

SYSTEMIC UNSUSTAINABILITY AS A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Resilient socioeconomic unsustainability poses a threat to democracy whose importance has yet to be fully acknowledged. As the prospect of sustainability transition wanes, so does perceived legitimacy of institutions. This further limits representative institutions' ability to take action, making democratic deepening all the more urgent. I investigate this argument through an illustrative case study, the 2017 People's Climate March. In a context of resilient unsustainability, protesters have little expectation that institutions might address the ecological crisis and this view is likely to spread. New ways of thinking about this problem and a new research agenda are needed.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, Social Movements, Legitimacy, People's Climate March, Trump

1. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing ecological crisis has often been understood with reference to the idea of resilient systemic unsustainability. This concept has developed from the interaction between debates on socio-ecological systems (e.g., Redman et al. 2004) and interdisciplinary work on the idea of

resilience (e.g., Gunderson 2000). Basically, resilient systemic unsustainability refers to the challenge of making desirable transformations in biophysical and socio-economic systems that tend to retain their characteristic unsustainability despite shocks and efforts to change them in more sustainable directions (see Holling 1973; Rotmans and Kemp 2008).

Politics are often considered as a key factor contributing to the resilience of systemic unsustainability (Smith, Stirling and Berkhout 2005). Nevertheless, and despite growing scepticism about the possibility of redressing the current course (Blühdorn 2013), there are sustained scholarly efforts to envision innovative political reforms. Their goal is to conceive of new forms of governance to promote sustainability transition and to avert the worst consequences of the ecological crisis from following their course (Avelino et al. 2016). These contributions shed a light on the kind of political systems we would need in order to redress systemic unsustainability, and can also inform institutional and social action (Hess 2014).

A limitation in current research, however, is that resilient systemic unsustainability is generally intended only as a problem for making policy progress necessary to address environmental crises: it is generally overlooked that it might pose problems for political systems as well (see Fischer 2017). Whereas we are aware of negative consequences the resilient unsustainability of socioeconomic systems has from an environmental standpoint, its long-term political consequences have been overlooked so far.

On the basis of my qualitative analysis of the 2017 People's Climate March protesting against the Trump administration, I argue that the systemic unsustainability might undermine the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions which, in turn, might further diminish the latter's ability to solve problems. My study shows that activists striving towards environmental justice in the context of resilient, systemic unsustainability face momentous challenges and there is little or no

expectations as to the ability of extant democratic institutions to redress the situation. Opposition against the Trump administration and its policies is a fundamental driver of the protest I am studying (see Tarrow and Mayer 2019). Here, however, I do not intend to document whether and to what extent activists mobilised against the Trump administration might claim that the government is illegitimate (see e.g., Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Rather, I show that in the protest under examination, activists are not only critical about the administration, they are also sceptical about US democratic institutions' ability to address the climate crisis. Interviewees show a belief in democratic participation as a means to spur change from the bottom-up. Their scepticism towards institutions is not rooted in disaffection with democratic values. Rather, it is based on a shared sense that the political, economic and social systems are entrenched in deeply unsustainable ways. As I show, activists' views are consistent with arguments developed in the literature on resilient systemic unsustainability.

My investigation of the effects of resilient systemic unsustainability on democratic institutions is hinged on the issue of legitimacy. In particular, as shown in greater detail later in the paper, I refer to the problem of output legitimacy. Crucial to democracy, output legitimacy regards the perceived quality of institutions' response to problems, their capacity to address them (Rothstein 2009). In this sense, legitimacy varies depending on the extent to which there is a shared belief that institutions take actions that are proper or appropriate in dealing with perceived problems (see Bernstein and Cashore 2007).

An important issue to reflect clearly emerges from my study: if a legitimate political system is one where there can be at least an expectation that claims to justice can be met, then the shared sense that institutions will fail to address vital problems, such as those connected to the ecological crisis, exposes democracy to another, largely overlooked crisis of legitimacy. In a context where

democratic systems are already faced with unprecedented challenges, the issue of perceived legitimacy cannot be overlooked (Mansbridge 2017). This is a concerning issue that is starting to attract research interest and is deserving of greater attention (e.g., Fischer 2017). Indeed, as argued by Kuyper (2016), we urgently need new ways to think about the problem of democratic legitimacy in the face of political problems that globalisation is bound to face us with. My investigation offers a good basis to reflect upon what might occur if the emergency and intractability of socioeconomic unsustainability will be patent to an ever-growing section of the population.

Of course, my argument is developed with regard to the US context. The installation of an anti-environmentalist administration (Bomberg 2017) might have concurred to the development of the sceptical views I recorded. It is conceivable – one might even say, likely – that activists would be less sceptical with a more supportive or a less adverse government in power. Nevertheless, I consider ways in which the observations I made in this US-based case study and the reflections they elicit might be interesting also in other cases where democracies might fail to develop in their citizenry a reasonable expectation that unsustainability might be addressed. I agree with Hammond and Smith (2017: 12) that our democracies are constrained by the structural forces that generate unsustainability. We need to understand the potential threat posed by resilient systemic unsustainability to democratic systems if we are to protect and enable them to deal with the escalating ecological crisis before us. While providing a full or generalizable account of how systemic unsustainability might undermine developed democracies is beyond the reach of this paper, I intend to shed light on this issue to also suggest ways forward in addressing it.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section hosts two theoretical discussions. The first one focuses upon the idea of resilient socioeconomic unsustainability. The second one explores the tension between the pursuit of environmental justice and democratic legitimacy given a context of

resilient socioeconomic unsustainability. Preceded by a methodological discussion, the ensuing section is devoted to insight generated from my investigation of the People's Climate March. In the concluding section I reflect on the implications of this study, its strengths and limitations and suggest future directions for inquiry.

2. RESILIENT SOCIOECONOMIC UNSUSTAINABILITY AND ITS EFFECTS ON DEMOCRACY

The Resilience of Socioeconomic Unsustainability

Socio-ecological systems have been central in research on environmental politics, offering social scientists one way to conceptualise the complex human-environment dynamics (Young et al. 2006). The approach is based on the idea that social and ecological elements are intertwined in complex and adaptive ways: in some cases, it is possible to identify different, interacting parts whose configuration might be more or less desirable and amenable to change (see Berkes 2017). In particular, this approach has often been used to interpret complex problems where societal, technical and ecological problems interact (Williams and Woodson 2019) and to envision governance solutions (Borràs and Edler 2014) or to change them in more just directions (Salomon et al. 2019).

In order to capture some important socioeconomic features of socio-ecological systems, researchers have often employed the idea of resilience (Cote et al. 20119). Following Walker et al. (2004: 5), resilience can be intended as 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks' (see also Folke 2006; Adger 2000). When applied to an unsustainable system, resilience is not a desirable quality: such a system 'defies' efforts to fundamentally alter it

towards a new, sustainable configuration. Today, it seems that industrial societies, both at the biophysical and increasingly so at the socio-economic level, are not just unsustainable (Krausmann, Schandl and Sieferle 2008). Their unsustainability is also resilient (see Gallopín 2006). Under these circumstances the transition to a sustainable system might be essentially impossible. That is, ‘efforts to achieve long term change in critical societal subsystems currently plagued by persistent problems’ (Meadowcroft 2011: 71) are essentially in vain.¹

Although the problem of resilient unsustainable systems cannot be reduced only to a political economy matrix, there seems to be greater awareness that politics deserve particular attention (Avelino and Rotmans 2009). This has not always been the case: a tendency to overlook the genuinely political dimension of sustainability transition – and the messiness and conflict it involves – has been observed, among others, by Meadowcroft (2009), with respect, for instance, to research on transition management. Similarly, Avelino and Wittmayer (2016) have noted this trend also with respect to sustainability transition literature more generally. So, analyses that give due attention to political aspects in socio-ecological systems literature are a much needed contribution (e.g., Shove and Walker 2007; Rotmans and Kemp 2008). Phelan and colleagues

¹ I retain the expression ‘resilient unsustainability’ as is currently used in scholarship examining this problem, despite the potential paradox contained in this expression. The ‘resilient unsustainability’ argument excludes the possibility of unsustainable socio-economic systems being transformed in a desirable, sustainable way. It is entirely possible, however, that the current unsustainable configuration will leave way to another undesirable configuration in the future. That implies that systemic unsustainability might not be resilient after all. The expression ‘robust unsustainability’ might enable us to refer to the intractability of unsustainability in existing socio-technic systems without falling into to the abovementioned paradox (I am indebted to John Dryzek for this consideration).

(2013: 202) go so far as to state that ‘the climate crisis remains intractable not because of climate system complexity, but because of the phenomenon’s political and economic dimensions’.

Interestingly, the idea that socio-economic systems might be both unsustainable and resilient seems prominent among approaches that are otherwise substantially different from each other. Among them, it is worth mentioning that there are some approaches that do not only focus on how politics contribute to socio-economic resilient unsustainability but also on how the former affects the latter. Post-ecologist and neo-Gramscian analyses about the current environmental situation are cases in point.

The basic claim of the post-ecologist approach is that since the late 1980s modernisation has induced culture and value shifts that preclude the achievement of ecological values and a transition into sustainable societies (e.g., Blühdorn 1997). Rather, these developments have led to a politics of unsustainability, a paradoxical situation whereby ‘advanced modern capitalist consumer democracies try and manage to sustain what is known to be unsustainable’ (Blühdorn and Welsh 2007: 197; see also Blühdorn 2007). According to Blühdorn (2013: 18) strenuous efforts by ecologically committed actors (from activists to intellectuals to policy makers and government agencies at all levels) have failed to bring about radical ecological change that contemporary consumer democracies would need. A post-ecologist turn is paralleled by a post-democratic one (e.g., Crouch 2004), a ‘simulative democracy’ whereby citizens willingly engage in a performance of democracy to respond to the ‘inherent contradictory value preferences and needs of contemporary citizens’ (Blühdorn 2013: 29). To Blühdorn (2013: 29), ‘these new forms of governance are an indispensable tool for the management of sustained unsustainability ... [I]n a seemingly paradoxical sense they democratise the politics of unsustainability and thereby substantially increase societal resilience to sustained unsustainability’.

From a neo-Gramscian perspective the resilience of unsustainability stems from a hegemonic historical bloc in contemporary political economy and reproduces practices that undermine systemic sustainability (Levy and Newell 2005). In a nutshell, according to this view, the limited progress in the transition to sustainability is related to the fact that at the heart of socio-technical systems lie historical blocks resisting transition. In the words of Phelan and colleagues (2013: 215): ‘Maintaining overall Earth system resilience depends on undermining perverse resilience of hegemonic blocs within the Earth system’. This is important as it highlights that, far from being only a question of science, an issue of technology or an economic problem, systemic unsustainability, is also and fundamentally a socio-political challenge (see also IPCC 2008).

Scholars of different strands, including the more radical and critical ones mentioned above, seem to agree that the problem of resilient systemic unsustainability can be aptly framed in terms of climate justice (Anshelm and Hansson 2011). Against this background, though not unproblematic, the role of social movements and civil society organisations is deemed important in sustainability transitions (Seyfang et al. 2010; Hargreaves et al. 2011) and to environmental politics more generally (Dryzek et al. 2003; Schlosberg 2009). These actors are fundamental in articulating justice claims that democratic institutions can neglect at the price of further eroding their perceived legitimacy. In sum, sustainable resilient systemic sustainability is a problem that political systems have contributed to create and that exacerbate injustice. One could say that resilient systemic sustainability is not just a problem created *by* politics but is also a problem *for* political systems and, in particular, one that poses serious issues of *justice*.

The Tension between Claims to Justice and Democratic Legitimacy

Understanding the relationship between problems of justice and democratic life represents a longstanding, difficult challenge for both theoretical and empirical research (e.g., Miller 1978; Young 2000). Justice and democracy are two related yet distinct concepts and, as Goodin (2004: 72) put it, justice is ‘ordinarily regarded as an attribute of outcome’ while democracy ‘as an attribute of process’. Notwithstanding deep differences between these two ideas, there have been attempts at considering the two issues together (see Van Parijs 2011; Dryzek 2013). Interestingly, a wealth of scholarship has focused on the relationship between justice and democracy right in the context of environmental politics (see e.g., Schlosberg 2009; Gellers and Jeffords 2018). Although synergies and tensions in the quest for democracy and environmental justice have been envisioned, the idea of systemic unsustainable resilience has not been central to these analyses.

In an effort to deepen our understanding of justice and democracy as distinct yet related phenomena, in this paper I investigate activists’ claims and reflect upon their implications in terms of perceived democratic *legitimacy*. My decision to focus on legitimacy problems is based on similar efforts by previous scholarship investigating the relationships between justice and democracy (see e.g., Dobson 1998; Humphrey 2006). I rely on concepts widespread in social movement studies that distinguish between claims pertaining to diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames. According to a well-established distinction, claims referring to diagnostic frames single out a problem and attribute responsibility for it; prognostic frames articulate a proposed solution; and motivational frames, meanwhile, define a call for action (Snow and Benford 1988). By reducing the discussion on justice to claims made by activists I deliberately refrain from making normative considerations about justice. Rather, using a more sociological approach, I intend to reconstruct the contents of activists’ claims. As seen, these actors and their

opinions play an important role in understanding the trajectory of environmental politics in democracies.

In reducing the idea of democracy to a specific type of legitimacy (perceived legitimacy) I engage in a similar operation as I do for justice. I do not formulate normative assessments about the idea of democracy. Rather, I limit myself to observing how an important element of any democratic order, such as perceived legitimacy, might be affected by political developments in the context of resilient, systemic unsustainability. Today, environmental concerns are spreading widely and representative institutions are being increasingly questioned (Norris 2011). I agree with Mansbridge (2017: 2) that in light of the challenges facing our democracies ‘every ounce of both normative and perceived legitimacy is becoming increasingly precious’. Furthermore, as she argues (2017: 3) the expectation of our political systems being able to address ecological problems is especially important now to the extent that ‘we must now ourselves produce vital free use goods – such as clean air, clean water, a reproducible number of fish and trees, and a stable climate – that in an earlier era “nature” provided’.

Activism has been key to the success of a long list of struggles for democracy and environmental justice (Brulle 2010). At the same time, a wealth of empirical research highlights substantial limitations with extant democratic processes when it comes to environmental problems (e.g., Hendriks 2009). Promoting environmental justice through democratic engagement often represents a difficult enterprise (Agyeman, Bullard and Evans 2002) and activists’ contestation offers a very interesting source of insight to reflect on the problems that systemic unsustainability might pose to democracy. The issue is not only that, as correctly highlighted by most accounts, existing institutions seem unable to guarantee a sustainability transition. Rather, another problem is that the absence of a sustainability transition threatens democracy. Meadowcroft (2011: 71) is

correct when he says that: ‘Politics is the constant companion of socio-technical transitions, serving alternatively (and often simultaneously) as context, arena, obstacle, enabler, arbiter, and manager of repercussions’. In this paper, I add that there is a concrete risk that democratic politics might be the victim of a socio-economic system that is unsustainable and resiliently so.²

In a recent contribution to the debate on climate governance, John Dryzek frames succinctly and effectively the twofold link connecting justice and legitimacy. Commenting on a study by Bäckstrand and Kuyper (2017) focused on transnational governance of climate change, Dryzek (2017: 791) argues that output legitimacy ‘is a direct function of effectiveness’ – that is, the performance of a given system affects the way in which people see such a system as being more or less legitimate. Furthermore, he claims, ‘perceived legitimacy facilitates compliance with collective agreements, and ... democratic processes in general do better than their alternatives when it comes to ecological problems’. This view is consistent with extant research showing how perceived performance is an important determinant of legitimacy among citizens (e.g., Dahlberg, Linde and Holmberg 2015) and with studies on perceived legitimacy and compliance (e.g., Marien and Hooghe 2011; Dalton 2004). Furthermore, Dryzek’s view that (more) democracy represents the way forward in tackling environmental problems is not only generally supported in academic debates, but it is also widely shared, as we will see, across activists circles.

² In a *Nature* opinion piece sociologist Nico Stehr (2015: 450) argued against tendencies in scientific circles to criticise democracies for failure to tackle climate change claiming that ‘the erosion of democracy is an unnecessary suppression of social complexity and rights’. Whilst agreeing with this view, in this paper, I seek to highlight that resilient socio-economic unsustainability might well favour democratic erosion.

What is concerning, however, is that in the case I discuss below there seem to be challenges with respect to all of the above-mentioned issues. Firstly if, as argued, effectiveness enhances output legitimacy, the fact that essentially there is no substantial expectation of US democratic institutions to deliver on environmental challenges is problematic. Second, this negatively impacts perceived legitimacy and it also puts compliance with decision by democratic institutions at risk, at least to the extent that, as argued, compliance is dependent on (shrinking) output legitimacy. Finally, whilst an in-depth reflection on the performance of democratic (or alternative) processes with regard to ecological problems is beyond the scope of this paper, it seems necessary to reflect about whether activists and citizens will continue to hold a preference for democratic processes in the face of a failure to address systemic unsustainability.

In the next part of the paper, I offer an overview of the research methodology. I then present my case study and highlight its main insights. Then, I discuss my observations in the wider context of the debate on the resilience of unsustainable socio-economic systems.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CASE STUDY

To support my argument I draw illustrations from original empirical evidence from a qualitative study. My discussion of the People's Climate March is not mainly aimed at exploring the complexities of the People's Climate movement in their full extent (cf. Fisher 2018) – although this study does provide insight on this understudied movement. Since the arguments here are mainly theoretical, my analysis of the effects of systemic, resilient unsustainability on democratic legitimacy is best understood as an illustrative study. The strength of illustrative case studies does not lay in the thorough exposition of events under examination. Rather, they are better suited to develop alternative theoretical perspectives on problems or to generate research hypotheses (or

hints) to empirically explore some dimensions of a given problem that tend to be overlooked otherwise (see Levy 2008). My approach to the case study is also interpretive (see Yanow 2006) and, in particular, my analysis is based on what is known in social movement studies as frame analysis (Lindekilde 2014). These type of interpretive efforts have been deemed fundamental to understanding systemic problems affecting democratic systems (Ercan, Hendriks and Boswell 2016), including socioeconomic unsustainability.

Dara were generated through interviews and consultation of documents. During a month-long fieldtrip in April 2017, I interviewed ten activists recruited through snowball sampling. They were based in Boston and New York City, two of the most active hubs of the People's Climate March. These activists belonged to a variety of groups including one student organisation for fossil fuel disinvestment, two environmental organisations of concerned mothers, one international environmental policy organisation, one national organisation for racial justice, and four state-level branches of national environmental and conservation organisations, all of which were directly involved in the organising committee of the People's Climate March. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted around 30 minutes. They were aimed at unearthing activists' motivations for protesting the Trump administration, their understanding of the march within the context of their own organisations' broader strategies and their views on environmental problems as well as on the solutions they envisioned. I manually transcribed the interviews and developed a thematic analysis, coding all references to the organisations' role within the People's Climate movement, their key concerns, views on climate change and expectations.

Consulted documents were written by the groups I studied and by the People's Climate March organisers. I explored the online materials (including social media – Facebook and Twitter) of every organisation, including a dozen websites and about 30 social media accounts. Furthermore,

before or after interviews I collected printed public documents (about half of the organisations provided materials, generally leaflets). I also consulted the People's Climate March official website as well as Twitter and Facebook accounts. I qualitatively analysed the content of these documents, paying special attention to communications about the march. These efforts offered guidance in preparing and analysing the interviews and enabled me to better understand the different organisations and their stance with respect to the broader People's Climate Movement.

The People's Climate March. Activist Politics in Times of Systemic, Resilient Unsustainability

The People's Climate March on 29 April 2017 in Washington DC was attended by an estimated 200,000 people, and other marches took place simultaneously in 3,000 other US cities. The march protested against the environmental policies of the Trump administration, on occasion of the 100th day of its installation in power. This protest can be seen in continuity with previous manifestations such as the 2014 People's Climate March held in New York City and across the globe and with the Global Climate March taking place in November 2015 in occasion of the Paris summit on climate change. Nevertheless, the 2017 march's focus against the US administration distinguishes this nation-level oriented mobilisation from previous marches, sharing similar ideas but casting them against a more global stage.

As mentioned, using the language of frame analysis, I identify some statements of the People's Climate March activists. The excerpts concern activists' views on contemporary environmental politics and are illustrative of their diagnostic claims, which are those that identify problems and relevant actors. The words of an environmental justice campaigner describing the Climate Justice Alliance, a network involved in the organisation of the People's Climate March, is indicative of a shared framing informing the protest:

‘[we are] focused only, mostly on just transitions. This idea that we need to account for – as we move away from fossil fuels, as we move away from toxics, from industries that harm communities – ... for what happens to those communities once those industries go away. [We make] it much more about justice because traditionally ... this is just one example: coal has been part of the culture in West Virginia forever and the coal industry is dying due to market forces and due to the fact that it’s a terrible pollutant and as results those industries no longer exist and those industries support the entire economy of the region in West Virginia. So, what happens to the workers once that industry dies? We spent a lot of time thinking about [it]: it’s not the workers that we have a tension with. In this work, in environmental work, you can’t be focused on lambasting or thinking negatively at the workers, it is about the underlying system which had them working in an unsustainable industry’.³

There is an acknowledgement of the systemic nature of unsustainability.

Moreover, unsustainability is seen as an entrenched problem, further exacerbated by the election of Donald Trump. The Trump administration is understood both in continuity with the past – as yet another manifestation of systemic unsustainability – and as a break from it – as an altogether greater, shocking challenge to sustainability. As a progressive environmentalist activist reported:

‘I think the Climate March was called when and by people who thought that Hillary Clinton would be president at the time [giggle]. So, it was really conceived as a way to make sure that Hillary Clinton got also pressure from the left, from the climate movement

³ Interviewee 1, 18 April 2017

and that she wasn't given a free pass on this stuff. Obviously, it turns out that wasn't the case'.⁴

Another interviewee commented:

'Trump has organized a lot of people... all the groups have doubled or tripled in size since Trump got elected. People are so worried and they are so bothered and so angry that people are coming, people are going to demonstrations to meetings that never happened before'.⁵

Overall, the election of Donald Trump has amplified the need for mobilising against a system that has long been characterised by unsustainability.

Moving beyond the diagnostic framework, a second set of considerations concerns activists' prognosis: their envisioned strategies to address the current situation. The prognostic claims reported below show that the People's Climate March is an effort to counter an entrenched systemic problem through a social and political coalition that is as far-reaching as possible. The Trump administration is seen more as a tragic opportunity to re-organise the struggle against an unsustainable order rather than something altogether new. In the words of one environmental justice campaigner, for instance:

'The People's Climate March is about articulating a new vision for what climate justice looks like. Especially with people like ... Donald Trump, it's critical that the public comes together defiant to the insanity that this administration is seeking to bring into communities'.⁶

He added:

⁴ Interviewee 3, 24 April 2017

⁵ Interviewee 10, 13 April 2017

⁶ Interviewee 1, 18 April 2017

‘If you look at the history of the environmental movement, certainly in the last 20 years we haven’t met that many victories, in the last 15–20 years the big victories that we got ... It wasn’t that Washington insiders were able to [lock] in those victories, and it wasn’t that the grassroots alone [locked in] those victories, it was the trust and the transparency between the two that actually [cultivated] those wins and it’s something that this movement hasn’t quite understood yet. What it takes to win, in my view the only way to win in this world, is to align the frontline perspectives with the inside game’.

A volunteer for a progressive environmentalist organisation framed the matter thus:

‘Within the climate movement we are towards the left wing of it, in the sense seeing the climate issue and the solution to is as being conjoined with the solution to a number of other social problems, particularly the problems of inequality of all, class, race. In our work we talked about climate justice not just climate change ... one of our real objectives [is] to broaden what the constituency of the climate movement is. Environmentalism in the US has had a long history of being an elite movement and we see this as being something different, climate change is something that affects everybody and we are not up to preserve some little paradise for a few people to enjoy, we are out to build a new world in a whole lot of ways. So, that means that in our coalition we are not just interested in how many people we can get out tomorrow, we are interested in bringing in new sectors and engaging the labour movement and engaging people that are dealing with racial justice issues, people who are dealing with housing issues to bring them into and connect those movements with the climate movement and we see that, you see that it’s interlinked’.⁷

⁷ Interviewee 4, 24 April 2017

Similarly, one of the leaders of an organisation of environmentally concerned mothers commented with respect to the People's Climate March:

'I didn't expect that, the way that it [the People's Climate March] is bringing together the labour and environmental groups. I mean it has done that, it's always been people's march and it's always been about the bigger picture to broaden the climate message to include voices beyond environmental groups'.⁸

Activists deem efforts to build as vast as possible a coalition of different constituencies are all the more fundamental to generate popular support for systemic change since systemic unsustainability is not going to be addressed by institutions.

Importantly, activists' struggles are conducted in the midst of a growing recognition of the near impossibility of achieving the extent of change that would be needed to avert severe environmental and social damage. This emerges if we look at the third type of frame concerning motivational calls for action, which are reported below.

As a civil rights campaigner commented:

'The reason that I have some concerns about the national mobilization is again the level of resources I know goes into it. ... When you see all resources going to that, when you have communities that aren't even drinking clean water. On the one hand, someone would say the Climate March is about the bigger picture and you know if we have attention and if we shift the policy on the bigger picture, then, eventually that will help those communities. If there was more of a certainty that that was true, I would be more in favour of it, even some degree of probability [giggle], I would be more in favour, but I haven't necessarily seen that in any metrics. But on the positive side, certainly, you know, the women's march for

⁸ Interviewee 9, 28 April 2017

example that was really powerful ... and even the science march also ... it was good to see those messages, it was good to see that conversation that resulted from it ... that hadn't necessarily happened before and raising awareness and maybe potentially raising action and political will. So, all of that is a possibility, and it's there and I think it will happen to some degree, the question is cost-benefit in terms of 'to what degree' and 'is it worth all of the time, effort, resources et cetera that is going into it'?'⁹

An environmentalist and mother campaigner also commented thus:

'The People's Climate March has a lot of labour people in addition to a lot of environmental groups, and then like corporate sort of more like socialism type of groups, like economic-based groups, so I think the different groups come together around different pieces of work but then you form the relationship and then you can say: 'oh this representative who's against us on this energy piece, he is really tied into labour', so then in my mind I go back: 'oh, can we reach out to our friends in the labour movement to see if they have a relationship with that rep and say: 'hey we care about climate change too, you need to change there too'''.¹⁰

As the above excerpts suggest, also in this movement the inspired struggle to attain systemic change needs to be combined with more practical efforts for change in line with different actors' priorities (see Yearley 2013). This is particularly important since necessary systemic change at the social and ecological level seems beyond reach in light of the national context.

Finally, expectations to attain the necessary changes at the systemic level vary, yet hopeful statements seem more often accompanied by apprehension, rather than confidence as to the ability

⁹ Interviewee 5, 26 April 2017

¹⁰ Interviewee 9, 28 April 2017

of institutions to spur desirable change. As an environmentalist campaigner put it: ‘We have a clear idea of what is just, I don’t think that we have any understanding of how it is that we get there’.¹¹ A leftist environmentalist interviewee, instead, remarked:

‘[change] It’s not gonna come from Trump but it may come from other parts, parts of the Democratic Party starting to actually, and some of them already are, push hard on this to be less compromising, to really force the issue around the climate along with many other issues that are coming up. I mean you know we weren’t expecting to be in a situation where we were to defend the meagre healthcare plan [giggle], that we sort of won in the previous experience. So, in some ways it’s not exactly what we planned. But I think that the coalition that it’s built around it is one that is strategic in a long-range sense, really starting to have an impact not just by increasing our numbers in a particular demonstration but by increasing our penetration in the sectors that hadn’t been involved previously. So, we are very optimistic, I think, about how things are going, I mean as optimistic as you can be with the maniac in charge [giggle]’. He, then, specified: ‘We would like to take steps in the right direction but not taking wrong ones is the least we can do’.¹²

According to a local leader of the student divestment movement:

‘I think that People’s Climate March is going to ... get a lot of people active, excited and willing to work but the number of pathways of change is going to be so many, so abundant that it’s gonna be difficult to see concise changes there’.¹³

¹¹ Interviewee, 1, 18 April 2017

¹² Interviewee 4, 24 April 2017

¹³ Interviewee 2, 11 April 2017

Overall, if a more sustainable course is to occur at all, it seems unwarranted to expect institutions to favour desirable developments.

To sum up, the People's Climate March activists' view of the contemporary environmental situation features at least three particularly interesting aspects. First, their target, the Trump administration, can be seen as yet another, most dramatic manifestation of systemic, resilient unsustainability of the socioeconomic system. Together with a momentous challenge, the administration offers an opportunity to reorganise environmentalist and progressive forces. Second, the main form of this reorganisation seems to concern the effort towards coalition building. However, the ability to actually break systemic unsustainability and steer the system towards a just transition is seen as an unlikely outcome. Indeed, thirdly, a sense that democratic institutions might be failing to deliver justice and sustainability is widespread among activists. As I argued in my theoretical reflections, this tendency undermines perceived legitimacy and might negatively affect compliance. The more dramatic effects might be manifest if awareness of a failure to address systemic unsustainability spreads beyond activist circles, which seems likely to occur if the unsustainability resilience thesis is correct.

4. DISCUSSION

In this paper I shed a light on how the failure to address the environmental crisis affects democracies. In my investigation of the People's Climate March I have showed that there seems to be a shared sense that institutions will not be able to redress the deeply entrenched unsustainability of the systems we live in. This goes beyond the well-documented disappointment experienced by some activists when dealing with institutions or the possibility of failing to address urgent problems that environmentalists are also familiar with (see Temper et al. 2015; Hendriks

2009). Indeed, the prognosis, diagnosis and motivational frameworks of the activists I interviewed seems to overlap with the critical positions characteristic of literature on resilient systemic unsustainability where there is little or no expectation that institutions will be able to address the environmental crisis. To the extent that the systemic unsustainability worsens and its effects become more tangible the sceptical views might further expand to the detriment of the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions.

The resilience of socio-economic unsustainability places democracy at risk because it contributes to undermine output legitimacy. Scholars and commentators often claim that poor economic conditions and increasing inequality threaten democracy (della Porta 2015). This insight is obviously important. However, the way in which a major development in our societies such as systemic unsustainability threatens democracy should receive more attention. Against a tendency to overlook the effect that unsustainability bears on democracy, this papers seeks to spur attention to the consequences of systemic resilient unsustainability for democracy. Continuing to bend the non-human world to human needs and wants has its dangers. By doing this, we are consolidating conditions for the Earth system to become increasingly unstable and inhospitable to cherished human institutions such as democracy. The US case might be particularly problematic in light of, for instance, the environmental record of the country and anti-environmentalist policies of its administration. Nevertheless, this issue should receive attention across democracies. Recent protests, especially by young generations across the globe, show that the perceived inability of institutions to address the ecological crisis is transnational in nature (Wahlström et al. 2019). We should not wait for degrading systemic conditions to trigger popular upheavals or to generate problems that strain institutions' capacity to function.

Systemic resilient unsustainability fuels broader democratic malaise. The recent *Gilets Jaunes* protests in France show that ecological and social justice problems are increasingly entangled (also in the eyes of citizens) and hard to solve by representative institutions in established democracies. Triggered by a perceived injustice connected to an environmental policy on fuel pricing, the *Gilets Jaunes* movement protest has quickly turned into a popular movement articulating a systemic critique that targets also representative institutions (Poissenot 2018). President Emmanuel Macron's willingness to undertake an unprecedented experiment in deliberative democracy in response to this crisis might be interpreted as a sign of the waning ability of traditional institutions alone to address the challenges before them and as an opening to experimenting with democratic innovation.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses might refine our understanding of the problem at hand and advance the discussion laid out in this paper. Quantitative research should test on a large scale how systematic unsustainability and low levels of perceived legitimacy across countries relate to each other. Going beyond my focus on an illustrative case based on climate protesters in the US, qualitative researchers might deepen our understanding of how different actors might come to perceive different political systems as increasingly undemocratic as they fail to address sustainability issues and quantitative analysis.

More generally, two lines of inquiry should receive increasing attention in order to understand how systemic unsustainability undermines democracy. The first one rotates around the question of whether and how different sources of democratic legitimacy can be fostered in the context of the politics of unsustainability. For instance, might decline in output legitimacy at the federal level be redressed by effective movement and institutional action at the local or at the transnational level, as some activists and scholars suggest? (Fischer 2017).

The second one, instead, regards the implications of systemic, resilient unsustainability for future developments of political regimes. Which political regime will citizens and political actors look at if the perception of the failure to address socio-economic unsustainability will spread widely beyond activist circles? Debates about contemporary political developments often envision a tension between authoritarian or illiberal forces, on the one hand, and, on the other, democratic deepening efforts (Fung and Wright 2003). Taking the idea of resilient unsustainability seriously poses challenges to both alternatives, though the latter remains certainly preferable (see e.g., Dryzek and Stevenson 2011; Niemeyer 2013; cf. Shearman and Smith 2007). Authoritarian regimes on environmental and other matters tend to fare worse than democratic ones, and therefore seem to be unlikely candidates for actually solving systemic unsustainability (Niemeyer 2014). At the same time, whilst we should not accept ‘the limits of contemporary liberal democratic practice as the limits of democracy as such’ (Hammond and Smith 2017: 1), it is problematic to expect that future generations (who might be likely to act under conditions of greater unsustainability) will build the democratic institutions that were needed in the present moment. The climate strike movement is explicitly making the demand that if governments do not act, they are illegitimate. If socio-economic systemic unsustainability is here to stay, we need to take this phenomenon more seriously in order to address the present and future challenges it generates. Understanding that systemic unsustainability poses a threat for democratic life represents an important step in this direction.

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