Chapter 1

"Radical kindness": the young climate activists transforming democracy

Benjamin Bowman, Pooja Kishinani, Sarah Pickard and Marion Smith

Introduction

> "We are radical in our kindness. We are breaking social norms. We are a radical community."
>
> (Skylab, 19, Extinction Rebellion activist, London, October 2019)

Young people are leading the call for action on climate change. Young people's visions for democratic change, and movements like the Fridays For Future school climate strikes are inspiring new approaches to democratic participation and new ideas/notions about the role of young people in society. In this chapter, we explore the visions for democratic change among young people. In our studies of the current wave of youth-led environmental activism that began in 2018, we have observed that young people's environmental activism emphasises an ethics of intersectional justice, solidarity and care. Moreover, this activism tends to take place within fluid networks that foster internal democracy and aspire to horizontalism: they are networks of mutual support rather than leadership, in which sharing and collaboration coexist with more traditional political aims and demands. We posit that the ethics, structure and actions of much of young people's environmental activism are characterised by a combination of features that we call "radical kindness", a term used by a young environmental activist/demonstrator in our interview research.

Young environmental activists are calling for a new approach to environmental politics. Radical kindness is the system of civic ethics they are developing to serve as the foundation of the new environmental politics they wish to see. We argue that these ethics are characteristic of the current wave of youth-led environmental activism. Radical kindness, as we explain in this chapter, challenges contemporary notions of civics. It also challenges traditional assumptions about the place of young people in democracy. We explain how young people are developing a transformative and youth-led political culture in environmental movements, and thereby engaging with democracies in transformation. We posit that these young people are transforming democracy itself, by exploring, imagining and building a new ethical approach. We hope that our work on radical kindness, which is a new and emergent concept, can support others who seek to reflect on, learn from or study the ethics, goals, issue framing and internal organisation of young people's environmental movements.

In this chapter, we first provide a brief introduction to the authors' research and experience in the area of young people's environmental activism. We then explore three of the main characteristics of radical kindness among young environmental activists, each based on a slogan shown on placards by young protesters at a 2018 climate strike in Manchester, United Kingdom, described below.

"System change not climate change"

Radical kindness is about dissent. It is about calling for wholesale, systemic and radical change in the politics and economics that have brought the world into a climate crisis. Radical kindness is reflected in the words of Greta Thunberg (Snapes 2019) when she declared that activism represents a deliberate choice: "We can create transformational action that will safeguard the living conditions for future generations. Or we can continue with our business as usual and fail."

"Waves of support"

Radical kindness is about a vision of transformative change that comes from grass-roots collaboration. To quote Drew (Youth Strike for Climate participant): "Everyone needs to get involved… everyone's involved and everyone has a say." Radical kindness is an intersectional approach, according to which, in order to involve everyone, one must recognise that everyone is coming from different places. For instance, climate change does not impact everyone equally, and to understand the impact of climate change one must also understand inequalities, such as those arising from structural racism, economic inequalities, gendered inequalities and enduring global inequalities of wealth across the world.

"Care for the earth"

Radical kindness is a system of civic ethics based on care and kindness. For this reason, young people's environmental activism tends to be based on expressions of emotions and feelings, such as anxiety, love, support and empathy, alongside more traditional political demands, and policy preferences and outcomes. Radical kindness can be observed and experienced in artwork, singing, dancing and other creative modes of expression that challenge traditional ideas of what is political and what is not. Young environmental activists working in this system of civic ethics often concern themselves with the mental health of others (and themselves), community building and showing care and consideration for emotions such as anxiety and fear.

Lastly, we describe the opportunities for positive democratic transformation arising from young people's environmental activism. Our study gathered data by working with young people who took part in Fridays For Future school climate strikes and Extinction Rebellion protests during the period of study (2018-21). In short, radical kindness is a system of civic ethics based on transformative change, grass-roots democracy and love for others. We hope our work can support further, wider studies of how radical kindness functions as a system of civic ethics among young environmental activists.

This chapter is co-authored by a team of academic researchers and young people. We present the model of radical kindness as a way to make sense of this complex global movement of young people for action on climate change, using examples from our research and our reflections on the movement across Europe more widely. Our findings, and our conceptual model of radical kindness, are intended to support young people as they lead positive new transformations in democracy. Radical kindness is an opportunity to transform young people's democratic participation in a changing world, to empower young people and support them as they imagine a new, just and sustainable world. We hope our work helps to counter the negative stereotypes associated with young people's environmental activism, such as immature school students skipping school, which do not correspond to young people's very real engagement.

Radical kindness in young people's environmentalism

The global movement of school climate strikes – often known as the Fridays For Future or Youth Strike for Climate movement – is now a consistent presence in cities and towns across Europe. Young people are calling for immediate and substantial action on climate change from politicians and other "powerholders". These young environmental activists agree with the general consensus among natural scientists who have asserted for decades, if not centuries, that climate change represents an existential threat to humanity (Foote 1856; Hagedorn et al. 2019; Warren 2019). Due to the impact of young people's environmental activism on the gathering pace of political change, the year 2018 has been called a "a watershed year" in environmental activism (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020: 251). Indeed, Greta Thunberg held her first *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (School Strike for Climate) in Sweden, in August 2018, when aged 15; just over 12 months later, in November 2019, the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, called the climate crisis "an existential threat" to humanity and pledged that the EU would lead the world's response (Boffey 2019).

The term "existential" must be emphasised: as the environmentalist Bill McKibben writes, "the science has been clear for twenty years" that humanity is enduring an existential crisis and we will either save ourselves or we will not. For environmental movements, McKibben states, the argument over climate change has been resolved for decades, and what remains is to "win the fight" against the individuals, governments, industries and other actors who profit either from inaction or from the exacerbation of the threat to human civilisation (Diehn 2015). If humanity is winning the fight to survive, then the global wave of mobilisation by young people since 2018 may be remembered as the tipping point at which action on climate change, of the scope required for human survival, began to look politically viable. The importance of young people's environmental activism cannot, therefore, be overstated. Young people's environmental activism is changing the human response to climate change. We consider it likely that the years in which our research took place (2018-21) will be regarded as a critical moment in the history of environmentalism, and, if adequate action is taken on climate change, in the history of human civilisation.

In this chapter, we argue that young people's environmental movements, such as the Fridays For Future school climate strikes, base their activism on a system of civic ethics that we call radical kindness. This is a term shared with us by a young woman

we interviewed, as part of our studies of young people's environmental activism in the United Kingdom and France. In our analysis of the findings of our in-depth interviews with young people, and in our wider research, we argue that radical kindness offers many opportunities to transform democracy for the better for young people and future generations. Radical kindness, among young environmental activists, represents a specific form of civic participation that aims to transform democracy through the formation of a new political culture. This transformative political culture is led by care, environmental justice and horizontal democratic structures.

We explore in this chapter the ethics of care among young environmental activists; the commitment of the activists to environmental justice – a conceptual approach with historical roots in research and activism concerning environmental racism, which is the disproportionate impact of environmental damage on people and communities racialised as non-white – as "a way to critique and restructure existing power relations" (Sze, Ambriz and Correia 2017: 54) such as the enduring global inequalities that endure after "over 500 years of colonization and oppression" (Environmental Leadership Summit 1991). We also refer to the horizontal democratic structures among young activists, which are often youth-led and youth-centred: they are run by young people, for young people and for future generations, in other words for the benefit of everyone. Radical kindness is the ethical foundation of a movement that considers itself to exist at a turning point in human history. This movement consists of young people seizing the chance to change the world by imagining a new (better and fairer) one. Radical kindness, we contend, is the basic ethical structure of the new world that this movement is in the process of imagining.

We define radical kindness as a concept consisting of three parts. First, the concept represents the radical dissent among the young environmental movement, as young people call for systemic change and a global renewal through social and economic justice (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020; 2022). Second, radical kindness represents the complex solidarities and advocacy for democratic change at levels from the local to the global. Third, radical kindness denotes a transformation of the theoretical boundary between the political and the personal. As Bronwyn E. Wood writes, young people occupy a liminal place in society, "neither completely 'child', nor completely 'adult' in their ability to operate as autonomous political agents or access the full entitlements of adult citizenship" (2011: 338). Feminist critiques of a binary concept of public life v. personal life, formal v. informal participation and institutional politics v. the politics of everyday life draw our attention to the ways that young people can use informal participation, everyday interactions and so forth as "an arena for the contestation and transformation of dominant, often oppressive modalities of citizenship" (Dickinson et al. 2008: 105). In other words, radical kindness is a system of civic ethics that upholds young environmental activists as they subvert the conceptual boundary between the public and the private, mixing everyday issues and emotional and cultural practices with policy advocacy, lobbying, direct action and "do-it-ourselves politics" ("DIO politics") approaches to citizenship (Pickard 2019) or "everyday" DIY engagement (Bang 2010).

This chapter is co-authored by a team of two academic researchers and two university students who have written on and advocated better emotional processing of the climate crisis's effects, most prominently in their work, "Student guide to

the climate crisis" (Kishinani and Smith 2020). The chapter is a collaborative work, informed by our shared knowledge gained through research and experience, and this combination is rare in traditional scientific research. We write in the first-person plural, using the term "we", in order to reflect the importance of our social location to our analysis (Tanaka 2002: 265). This work is only possible because we are working as a team, and so we style our writing with the first person plural to emphasise the collaborative nature of our study.[1] We consider that young people's environmental activism is characterised by an environmental-justice approach, and we reflect that environmental justice includes the call for "the right to participate as equal partners at every level of decision-making, including needs assessment, planning, implementation, enforcement and evaluation" (Environmental Leadership Summit 1991). Our evaluation and assessment of the data, and our theoretical approach to young people's environmental activism, is based on our equal partnership.

We, the authors, present the model of radical kindness as a way to make sense of this complex global young people's movement for action on climate change, using examples from our research and our reflections on the movement across Europe more widely. We hope that our work supports young people and others at what young activists say is a turning point in human history. Our goal is to write about radical kindness, as we see it in our research, in order to support the positive transformation of democracy we see young people participating in.

Research background

Studies with young environmental activists in the current wave of activism began in 2018 (see Pickard 2021). In 2019, fieldwork was conducted in the United Kingdom and France to explore our concepts of young people's environmental activism with the use of exploratory, qualitative interviews, before and in the field, during environmental demonstrations, which included demonstrations aligned with the Fridays For Future, Youth Strike for Climate and Extinction Rebellion movements. In all, 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted in six cities (and, therefore, all urban contexts) – Edinburgh, London, Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield and Paris – in September and October 2019. Young protesters between the ages of 11 and 34, from young people starting secondary school through to those leaving young adulthood, were interviewed. Participants signed ethical consent forms prior to the interviews, and parental consent was given for interviewees under the age of 16.

The two university students on the team have worked to support peers and fellow young people, especially students, with the experience of the climate crisis. This body of work brings together frameworks for self-care, supportive accessibility-oriented guidance for local democratic participation, and reading lists for students who wish to know more. This chapter is a collaboration between all members of the team, and the research that underpins this project goes hand-in-hand with the writing, practice and experience of working with, and on behalf of, young people during climate change.

1. The authors would like to thank Dena Arya (Nottingham Trent University) who was part of the research design, planning and fieldwork for 2019 studies undertaken with young environmental activists in the United Kingdom.

"System change not climate change"

Illustration 1. "System change not climate change" placard, Manchester, September 2019 (photograph: Ben Bowman)

Young people's environmental activism, including young people's movements for action on climate change,[2] features a wide range of young people among its supporters and activists. They are global in nature and include young people of all ages (O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward 2018; Boulianne, Lalancette and Ilkiw 2020; Bowman 2020; Nissen, Wong and Carlton 2021). The young generation is not a monolithic or homogeneous group, and neither are young environmental activists. Academic work, including our interviews, shows that young people are motivated to participate in environmental movements for many different reasons (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020; Bowman 2020). However, there are features of young people's environmental activism that differentiate young people as activists, and young people's movements, from mainstream activists and mainstream environmental movements. When considered together, we call these aspects of young people's environmental activism "radical kindness", and the first facet of radical kindness is dissent. In their work on dissent among young activists, O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward define dissent as "the conscious expression of disagreement with a prevailing view, policy, practice, decision, institution, or assumption that is exacerbating climate change" (2018: 42). Young people's environmental activism is radical because they dissent: they imagine, and work for, radical and transformative change (Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020).

Radical kindness is characterised by dissent. Dissent is not a form of engagement with the political system, but rather a call for systemic change of the current political system. The call for dissent among young activists is frequent and, to quote the activist Greta Thunberg (Snapes 2019), represents a deliberate choice: "We can create transformational action that will safeguard the living conditions for future generations. Or we can continue with our business as usual and fail." Dissent against "business as usual", as Thunberg calls it, is both a call for the transformation of failing political, social and economic systems and for imagining and developing new ones. The dissent of young environmental activists is often full of hope that "we are unstoppable; another world is possible" (Rosie, 25, Extinction Rebellion activist, London, October 2019).

Young environmental activists do not merely protest. They dissent, that is to say they challenge "prevailing norms, lifestyles, decisions and action that perpetuate business as usual and its far-reaching, long-lasting and in some cases irreversible global impacts" (O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward 2018: 1). The young environmental activists' challenge to the status quo, and their call to overhaul "business as usual"

2. We included interview data from young Extinction Rebellion activists in our study, but we recognise that Extinction Rebellion has a broad age profile (Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020: 31).

(metaphorically and literally) is not limited to the environmental impact of the status quo. Young environmental activists are typically, as discussed above, environmental-justice activists. They take action on climate change while also navigating complex solidarities with other campaigns for climate justice, racial justice and global economic equality. For instance, the demands of the Lausanne Climate Declaration of the Fridays For Future movement includes the call to "ensure climate justice and equity" (Fridays For Future 2019). The call for justice and equity, which is common among young environmental activists, represents a particular form of dissent that is characteristic of young movements such as Fridays For Future. Young people, as the activist Becky put it during an interview, are "going against the status quo" (Becky, 32, Extinction Rebellion activist, London, October 2019), in an act of broad dissent that seeks to imagine a new, better and more just world. Young environmental activists, acting in radical kindness, dissent from the status quo and aim for transformative "system change". For this reason, radical kindness leads young environmental activists away from the more "narrowly constructed, technocratic, and dehistoricised" approaches of mainstream environmentalism (Curnow and Helferty 2018: 149).

1. "Waves of support"

Radical kindness among young environmental activists is an intersectional approach to what we referred to earlier as "system change". Intersectionality is the theoretical approach that acknowledges the "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1991: 1 245) and reveals how structures of privilege and disadvantage interact to form a system of "interlocking oppressions" (Roberts 2012: 240). An intersectional analysis of climate change helps us to understand "how different individuals and groups relate differently to climate change, due to their situatedness in power structures based on context-specific and dynamic social categorisations" (Kaijser and Kronsell 2014: 417). One example of an intersectional approach – and one which examines the intersection of racialised inequality, economic inequality and the impact of environmental damage – is provided by Alexandra Wanjiku Kelbert (2016) in her analysis of why the Black Lives Matter movement blockaded, and closed, London City Airport in 2016.

Illustration 2. "Waves of support" placard, Manchester, September 2019 (photograph: Ben Bowman)

> Why are communities like east London's Newham, where 40% of the population survive on £20,000 or less, hosting airports such as London City, where passengers earn on average £114,000 a year? When we say black lives matter, we mean *all* black lives, and that includes the lives of those who live in proximity to airports, to power plants, to

> the busiest of roads, and whose children grow up with asthma, and skin conditions exacerbated by air pollution. Black British Africans are 28% more likely than their white counterparts to be exposed to air pollution.

An intersectional approach guides the work of many young environmental activists. The "waves of support" placard (above) was held by a school climate strike participant in our study in Manchester, in September 2019, who explained:

> 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. (Drew, 16, Youth Strike for Climate activist)

Young people's environmental activism tends to be less oriented towards the "top-down" flows of information on climate change (Tanner 2010: 2) that have historically dominated traditional, mainstream environmentalism found in "professional environmental charities, foundations and NGOs and in mainstream politics" (Castree 2006: 11). Although the environmental movements young people are involved in do call for political leaders to "listen to the science" – that is, the evidence and evidence-based claims of elite scientists – top-down flows are part of an ecology of knowledge, agency and voice in young people's environmentalism. As Drew puts it, radical kindness, which characterises young people's environmental activism, is a democratic concept that "spreads the message that everyone needs to get involved… that everyone's involved and everyone has a say". Because young environmental activists perceive environmental issues to be bound up with wider inequality and injustice in the world, their solidarity reaches out to others who suffer inequality and who face injustice. In other words, we argue that young people's environmental activism is typified by an intersectional analysis of environmental issues that seeks to explore the multiple and intersecting inequalities at the heart of the climate crisis. Some young environmental activists will refer specifically to intersectionality and to "systematic oppressions" (Mickey, 17, Youth Strike for Climate activist). Others, like Drew, may call for sharing, co-operation, diversity and pluralism. It is for this reason that youth-led environmental movements such as Fridays For Future demand climate justice as opposed to, for example, economic sustainability; in other words, young people want to build a fairer, better world, rather than make technical adjustments to sustain and perpetuate the unfair one we have. Young environmental activists tend to perceive that environmental issues intersect with other interlocking oppressions. Accordingly, they position themselves in favour of unity and support with other activists and non-activists, movements and communities that wish to change structures of privilege and disadvantage in an unfair world.

We posit that young people's environmental activism is distinguishable from mainstream environmentalism in part because of the characteristics of radical kindness. The scholar Laura Pulido distinguished "subaltern environmentalism" as the environmentalism of "those who are highly marginalised both economically and socially" (1997: 25). We follow Pulido, and define young people's environmental activism as subaltern environmentalism because young people are marginalised, but also because, as Pulido writes (1996: 28): "The issue of positionality is most important in distinguishing mainstream and subaltern activism." Positionality is "a person's location in a larger social formation" (Pulido and Peña 1998: 33) and, as we illustrate, young

people's environmental activism is focused on questions of positionality. For instance, due to "the disproportionate racialised and classed impacts of environmental damage" (Curnow and Helferty 2018: 149), the worst harm is inflicted on poor, powerless and minority communities (Foster 1993: 728). For this reason, young people's environmental activism focuses on people's positions in social formations of intergenerational injustice, racism, class inequality and other systems of injustice and oppression.

As young environmental activists are different from mainstream environmentalists, young people themselves often feel the environmental movement itself represents a barrier to the transformative changes they wish to see. Mainstream environmentalism has tended to exclude the activism of marginalised people, including young people, in a way that "artificially compartmentalizes people's troubles," so as to claim minority environmentalism to be "not 'environmental'" (Austin and Schill 1991: 72). Mainstream environmentalism has historically ignored the racialised inequalities in environmental problems, a concept known as "environmental racism" (Foster 1993). This is unlike young environmental activists, who more often "link the histories and continuities of colonialism to climate change and understand that the root causes are shared" (Curnow and Gross 2016: 380). According to Bessant (2021), the activism of young environmental activists is often artificially compartmentalised by environmentalists and scholars of environmentalism with claims that "a simple but unambiguous message" emerges from their activism, calling on adults to "listen to the science" (Schinko 2020: 20). As O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward (2018: 1) write: "Surprisingly little attention has been given to analysing expressions of dissent among youth." It may not be surprising to young environmental activists themselves that little attention is being paid to their dissent. Historically speaking, environmental activists who dissent from systems of racialised oppression, class inequality and other injustices have their dissent compartmentalised as "not environmental", and their complex politics distilled into "simple but unambiguous" policy requests.

In a deeper conceptual sense, young people's dissent challenges contemporary norms of engagement, namely that the role of young people in a democracy is to participate in the processes of democratic governance, and that through their participation they will sustain and regenerate the status quo (Kisby and Sloam 2014: 52), as dutiful and "good' citizens" (Pickard 2019). Simply put, it is so commonly assumed that the role of young people is to participate in our economic and political systems, that it comes as a surprise to many researchers, commentators, politicians and others in power when young people wish to change those systems. "System change not climate change" is a transformative proposal that promises a new, youth-led and youth-centred political culture for young people and future generations. In doing so, young environmental activists tend to be well informed and rather pragmatic about the task of "system change" and, rather than making rash and revolutionary claims, they call for a process of sharing, learning and discussion. It ought to be noted that these goals are similar to the cutting-edge approach of the "citizen's climate assemblies" that are being developed across Europe and the world (see, for example, Cherry et al. 2021).

The "waves of support" slogan illustrates the characteristic solidarity of young environmental activists who perceive their cause, and their movement, to be closely linked with other movements for justice and equality around the world. Our study, based on a theoretical approach, explored this solidarity but did not investigate

in detail the identities or socio-economic statuses of the young people in the movement. Future work could examine more of what Curnow and Helferty call the "contradictions of solidarity" (2018) where, for instance, white and relatively affluent young people may be seeking to act in solidarity with other people while also inhabiting and benefiting from social locations of racialised and economic power. Similarly, future work could explore the difficult intersection between youth and justice and the ways global inequalities can erode the belief among young people that they have a claim to justice, as they feel unworthy compared to others around the world who they believe suffer more (Thew, Middlemiss and Paavola 2020). We also hope to contribute to future studies on the importance of young women in these movements, or, contrariwise, the fewer number of men they attract (de Moor et al. 2020). We hope that our study contributes to the exploration in future work of these facets of young people's environmental activism. In the next section, we explain how radical kindness is also an ethics of care for others, and what that care means for the transformative potential of young people's political participation.

2. "Care for the earth"

Young people's environmentalism is, characteristically, a movement of care and kindness. Radical kindness, as we define it, means thinking about social change as a process of care for others. By "care", we mean the practices of emotion, morality and empathy among young environmental activists. These practices frequently include the expression of love and consideration for others and emotions such as joy, fear and hope, and feature malleable and adaptive approaches to activism that benefit from a permeable public/private divide. Traditionally, academic work on political activism divides young people's activism into "dichotomies of political instrumentality versus self-expression" (Bowman 2019: 302) and tends to "celebrate agency and view youth as isolated, bounded, individual subjects" (Wood 2020: 219). The activism of young people, in other words, is examined in terms of individual acts of political agency. These acts are separated into two categories. The first consists of political instrumentalist acts, namely things young activists do in order to achieve a political goal. The second consists of self-expressive acts, which are expressions of the self, of feeling, emotions and so forth. Radical kindness, as an ethics of care for others, challenges the traditional approach to young people's activism in two ways.

Illustration 3. "Care for the earth" placard, Manchester, September 2019 (photograph: Ben Bowman)

First, the care and kindness of young people challenges commonly held assumptions about young people's activism in general, and young people's environmental activism in particular. Young people do not act alone, nor do they act only for young

people. Young people, including young environmental activists, do what they do as part of a wider community, and amid connections to adults, parents, younger children, teachers, schools, colleges and so forth. As Bronwyn Wood states, "the focus on youth alone has led to a tendency to celebrate agency and view youth as isolated, bounded, individual subjects" (2020: 218). Wood argues that due to this focus, young environmental activists are commonly described as "an angry young generation – isolated and alone" (ibid.: 219). On the contrary, we find young environmental activists working collectively, mirroring what Pickard calls "do-it-ourselves" modes of citizenship that are based on collaboration and networking with peers (Pickard 2019; 2021).

The radical kindness of young environmental activists challenges the assumption that the young person is an isolated individual actor. At the climate strikes we studied, for instance, the activism of young people was full of emotions including joy, fear and hope, and the rich interplay of emotions and feelings has been documented by other studies (Wahlström et al. 2019). We also recorded fluid, organic and intergenerational relationships at the strike sites, not just between young people and older adults, but also among young people of different ages. At the climate strikes held in Manchester and Nottingham on 20 September 2019, for instance, the demonstration was recognisably a rally of young people, but with many parents, grandparents and other adults standing just outside the main body of demonstrators. Furthermore, we observed groups of small children, toddlers and babies playing, participating and making chalk drawings on the street, waving flags and chanting. There were also specially designated play areas for small children, as well as tents and workshops for making placards.

The rich, complex and caring atmosphere of the climate strikes we studied is not easy to assess with scientific measurements. This is partly because our research methods are ill-suited/not adapted to working with young children. Like the researchers who conducted the landmark Protest for a Future study (Wahlström et al. 2019), we noted that there were a sizeable proportion of participants in the climate strikes we studied who were aged 16 and younger, but we did not consider it ethically advisable to interview them on the street. Although the scientific methods used to study the movements were unable to measure the inclusion of very young children in the environmental movement, young children were there, and so were older adults. The kindness and inclusivity of young people's environmental activism is characteristic of the movement. The kindness of young activists challenges the common assumption among policy makers, politicians and other power holders that young people's activism is a process by which individual young people make their voices heard. Activism, for young environmental activists, is also a process of building community in relationships of kindness. It should be noted that the largest available studies of the climate strikes record that, although an increasing number of individuals began attending the strikes alone, possibly because the "demonstrations are becoming such well-known public events", "interpersonal mobilisation remains predominant – especially among friends" (de Moor et al. 2020: 30). In our study, too, young environmental activists participated with friends, brought collaborative artwork, made protest signs with schoolmates and family members, walked with others and so forth.

Second, the radical kindness of young environmental activists challenges assumptions about what constitutes political activism, and even the definition of activism itself. As Emily Rainsford writes, political activism is an "essentially multidimensional concept" that is commonly misinterpreted as a dichotomy (2018: 792), and young people are defined as active or not, political or not, engaged or not. Rainsford explains that many young people "do not see their activism as political" (2018: 800). In addition, in established democracies, young people tend to be disillusioned with electoral politics and so their engagement is more likely to be on a case-by-case basis relating to issues, especially local issues, which connect social, economic and environmental concerns (Sloam 2020). In other words, the radical kindness of young environmental activists challenges a common assumption in democracies that when young people are active in politics, they will perceive themselves as political and engage with political institutions in order to have a voice and push for change. In fact, the reality is frequently the opposite. Young people who are active in politics often do not consider themselves activists or even political: rather, they may care strongly about an issue, or have a sense of common endeavour with a group of peers or friends (Pickard 2019). They tend to be sceptical about electoral politics and, accordingly, often feel sceptical about the utility of raising their voice to sway the opinions of elected officials: on the contrary, many young people do not seek a voice, but seek the power to change things themselves.

Positive transformations: the opportunity of radical kindness

At the beginning of this chapter, we argued that radical kindness is an ethical approach that aims to change democracy for the better. The radical kindness of young environmental activists is transformative. It is an approach that challenges assumptions, changes understandings and moves democracy forward. In this chapter so far, we have defined the approach we call radical kindness as we encounter it in our work with young environmental activists. In this final section, we explore some of the transformational opportunities in radical kindness. There are many opportunities to learn from young people's environmental activism but, here, we suggest three.

First, radical kindness challenges democracy to recognise that for young people, politics is about more than simply "having a voice". A voice combined with another might create feelings of solidarity and well-being, but if it does not change anything in terms of concrete outcomes, young people often feel their voices are ignored. Politics, for young people, is often a more complex relationship between voice, voicelessness and finding ways to "do it yourself". Democratic institutions often celebrate young people for "having a voice", but radical kindness challenges the assumption that "a voice" is what young people want. Young environmental activists do not typically want a voice in the political and economic systems that have brought civilisation to the point of the climate crisis. They want a fundamental reshaping of those systems. This challenge is especially pertinent in movements that fight for political change, such as the climate strike movement, because young people's political struggles are often articulated not through voice, but through voicelessness (Kallio and Häkli 2011). As Kallio and Häkli found with regard to young people's resistance to privatisation in

Finland, young people's ways of being political "do not necessarily consist of intentional but purposive action" (ibid.: 70), employing tactics such as self-help, passive non-compliance and subtle subversion.

Young environmental activists who want to reshape the world, in other words, often seek to reorganise the relationships in the society around them, in order to make them fairer, kinder and more supportive. In the "Student guide to the climate crisis" (Kishinani and Smith 2020), for instance, the authors provide an extensive guide for young people to "acknowledge climate grief" (p. 4) and to care for themselves while supporting others. Writing in England, where economic austerity reforms following the 2008 recession have been associated with worsening mental health, and have disproportionately impacted young people (see Thomson and Katikireddi 2018), the "Student guide to the climate crisis" does not form an intentional political act concerning the struggle of young people to access adequate mental healthcare, but it is purposive in caring for and supporting young people in their struggle. Radical kindness challenges democracy to uphold the complexity of democratic participation and recognise that politics is multidimensional, and that young people's politics is not always about having a voice, or even intending to be political. Often, for young people, if you care for others or care about an issue, you get up and do something about it yourself. Radical kindness challenges democracy to welcome wider practices of citizenship and political action.

Second, in a related way, radical kindness challenges democratic institutions to recognise the reasons many young people are sceptical about institutional politics. Since at least the 1990s, the so-called "problem of youth participation" has come to dominate thinking about the role of young people in democracy (Farthing 2010). By this phrase, we mean the inaccurate assumption that young people can simply be divided into two camps: engaged young people, who know about politics and are active in politics, and disengaged young people, who are passive, disinterested and detached from politics. Radical kindness challenges this assumption, as it seeks radically new approaches to the environment rather than reforms that sustain the current approaches (see Pickard, Bowman and Arya 2020: 258). Radical kindness, in other words, does not stem from a grievance among young environmental activists that they do not meaningfully participate in environmental politics, but that environmental politics itself is wrong. It is a call for a new politics, a new approach to the environment and a complete change in how things are done.

Young environmental activists are characterised by an attitude of dissent towards institutional politics, which is to say they dissent from "prevailing norms, lifestyles, decisions and action that perpetuate business as usual and its far-reaching, long-lasting and in some cases irreversible global impacts" (O'Brien, Selboe and Hayward 2018: 1). These activists are young people who believe, to varying extents, that existing political institutions are the problem. It is not surprising, then, that many young environmental activists look outside those institutions for the solution. They may even think that if they engage dutifully with the elected officials and democratic institutions that have presided over the climate crisis, their engagement will sustain and legitimise a political system they wish to transform. For young people who dissent from "business as usual", the way to care for the earth and for others may indeed be to disengage from business as usual and embark on something new. For democratic

institutions, then, the dissent, and even disengagement, of young people should be seen as an opportunity to find out more what they are doing when they resist doing politics in the traditional way. We can learn from young people's practices of care, kindness and community in order to transform society more widely and fulfil the intergenerational social contract (Pickard 2021).

Third, radical kindness offers democracies an opportunity to reflect on the intersecting nature of the issues that we face. While we agree that young environmental activists tend to respond to matters that interest them on an issue-by-issue or case-by-case basis (Sloam 2020), we suggest that radical kindness is an ethics of care that recognises shared experiences and reaches out to build solidarities across issues. Prominent examples include the relationship between young people's environmental activism and the anti-racism movement, solidarity between young environmental activists and campaigners for better social provision of mental healthcare around issues such as eco-anxiety, and a common search for what have been called "post-capitalist" futures (Herbert 2021: 7), in particular future economies that are not based on growth.

Radical kindness is the basis from which young environmental activists build the solidarities they envision. Young environmental activists want a new environmental politics, and they are building a new system of civic ethics that is different to mainstream politics. Radical kindness is an approach that weaves together multiple issues, does not always result in the concrete policy demands that democratic institutions are used to dealing with, and challenges democracies to expand the vision of what young people's participation looks like. For young environmental activists, and for other young people who wish to build a better world, the first step is not to propose incremental changes to the world we have. The first step, for many young people, is to share in imagining what a better world would look like. We cautiously suggest that, practically speaking, imagining a better world might start by supporting young people to recognise global issues and address them at a local level (see Kishinani and Smith 2020; Sloam 2020; Herbert 2021). At the local level, it is possible that the huge, systemic issues surrounding climate change can be more practically targeted on an issue-by-issue and "do-it-ourselves" basis.

Conclusion

This Youth Knowledge book poses the question: "How are young people engaging with democracies in transformation?" One prominent young people's movement in democracies today is the environmental movement, including the Fridays For Future school climate strikes. In this conclusion, we argue that young people's environmental activism is characterised by a system of civic ethics we call "radical kindness", based on a term used by a young person in our interview research. Radical kindness is a transformative vision for democratic change. We define radical kindness as having three main components.

First, young environmental activists who act in radical kindness are, as one activist explained to us, "[radical] in a good way" (Emilija, 20, Extinction Rebellion activist, London, October 2019). They are radical because they do not call for incremental or technical changes that can sustain business as usual, but for positive, transformational

change to imagine and build a new world. For this reason, we categorise young people's environmental activism as a movement of dissent rather than one of protest. Young people's dissent is a vital part of their engagement with democracies in transformation, especially in environmental movements. For many young people, politics begins with dissent: that is, disagreeing with the status quo, and calling for positive, transformational change.

Second, radical kindness is radical and it is also kind. Young environmental activists do not tend to see their radical visions for transformational change as antagonistic visions, nor do they act as isolated individuals with opinions about the changes they would like to see. Young people who engage with democracies in transformation, using the civic ethics of radical kindness, want to transform democracies in ways that uphold and support others who seek justice in networks of solidarity and "waves of support".

Third, radical kindness is a civic ethics of care that does not always follow traditional approaches to citizenship and to politics. Young people who act in radical kindness perceive that political participation is a multidimensional concept, and not a simple question of what is political versus what is not. Our examples included the mutual networks of aid, support and care for peers among young environmental activists, for helping each other with mental healthcare. While such processes of care, kindness and support are not always categorised as "political engagement", they have a profoundly civic and political purpose in that they establish a new, transformative vision of democracy.

The radical and transformative visions of young environmental activists offer enormous opportunities for democracies in transformation. Young people are taking on climate change, and other environmental issues, across Europe and around the globe. Their activism, characterised as it is by radical kindness, represents a world-building project. Young environmental activists perceive that they are at a turning point in human history. The goal of their movement is to build a better, fairer and kinder world. We hope that our writing explains, celebrates and upholds the work of young people across Europe and around the globe, as they work together to imagine a new, just world.

References

- Austin R. and Schill M. (1991), "Black, brown, poor & poisoned: minority grassroots environmentalism and the quest for eco-justice", *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy*, Summer 1991, pp. 69-82.
- Bang H. (2010), "Everyday makers and expert citizens: active participants in the search for a new governance", in Fenwick J. and McMillan J. (eds), *Public management in the postmodern era: challenges and prospects*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, pp. 163-191.
- Bessant J. (2021), *Making-up people: youth, truth and politics,* Routledge, Abingdon.

- Boffey D. (2019), "Von der Leyen pledges climate focus as MEPs back new commission", *The Guardian*, 27 November, available at www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/27/von-der-leyen-pledges-climate-focus-as-meps-back-new-commission, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Boulianne S., Lalancette M. and Ilkiw D. (2020), "'School Strike 4 Climate': social media and the international youth protest on climate change", *Media and Communication*, 8(2), pp. 208-218.
- Bowman B. (2019), "Imagining future worlds alongside young climate activists: a new framework for research", *Fennia - International Journal of Geography*, 197(2), pp. 295-305.
- — (2020), "'They don't quite understand the importance of what we're doing today': the young people's climate strikes as subaltern activism", *Sustainable Earth*, 3(16).
- Castree N. (2006), "The future of environmentalism", *Soundings*, No. 34, pp. 11-17.
- Cherry C. et al. (2021), "Citizens' climate assemblies: understanding public deliberation for climate policy", Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations, available at https://cast.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CITIZENS-CLIMATE-ASSEMBLIES-CAST-July-2021.pdf, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Crenshaw K. (1991), "Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color", *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241-1299.
- Curnow J. and Helferty A. (2018), "Contradictions of solidarity", *Environment and Society*, 9, pp. 145-163.
- Curnow J. and Gross A. (2016), "Injustice is not an investment: student activism, climate justice, and the fossil fuel divestment campaign", in Conner J. and Rosen S. M. (eds), *Contemporary youth activism: advancing social justice in the United States*, Praeger, Santa Barbara.
- Dickinson J. et al. (2008), "Introduction: geographies of everyday citizenship," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 7(2), pp. 100-112.
- Diehn S. (2015), "McKibben: 'We won the climate argument, now we have to win the fight'", *Deutsche Welle*, 10 December, available at https://p.dw.com/p/1HLLL, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Environmental Leadership Summit (1991), "Principles of environmental justice", First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, available at www.ejnet.org/ej/principles.html, accessed 23 July 2022.
- Farthing R. (2010), "The politics of youthful antipolitics: representing the 'issue' of youth participation in politics," *Journal of Youth Studies*, 13(2), pp. 181-195.
- Foote E. (1856), "Circumstances affecting the heat of sun's rays", *American Journal of Art and Science*, 22(66), pp. 382-383.
- Foster S. (1993), "Race(ial)matters: the quest for environmental justice", *Ecology Law Quarterly*, 20(4), pp. 721-7533.

- Fridays For Future (2019), "Lausanne climate declaration", SMILE For Future, available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Nu8i3BoX7jrdZVeKPQShRycI8j6hvwC0/view, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Hagedorn G. et al. (2019), "Concerns of young protesters are justified", *Science*, 364(6436), p. 139-140.
- Herbert J. (2021), "The socio-ecological imagination: young environmental activists constructing transformation in an era of crisis", *Area*, 53(2), pp. 373-380.
- Kaijser A. and Kronsell A. (2014) Climate change through the lens of intersectionality. *Environmental Politics*, 23:3, pp. 417–433. Doi: 10.1080/09644016.2013.835203
- Kallio K. P. and Häkli J. (2011), "Young people's voiceless politics in the struggle over urban space", *GeoJournal*, 76(1), pp. 63-75.
- Kelbert A. W. (2016), "Climate change is a racist crisis: that's why Black Lives Matter closed an airport", *The Guardian*, 6 September, available at www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/06/climate-change-racist-crisis-london-city-airport-black-lives-matter, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Kisby B. and Sloam J. (2014), "Promoting youth participation in democracy: the role of higher education", in Mycock A. and Tonge J. (eds), *Beyond the Youth Citizenship Commission: young people and politics*, Political Studies Association, London, pp. 52-56.
- Kishinani P. and Smith M. (2020), "Student guide to the climate crisis", Climate Emergency Manchester, available at https://climateemergencymanchester.net/student-climate-handbook/, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Moor J. (de) et al. (2020), "Protest for a future II: Composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 20-27 September, 2019, in 19 cities around the world", Göteborgs Universitetsbibliotek, available at https://gup.ub.gu.se/publication/290509, accessed 23 July 2021.
- Nissen S., Wong J. H. K. and Carlton S. (2021), "Children and young people's climate crisis activism – a perspective on long-term effects", *Children's Geographies*, 19(3), pp. 317-323.
- O'Brien K., Selboe E. and Hayward B. M. (2018), "Exploring youth activism on climate change: dutiful, disruptive, and dangerous dissent", *Ecology and Society*, 23(3).
- Pickard S. (2019), *Politics, protest and young people: political participation and dissent in Britain in the 21st century*, Palgrave MacMillan, London, pp. 375-405.
- — (2021), "'You are stealing our future in front of our very eyes': the representation of climate change, emotions and the mobilisation of young environmental activists in Britain", *E-Rea* 18(2), available at https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.11774, accessed 20 July 2022.
- Pickard S., Bowman B. and Arya D. (2020), "'We are radical in our kindness': the political socialisation, motivations, demands and protest actions of young environmental activists in Britain", *Youth and Globalization*, 2(2), pp. 251-280.

- Pickard S., Bowman B. and Arya D. (2022), "Youth and environmental activism" in Grasso M. and Giugni M. (eds), The *Routledge handbook of environmental movements*, Routledge, London, pp. 521-537.
- Pulido L. (1996), "*Environmentalism and economic justice: two Chicano struggles in the Southwest*", The University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
- — (1997), "Community, place and identity" in Jones J. P., Nast H. J. and Roberts S. M. (eds) (1997), *Thresholds in feminist geography: difference, methodology, representation*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, pp. 11-28.
- Pulido L. and Peña D. (1998), "Environmentalism and positionality: the early pesticide campaign of the United Farm Workers' Organizing Committee, 1965-71", *Race, Gender & Class,* 6(1), pp. 33-50.
- Rainsford E. (2018), "UK political parties' youth factions: a glance at the future of political parties", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(4), pp. 783-803.
- Roberts D. E. (2012), "Race, gender, and the political conflation of biological and social issues", *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 9(1), pp. 235-244.
- Saunders C., Doherty B. and Hayes G. (2020), "A new climate movement? Extinction Rebellion's activists in profile", CUSP Working Paper No, 25, available at https://www.cusp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP25-XR-report_final.pdf, accessed 23 July 2022.
- Schinko T. (2020), "Overcoming political climate-change apathy in the era of #FridaysForFuture", *One Earth*, 2(1), pp. 20-23.
- Sloam J. (2020), "Young Londoners, sustainability and everyday politics: the framing of environmental issues in a global city", *Sustainable Earth*, 3(1).
- Snapes L. (2019), "'Time to rebel': Greta Thunberg adds voice to new song by the 1975", *The Guardian*, 25 July, available at www.theguardian.com/music/2019/jul/25/time-to-rebel-greta-thunberg-makes-musical-debut-on-the-1975-track, accessed 23 July 2022.
- Sze L., Ambriz N. and Correia D. (2017), "Conversations in environmental justice: An interview with Julie Sze", *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, 28(2), pp. 54-63.
- Tanaka G. (2002), "Higher education's self-reflexive turn: toward an intercultural theory of student development", *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(2), pp. 263-296.
- Tanner T. (2010),"Shifting the narrative: child-led responses to climate change and disasters in El Salvador and the Philippines", *Children & Society*, 24(4), pp. 339-351.
- Thew H., Middlemiss L. and Paavola J. (2020), "'Youth is not a political position': exploring justice claims-making in the UN climate change negotiations", *Global Environmental Change*, 61, pp. 1-10.
- Thomson R. M. and Katikireddi S. V. (2018), "Mental health and the jilted generation: using age-period-cohort analysis to assess differential trends in young people's mental health following the Great Recession and austerity in England", *Social Science & Medicine*, 214, pp. 133-143.

- Wahlström M. et al. (2019), "Protest for a future: composition, mobilization and motives of the participants in Fridays For Future climate protests on 15 March, 2019 in 13 European cities", available at: https://tinyurl.com/vvyv7c5, accessed 22 July 2022.
- Warren M. (2019), "Thousands of scientists are backing the kids striking for climate change", *Nature*, 567, pp. 291-292.
- Wood B. (2012), "Crafted within liminal spaces: young people's everyday politics," *Political Geography*, 31(6), pp. 337-346.
- — (2020), "Youth-led climate strikes: fresh opportunities and enduring challenges for youth research - commentary to Bowman," *Fennia – International Journal of Geography*, 198(1-2), pp. 217-222.