal NOT WORKING SOS SOS IT'S DOWN TO US Then We made you successors on the Earth (after them) so that We may see how you ACT Quran 10.14 (Yes, Batman & Quran on the same poster) #GlobalClimateStrike'. Included in the *wake up* sub-code of imperatives were those signs that included terms like 'NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL' and 'this is a planetary emergency'. The codes *imperative,*

direct action and solidarity and *wake up* were placed into the largest single theme of the corpus of signs, which was entitled 'Don't be part of the problem', a quote from one of the signs in the sample (Fig. 1).

Since the main theme in the signs was 'Don't be part of the problem', I use findings from the interviews to further explore this main theme. If young climate strikers indicated a message in the imperative, what were they asking for, and whom were they calling on? What problems did they identify, and in what ways did they orient themselves towards problems? Such questions guided a careful analysis, using coding, of the interviews [55]. Main findings are presented in the discussion, below.

Analysis of interviews: climate action as an open-ended imperative

This paper has indicated that existing literature tends towards focussing on 'the continued dominance of top-down information flows' on climate change [3] and critiques that the Fridays For Future movement is based on a limited rhetorical imperative to policymakers that they must 'listen to the science' [4]. In this study, imperatives are identified as the main theme of protest signs in the case selected, but also that these imperatives had a broader reach and richer, more complex aims than simply asking policymakers to do their job. In other words, imperatives were not simply instruments of delivering political pressure, directed at those in power. The richness and complexity of the imperatives, and the diversity of intentions behind them, indicate the complex negotiation of positionalities by young demonstrators at the climate strikes.

I interviewed Drew, aged 16, just as the demonstration was beginning to march down the protest route. Drew explained that their sign 'WAVES OF SUPPORT' (Fig. 2) was a collaborative effort that Drew made with a friend from college. During the interview, I asked, 'is there anything you'd like to say to someone who is listening?' and Drew responded in the imperative:

> *'Yes, this is a big issue. Fucking listen. God.'*

Drew gave a further clarity when answering a follow-up question, 'what inspired your sign?':

> *'It's artistic, but also spreads the message that everyone needs to get involved, which I quite like. And the waves of support, like, it shows unity, that everyone's involved and everyone has a say in what's happening'*

In the previous section I explained that, through the coding process, signs coded as 'solidarity' were brought, along with 'imperatives', into the broader theme of 'don't be a part of the problem'. Drew's poster, 'WAVES OF SUPPORT', is a perfect example of the thematic relationship between solidarity and imperative. Drew intended 'WAVES OF SUPPORT' as an imperative that 'everyone needs to get involved', that 'everyone has a say'. Drew's enthusiasm for horizontal structures, and orientation towards mutual sharing and inclusion, is illustrative of what was found in the study more broadly.

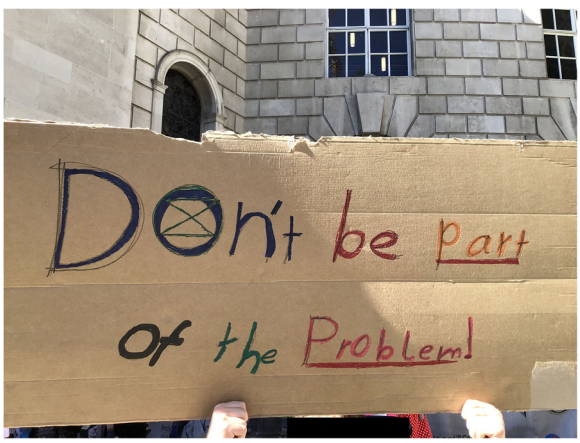

Fig. 1 Protest sign: 'Don't be part of the problem!'

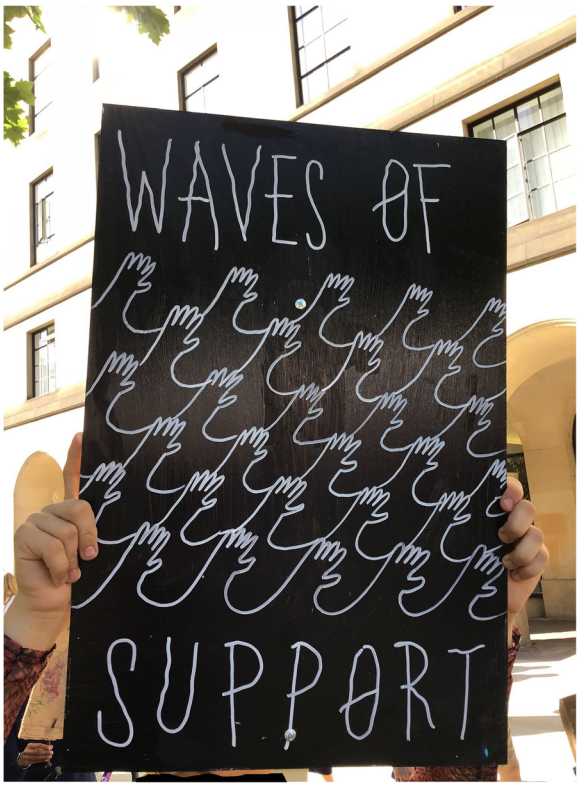

Fig. 2. Protest sign: 'WAVES OF SUPPORT'

Climate strikers positioned themselves in relation to each other as a group trying to seek mutual involvement and uphold each other.

I met Mickey near the beginning of the demonstration, standing near the edge of the rally with a friend. Mickey was aged 17 (name anonymised) and made their sign 'with my little sister'. The sign said 'THEY'RE BLOWING UP THE WORLD WITH A BALL POINT PEN – YungBlood' (Fig. 3). This is a quote from a song by the UK musician YUNGBLUD:

> *'When I was younger I had a proper plan / Keep myself naive, take advice from the man. But I turned 17 and I saw in my head / He was blowing up the world with a ball point pen.'* [56]

After I told Mickey I was interested in hearing about the sign, Mickey explained that 'my parents aren't exactly too happy about all this, so it's kind of, every night after everyone had gone to bed I'd get it out, do a bit more work on it…'

> *'… they don't quite understand the importance of what we're doing today. They think that me getting this day of education will be more important than making a stand against the systematic oppression that is happening … I think it's really important to do this because if we are successful and, say, however many years in the future I have all these amazing stories to tell my grandchildren about what I did to help.'*

Fig. 3. Protest sign: 'They're Blowing Up The World With A Ball Point Pen - Yungblud'

'Making a stand', as Mickey puts it, was an important goal visible in the imperative language of the signs. As with Drew, above, and in a way that is illustrative of the sample generally, the discourse that Mickey used can be appropriated by an engagement approach, and interpreted as a negotiated position with respect to adult elites. In other words, should the researcher decide to impose a categorizing approach to Mickey's activism, focussed on engagement and political instrumentalism, it would be possible to interpret Mickey's sign and words to be 'making a stand' against political elites. However, Mickey's response indicates a far richer negotiation of interconnected positionalities. Mickey considers an intergenerational position in this answer, not just a position of child vulnerability with respect to adults [57], but also Mickey's relationship as a future adult with grandchildren. Mickey emphasized 'systematic oppression' as their target. They did not mention mainstream environmental considerations like emissions targets. Again, like Drew, Mickey's activism is not one way. It is rooted in a complex ensemble of people – self, parents, siblings, future grandchildren – and interprets those people within intersections of 'systematic oppression'.

I also encountered climate strikers who framed their action as a means to pressure politicians. These more 'mainstream' environmentalist demands were not straightforward, however. Participants presented mainstream demands in complex ways. One participant, who identified themselves as Death (no mortal age provided) and who wore a cowled robe complete with dangling chains and a scythe (Fig. 4) said,

> *'I'm here as a kind of counter-protest… you see, what these schoolchildren don't realise is that climate change is really strengthening the post-life economy,'*

It should be said that, traditionally, studies of political activism separate motivations into a binary frame of analysis: 'instrumental' motivations, aiming at a particular goal, are divided from 'expressive' motivations, which express ideology, values and/or emotions regardless of political goal [42]. I consider Death a prime example of the inability of this traditional definition to grasp the activism at the climate strikes, which is more complex and amorphous.

As others have noted, despite the fact a significant number of climate strikers consider the issue at hand to be no less than the imminent destruction of life on Earth as we know it, the climate strikes are typically cheerful,

Fig. 4 Protest ensemble: 'REAPERS 4 CLIMATE CHANGE'

friendly and even joyful places [42]. Death's jibe about the 'post-life economy' is a joke at the expense of managerial, technocratic approaches to governance at the end of the world. Playful protest is a familiar way to create social knowledge of a problem [58], and I noted, along with the carefully prepared costume ensemble, Death took a lot of care over phrases like 'post-life economy'. When asked 'if you could show your sign to anyone in the world, who would you show it to?', Death responded that lobbyists have power:

> *'Well it has to be those in power, really… I feel some sort of grim reaping lobby group might have a good positive impact because they seem to be the people with power these days to make change or keep laws the way they want them… If we could take a lobbying group to Government that would be great… Just keep burning your fossil fuels, keep destroying your planet and I'll see you real soon!'*

Shepard, quoting Jamie McCallum Jameson, explains that protesters can use humour and play to stop protest becoming 'routinized', 'boring' and to prevent It failing 'in its mission to capture the imagination of wider groups of people' [58].

Death was the most playful interviewee, but also, in indicating explicitly instrumentalist political motivations, Death was the most routine and mainstream interviewee in the sample. Death's intervention in the study illuminates the crossover between instrumental motivations and self-expression, between complex perceptions of the political landscape and 'Do-It-Ourselves' [31] practices of being there, doing something, taking action.

Ade (aged 17), whose sign read 'CUT THE CARP AND SAVE OUR REEFS' (Fig. 5), started the interview by explaining:

> *'I really wanted to get a pun on there.'*

While 'Save our Reefs' could be interpreted in many ways, it is one of the closer signs in the sample to a traditionally familiar form of political instrumentalist action. It includes the imperative 'save', for instance, and could conceivably be interpreted as a mainstream environmentalist demand associated with 'the preservation of wildlife and wilderness' [7]. Ade, furthermore, described reefs in a way reminiscent of Dorceta E. Taylor's concept of the 'sublime landscapes', at least in the romantic form of the wilderness evoking strong emotions. When asked what inspired the poster:

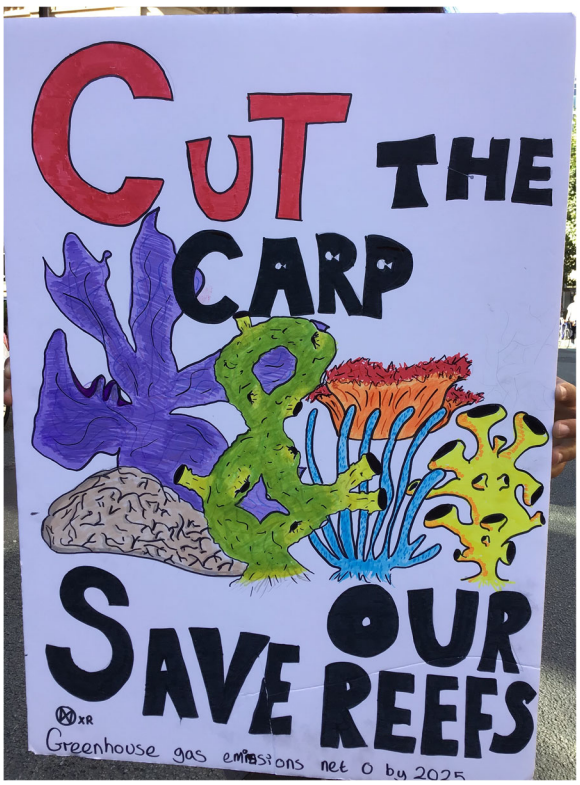

Fig. 5 Protest sign: 'CUT THE CARP & SAVE OUR REEFS Greenhouse gas emissions net 0 by 2025'

> *'I went scuba diving once in Mexico, and that was one of the best experiences of my life. And now the reefs are dying, people won't be able to experience that thing.'*

I asked Ade, 'if you could show this poster to anyone in the world, who would you show it to and what would you say?' Ade responded, 'Greta', and then, after a pause for thought:

> *'[I would tell Greta] that she's doing a good job and she's really making a change'.*

Like Death, above, Ade was a more mainstream and more political instrumentalist voice among the climate strikers in the interview sample. Again, like Death, Ade was playful, and made sure that I had got the joke *as well as* the political message. Unlike Death, who talked about the Government and lobbying groups, Ade positioned their message with respect to Greta Thunberg, an 'icon' of the movement who has a demonstrated effect on the mobilization of young strikers [42].

Between Drew and Mickey, Death and Ade, these illustrations represent of the 'don't be part of the problem' theme of the sample because they all, when interviewed, expressed imperatives like 'listen', 'make a stand' and 'keep destroying your planet and I'll see you real soon'.

Discussion

Each participant positioned themselves into a complex social arrangement with respect to various others. Drew referred to everyone and to everyone having a say, and illustrates a characteristic observed at the strike that climate strikers frequently spoke of horizontal structures, togetherness, and unity in sharing. Mickey spoke of future grandchildren 'however many years in the future' as well as parents, siblings and the self, and represents the complex negotiation of positions and especially generational positions. Mickey also made a specific mention of 'systematic oppression', and many climate strikers call for environmental justice. Death, in a more mainstream environmentalist approach, talked about lobbying Government, using humour and performance to disrupt the routinized expression of political instrumental motivations. Ade, whose sign called for the preservation of coral reefs, explained this intention to be motivated by personal experience, and oriented their activism towards Greta Thunberg, the young icon of the movement.

Future studies could investigate any of these features, relationships and concepts: for instance, a study that developed a closer relationship with participants, perhaps with longer interviews, might be able to correlate climate striker's perspectives on what Mickey called 'systematic oppression' against intersecting relationships of oppression, such as racialized inequality, or the marginalization of youth. Elsewhere, it has been demonstrated that young people can struggle to maintain a justice claim on behalf of youth in the face of systematic oppression [14], and future studies could investigate how climate strikers like Mickey (above) maintain their 'youth as a political position' while also holding inequalities of race, gender, class and so forth in the light of critique.

In this study, the primary research aim was to identify and demonstrate a weakness in traditional methodologies that artificially divide young political activism, in the climate strikes, into categories, and especially categories that align with an engagement approach. I advocate a different approach, conceptualizing young climate strikers as 'subaltern' activists whose activism is characteristically formed around positionalities, more than around instrumental or issue-based motivations [5].

Young people are a subaltern group and categories of marginalization intersect. In this case, the marginalization of the complexity – and specifically, the obscuration of environmental justice in favour of more narrow, mainstream environmentalist concept – coincides with the marginalization of young people as political agents. An engagement approach to young activism places limitations on the very concept of the young person as a political agent. As Chloé Germaine Buckley has described it, there is 'a restricted imaginary, that has been constrained [and] that constrains young people in their ability to think or act' when it comes to intersecting crises of ecology, environment and climate (in personal communication, 15 June 2019). Within this constraining model, young people are celebrated as voice-holders who 'admirably display civic engagement' [4], but it is precisely the constraining and inaccurate framing of action *as mere engagement* that is the problem. The dominant approach to young action is one of engagement that marginalises young people as agents.

The end of engagement

Where young people are concerned, engagement is a concept that enforces a particular sense of the civic. The engagement approach conceptualizes politics as a regime, what Rancière calls 'an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task' [59], in which the place and task of the young person is to engage. The engagement approach to young people's politics conceptualizes young people as apprentice citizens, or citizens-in-transition, who must abide by 'pro-social and conformist' pathways to citizenship [52]. It is an approach that sidelines the vital issue that young people are 'denied an effective voice in the political process and are short-

changed in the policy process' [60]. Young people must engage, but engagement is detached from efficacy. That is to say, young people allocated a voice, but the power to uphold or disregard that voice is held by privileged adults. An engagement approach forms part of Buckley's 'restricted imaginary' that constrains young people merely to having a voice, but not power. In the consideration of climate change, it identifies (and celebrates) young people as those who 'admirably display civic engagement' [4], and whose role is to tell decision-makers to 'listen to science'. The engagement approach excludes them from making decisions. It limits young people to roles of consuming scientific knowledge, but not holding knowledge or producing it. In so doing, the restricted climate imaginary reflects 'the continued dominance of top-down information flows' on climate change [3].

The framing of action as engagement – that is to say, an engagement approach, in which young people are assigned to the limited conceptual place of engaging with political institutions – can reproduce and reinforce the hegemonic vulnerability narratives that bind young people with respect to climate change. These may construct the young person either as a more or less passive victim whom adults must protect. They may also construct young people as democratically passive 'pro-social and conformist' transitional citizens [52] who are required to participate and to engage according to normative frameworks imposed by adults. This approach to young people employs participation in a familiar way 'as a mode of governance' [61], forcing young people to advance individual life chances by the means of more or less compulsory social participation and engagement, filling in the gaps behind a retreating state. As Swyngedouw notes, environmental politics is reduced in this way 'to the domain of governing and polic(y)ing through allegedly participatory deliberative procedures, within a given hierarchical distribution of places and functions' [62] reducing disruption and dissent, and upholding the original distributive order, i.e. the status quo.

The hierarchical distribution of places and functions is a distribution that intersects with racialized inequalities, because of 'the disproportionate racialized and classed impacts of environmental damage' [8] and the durability and reproduction of 'colonial-capital processes' and 'histories of empire' [13] in environmental movements, politics and policy. I am not arguing that all climate strikers are disadvantaged by structural racism, but I do claim structures of privilege and disadvantage interact 'to form a system of interlocking oppressions' [19] and that youth is a category of disadvantage. As such, young climate activists are subaltern activists, and it is unsurprising, in the context of a large existing literature on subaltern environmental activism, to find young people negotiating complex and interlinking positionalities, to use Pulido's terminology [5], in their environmentalism. Yet, I argue, the dominance of the concept of engagement in mainstream studies of climate action functions as a political regime to establish 'an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and that sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task' [59].

The climate strikes are complex

Simplified approaches to the climate strikes obscure the complex positionalities negotiated by young activists who, in their activism, remain bound up in webs of intersecting structural inequalities – not least racialized inequalities – and 'contradictions of solidarity' [8].

For instance, the organizer Jen Gobby writes, in a critical reflection on a climate strike in Montreal, 'this was also the first march I've taken part in that was not headed by Indigenous people… I looked around me and all I could see was a sea of white faces chanting "Whose future?? Our future!!"' [63]; Gobby also reflects on the 'seeds of radical change' and 'their signs and banners [which] read "Systems Change, Not Climate Change"' [63]. In Gobby's example it is a complex and interwoven movement of Indigenous young people, white young people, environmental justice frames, justice claims on the behalf of youth, critiques by young people *of* fellow young people, radical calls for systemic change, and so forth. All this complexity is present in the climate strikes.

To provide another example, the climate strikes also co-exist with mainstream environmentalist groups, for whom commitments to environmental justice may be 'largely semantic' [8]. In the UK, for instance, young activists share rhetorical and physical space with adult-led groups like Extinction Rebellion (sometimes abbreviated to XR), and must seek an uneasy and contradictory position with respect to these groups. In 2019, a young activist called Daze Aghaji was interviewed the XR strategy of sending activists willingly into mass arrest:

> *'XR Youth is really based on talking about indigenous communities, and the global south is our centring of what we talk about and how we express ourselves. And the way we connect to the climate emergency is very much in the line of more climate justice than the main XR'* [64].

Young climate strikers, in this complex context, must figure out how they position themselves as environmentalists in a broader context of overlapping mainstream and subaltern movements, and complex – even contradictory – approaches to climate justice and global solidarity: this complex positional negotiation takes place in shared spaces with a group, Extinction Rebellion, that

operates in the expectation of 'mass arrests' [65]. Racialized inequalities in the risk of arrest and criminalization inflict a disproportionate cost on people and communities who are racialized, compared to those who are white [66]. For young people, that racialized inequality intersects with legal, social and physical controls on young people's use of public space [67], a recent history of repressive tactics used by the police against young demonstrators [68, 69] and against environmentalists in particular [70].

The climate strikes take place in a global context in which legislative frameworks regarding the right to democratic expression are increasingly authoritarian [71–73]. Worldwide, the typical responses of the State to direct action for environmental causes have been surveillance programmes, criminalisation of protesters and heavy-handed policing including the militarization of protest policing [68, 74–77]. Although policing is absent from the data generated in the case study below, policing is nevertheless a vital piece of the contextual puzzle. In the UK, historical context of student protests in 2010 [69], uprisings – often called the 2011 riots – in 2011 [78, 79] and policing strategies that permit the police to disrupt protests using violence if they do not determine the protest to be peaceful [80]. Activism is no walk in the park.

Conclusion: the constraining frames of analysis in climate strike research

In this article, I have claimed that the climate strikes, as a youth led and youth centred environmentalist movement, are particularly vulnerable to two constraining frames of analysis.

The first constraining frame of analysis could be called the mainstreaming of young people's environmental activism as a form of subaltern environmentalism [5]. The frame could be summarized as a tendency to 'frame the goals of the environmental movement in narrowly constructed, technocratic, and dehistoricized ways' [8]. A mainstreaming frame of analysis, for instance, will tend to emphasize demands and practices that align with mainstream movements, mainstream demands and 'top down' flows of information relating to climate change [3]. For instance, a mainstream frame of analysis will emphasize a demand like 'listen to the science' [38], but struggle to conceptualize others, namely environmental justice claims that challenge the status quo. Mainstreaming frames may simply allow such claims to drop off the radar of analysis, considering them not environmental. The constraining effect of the mainstreaming frame of analysis is familiar in the literature, especially in studies of 'minority environmentalism' [7], 'subaltern' environmentalism [5] and environmental racism [8, 20–22].

The second constraining frame is an engagement approach to young people's politics. This approach celebrates young people who 'admirably display civic engagement' [4] but frames young people within 'pro-social and conformist' normative frameworks for citizenship [52]. These frameworks contribute to an incomplete or apprentice citizenship status in which young people are 'denied an effective voice in the political process and are short-changed in the policy process' [60]. Accordingly, young people are assigned a particular place in the 'hierarchical distribution of places and functions' that make up environmental governance [62].

The two constraining frames of analysis intersect when it comes to the analysis of the climate strikes. In the case study, which developed a more youth-centred frame of analysis based on Laura Pulido's concept of subaltern environmentalist positionalities [5], I interpreted young climate strikers signs and interview answers to explore complex, interacting and intersecting positions. In particular, the grammars of political activism I encountered at the climate strike confound analysis according to traditional analytical approaches, particularly in political science, such as the binary concept of motivations that divides political instrumentalism from self-expression [42].

The richness and complexity of young climate striker's political demands, processes of self-expression, positionalities, environmental justice claims, and so forth, offer opportunities for future research. As O'Brien et al. write, 'an awareness of the different modes of dissent and their strengths, limits and implications for climate activism among youth is critical' [37]. In this article, I advocate a step change in methods, especially in the discipline of political science.

Political action, as Rancière defines it, is the 'mode of acting that perturbs' [81] the hierarchical distribution of places and functions. The climate strikes, as a youth led movement of subaltern environmentalist action, is at least partially oriented towards disrupting and changing distributive orders of power and orderly hierarchies of doing, being and saying. Constraining frameworks of analysis that emphasize mainstream environmentalist concepts and that frame young politics as primarily a matter of engagement, can obscure, marginalize or even silence young dissent, young environmental justice claims, and the complex political acts and approaches of young climate strikers.

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Author's contributions
BB: Sole author and contributor. The author(s) read and approved the final manuscript.

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