

Global Extinction Rebellion Seminar

Friday, January 26, 2024 - 13:00 to 16:00

The Open University

List of Abstracts

Amy Robson, Durham University

Department of Geography

‘Extinction Rebellion Futures’

Whether the future is framed as a time of extinction, or through invocations of the urgency of emergency, contemporary climate activism is animated by claims about the future. By working with Extinction Rebellion, my ESRC funded PhD research project examines how exactly futures are present in recent climate activism. What types of futures circulate in the spaces of recent climate protest? Which agents populate these future worlds? And how does the existence of these shared futures transform human and nonhuman subjectivities, and the relation that exists between the two? By addressing these questions, my research casts critical light on one of the most pressing movements of our times.

Dr Annika Benz, University of Cologne (Germany)

Department: Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology

‘Laying the Ground for Intervention: On the Art of Critiquing a Movement’

Many scholars interested in movements want to give back to their fields of study - but how? My short talk looks at my own involvement with Extinction Rebellion Germany from 2021 to 2023 as an ethnographer and activist. I trace the intricacies of critiquing and advancing a movement as an activist scholar and pledge for a research mode that is „for“ XR instead „of“ XR and is built on reliable, truthful and symmetrical relationships at the intersection of activism and scholarship.

Dr Arne Harms, Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Germany)

Department of Anthropology

‘Zen politics: Spirituality and activism on an overheating planet’

In current climate activism in Germany, grassroots mobilization and spiritual practice overlap. XR activists, for instance, embrace a range of techniques, such as Zen meditation, mindfulness or yoga, in order to enable political action. While Zen or mindfulness practitioners now frequently understand their practices to be exercises in realignment toward planetary well-being. Drawing on fieldwork at the intersections of climate activism and spiritual practice in Germany, this paper

explores reconfiguration of politics in practice. I argue that these iterations enlarge and reshuffle the scope of politics. Complementing the well-known stance according to which one needs to turn inwards in order to bring about meaningful change in the world, these practices embody forms of responsabilization of planetary and transgenerational scope. In this view, everyday practices and relations appear re-evaluated that not only as the site of a politics aiming for justice, but mark in themselves already the otherwise.

Catherine Whittle, London School of Economics and Political Science

Department of Anthropology

‘Strategies for relational refashioning in the social and ecological context of the Anthropocene’

My PhD research, due for completion early 2025, addresses strategies for relational refashioning in the social and ecological context of the Anthropocene. Exploring that context as one of temporal conflict and contested agency, I draw on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with XRUK, particularly the local group based in Brighton. I present climate activism as a site in which people theorise, and experiment with, what kinds of transformations are needed to respond adequately and ethically to climate breakdown in relational, political and spiritual ways. In my talk, I offer that impact-oriented ethnography might have a role to play in facilitating dialogue around theories of change and activist strategy.

Edward Ephithite Lindholm, The University of Manchester

Department of Social Science

‘Unspoken Hegemony and Ideological Paralysis: An Ethnographic Account of Extinction Rebellion’

This study examines the tension between the principle of decentralised power in Extinction Rebellion (XR) and how power is imagined by its members. Nine months of ethnographic fieldwork at an XR local group revealed that despite pledging itself to decentralisation, hierarchies still formed within the local group but were never openly addressed or challenged by members. Instead, they assumed vertical hierarchy as inevitable due to preconceptions of ‘human nature’ and society. The findings of this study emphasise the power of hegemonic imaginaries in limiting the possibility of decentralising power and argues that practicing horizontalist structures requires a deeper engagement with how power embeds itself in social relations.

Eric G. Scheuch; Laura Thomas-Walters (Yale), Ganga Shreedhar (LSE) and Mart Ortiz (Penn State) Yale University

Department of Political Science

‘XR Media Coverage’

One pertinent outcome of protests is media coverage. We study UK media coverage of XR before and after its January 1 2023 "We Quit" statement using an original dataset of 422 articles from the largest UK news sources. We look at how coverage sentiment, accuracy, and volume varies according to the news source in question and the tactics employed in different protests. Our results

reveal that conservative publications cover climate actions more unfavorably and more inaccurately than other publications. Legal actions are generally covered more favorably than illegal ones in both conservative and non-conservative outlets and receive more coverage. Actions that target industry attract more coverage than those that target other actors, while actions that target the public are covered more favorably than those that do not. We also find that the sentiment of XR coverage did not change after "We Quit". These results contribute to the scholarly debates surrounding the interaction between social movements and news media, especially on how different strategies potentially influence the extent and affective nature of coverage. They have implications for strategies adopted by climate advocates, depending on whether their goal is merely to draw attention to an issue or if it is to generate positive coverage.

Hannah Fitchett, The University of St Andrews

Department of social anthropology

‘Cultural change or climate change: building cultures of care in Extinction Rebellion’

‘Cultural change’ has long been considered essential to climate breakdown mitigation within Euro-American environmentalism, and has been described as essential in multiple IPCC reports. Framed as building ‘regenerative cultures’, the creation of cultural change to mitigate climate breakdown is integral to the recent Extinction Rebellion movement, which has been rapidly adopted on a **transnational** scale. XR defines regenerative cultures loosely as cultures based on care, to provide activists with freedom in how they attempt to build such cultures. Through ethnographic fieldwork in London and Madrid, my PhD research explores what ethics and praxes XR activists consider regenerative cultures to encompass, and the ontologies, imaginaries of apocalypse, and related temporalities underpinning these. By comparing XR London and XR Madrid I will explore the role that local politics, environment, culture, and history - including historic international power dynamics – play in shaping activists’ interactions with the concept of regenerative culture.

Dr Kyle Matthews, Victoria University of Wellington

Department: He Whenua Taurikura [A Land at Peace]

‘Decolonising XR in Aotearoa New Zealand’

Activists in Aotearoa New Zealand, like other Western democracies, were attracted to Extinction Rebellion (XR), which promised answers to the threat of climate change based on social science, which were uncomplicated by race and settler-colonialism. But, guided by a Māori and allies caucus, XR in Aotearoa New Zealand translated the demands and principles into Māori, constructed a decision-making process which aspired to protect Indigenous sovereignty, and highlighted the links between colonisation and climate change in its actions. Drawing on my doctoral research on XR in Aotearoa New Zealand, I will outline the ways that Extinction Rebellion in Aotearoa New Zealand has been decolonised, and the challenges that activists have faced in doing so.

Dr Laura Thomas-Walters, Yale University

Yale Program on Climate Change Communication & Extinction Rebellion UK’s Data Analysis and Insights Circle

‘Climate activism: choosing effective tactics and mobilizing new activists’

From talks to walks, from bums in seats to feet on the streets, mobilising a diverse range of activists is essential for creating much-needed political action on climate change. I'll give a whirlwind tour of some of the research we have conducted using multiple experiments, surveys, and focus groups.

Lisa Savoia, University of Bologna

Department of Anthropology

‘Prefigurative practices within a hunger strike organized by Extinction Rebellion Bologna’

In this paper, I explore how prefigurative tendencies are played out in the context of a hunger strike undertaken by some members of Extinction Rebellion Bologna. Prefigurative practices allowed the activists to re-signify the hunger strike by turning an act of individual sacrifice into a collective experience strengthening the cohesion of the community. The practices that shape the activists’ habitus share certain characteristics like valuing dependency over autonomy of the individuals, promoting embodied knowledge or an epistemological approach that incorporates emotions into learning processes. Unlike the practices comprised under the name of “regenerative culture”, such as nonviolent communication, other practices, like polyamory, are not officially promoted by the movement but they are nonetheless pivotal in the activists’ experiences.

Dr Maria Nita, The Open University

Department of Religious Studies

‘Extinction Rituals in the UK’

This paper offers an examination of Extinction Rituals, drawing on my ethnographic research in Britain. I will look at performances in the British climate movement through the lens of my own theoretical models for examining ritual. I discuss both the material culture of these rituals, such as funeral clothes or coffins, as well as their structure and composition, showing that these performances can be understood as rituals of transformation. I show that to understand climate extinction rituals is to connect to the climate crisis in a way that goes beyond the semantic strata of the fragmented climate discourses we have created. The examination can help expand the application of ritual theory to cultural forms that enable cultural change.

Dr Paul-Francois Tremlett, Open University

Department of Religious Studies

‘Developing Publics: A Transnational Approach’

This paper takes as its point of departure the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur to the Philippines in November 2023. Filipino climate activists are demanding that the UN team “conduct a thorough, impartial investigation” into alleged environmental and human rights violations that have taken place under the Marcos Jr. administration in relation to development projects including the new International Airport in Manila Bay and the Kaliwa Dam project. This paper reflects on the activities

of Filipino environmental activists in the diaspora, and their work trying to mobilise publics in relation to environmental and human rights violations in the Philippines.

Dr Peter Gardner and Tiago Carvalho, University of York

Department of Sociology

‘XR adaptation during transnational diffusion’

In this paper, we offer a systematic analysis of how social movements adapt during transnational diffusion. We argue that the "translation" of the movement is an inherently political, cultural, and relational process that is integral to the diffusion of social movements. Drawing on 88 semi-structured interviews with 96 Extinction Rebellion activists in 17 countries, we identify key themes in the translation of the movement across the world. We contend that social movement translation involves a significant degree of activist agency, but this agency is constrained by context-dependent forms of power.

Dr Tobias Müller, The University of Cambridge, and The New Institute

‘Climate coloniality and democratic futures: Solidarity, cognitive justice, and co-liberation in the climate movement’

Climate coloniality (Sultana 2022) has become an analytical concept and a political project advanced by groups that seek to shape democratic futures where ecological concerns are not instrumentalised to delay or postpone questions of social, racial and cognitive justice. Based on three years of ethnographic work with various teams in XR UK, US and Uganda, this paper traces how in one such group, the Extinction Rebellion Being the Change Affinity Network (BCAN), climate activists, ecofeminists and new abolitionists are exploring democratic ways of decision making, practical solidarity and world-making. The contribution investigates the different forms of knowledge production that are used in this process, from trauma work, “co-liberation”, emancipatory education to decolonial theory, and how cognitive and epistemic justice is linked to climate and ecological justice.