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New climate change activism: before and after the Covid-19 pandemic

The global climatic and ecological crisis becomes more apparent with every passing year. Shocking images of the burning Congo Basin, of bushfires devastating aboriginal land in Australia, of thawing permafrost in Siberia and mass coral bleaching have gone viral. Countless studies from independent scientists have linked these events to climate change and revealed their serious effects on human wellbeing (Oreskes 2004; Watts *et al.* 2018). These catastrophes killed tens of thousands of people and destroyed the livelihoods of millions. Yet, so far, linking them to climate change has not generated meaningful political action (Swyngedouw 2011; Hornborg 2017) to decrease consumption (Wilk 2009), stop fossil fuel extraction, reduce pollution or halt ecological destruction. Faced with this inaction, a new type of climate activism recently emerged in Europe. Since the first student strikes dating back to August 2018, millions of mainly young people have participated in climate protests, with the Global Climate Strike in September 2019 counting a staggering number of 7.6 million participants. Spurred by public celebrities, such as Swedish Greta Thunberg, various ‘for future’ movements organised peaceful mass protests and civil disobedient actions in the streets of cities all over the world, which have been regularly covered in media and noticed by politicians of all stripes. This new climate justice movement has accomplished exceptional things in a very short time: it created lasting international protest networks, managed to rally supporters through social media and public performances and, arguably, helped to raise the level of awareness of the climate crisis among youth and other generations.

The emergence of this new type of mass activism poses a number of anthropological questions. For many activists, especially young people, involvement with climate change-related protest groups marks a sort of political coming-of-age. How do they learn political practice and citizenship? What examples and idols do they refer to? Studying novel climate action networks and their members and practices provides insights into contemporary forms of politicisation and the constitution of environmental subjectivities (Agrawal 2005; Callison 2014). Carefully weaving appealing graphic design and egalitarian language into their political messages, climate activists further constitute aesthetic systems (Sartwell 2010; Werbner *et al.* 2014; Meyer 2009) whose public acts are intricately planned performances of disruption. What systems of meaning and subjectivities are created in the context of these performances and what are their affective scaffoldings (Dave 2012)? Since public actions are planned as non-violent interventions, the movements challenge power structures by staging and publicly brandishing scientific knowledge. What is the role of science in acts of civil

disobedience? Lastly, protests claim and intervene in urban spaces, making disruption and deceleration felt, and enacting an alternative way of life (Wetzell 2016). How do urban publics respond to and shape these infrastructural disruptions?

Through this Forum, we hope to present some anthropological perspectives on the recent phenomenon of mass climate protests in Europe and beyond. Knowing that many anthropologists have been involved in the context of climate activism, we want to rekindle reflections on our discipline's stake in and influence on transitions to a different world in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. We are interested in thinking about how we, as anthropologists, could work with and alongside the climate justice movement, both as individuals who advise and spread knowledge and as a well-established and networked institution. In our opinion, during these times of multiple intersecting crises, anthropologists have the urgent task to ponder the role that the discipline has to play in fomenting social change and offering political alternatives. We know now for certain that the generations to come will have to deal with an unstable world *and* grapple with the lurking possibility of deadly pandemics. We hope that this Forum will help to show that anthropologists are poised to become interlocutors of environmental movements, but also that their knowledge can make a difference for humans and other beings as they face the impacts of climate change and for the generations of earthlings to come. Ultimately, we want to take stock of the stories that anthropology can tell to influence the outcome of the planetary crisis of climate change, because, as Jonathan Safran Foer cogently put it, 'History not only makes a good story in retrospect; good stories *become* history' (2019: 16).

In this Forum, 11 anthropologists talk about their experience with and offer interpretations of new climate activism. To allow readers to better navigate the Forum's diverse contributions, we grouped them into four topical categories: political implications, movements and the self, science, and specific forms of activism.

Political implications

Writing in the midst of a pandemic, Alf Hornborg argues that while climate activism raised general awareness of far-reaching environmental problems, it proved unsuccessful at averting climate change. He wonders why the globally spreading Covid-19 virus has been quicker in making inroads in reducing emissions and protecting ecosystems. Kevin M. DeLuca explores the role of image events in ecological activism in the age of globalisation and new media. He asks to what extent contemporary climate protest movements are able to challenge techno-industrial capitalism, as their ways to act are based on the resources of this very system. Similarly, Sarah Vaughn sees in climate activism the potential to tell stories about connections between the local and planetary effects of climate change. Since these stories exist on the fringe of dominant discourses, ethnography can help highlighting these connections.

Movements and the self

Thomas Hylland Eriksen thinks about the new climate protest movements from the perspective of generation. He describes young demonstrators as less entrenched in fixed social structures than older generations, which is why they can more easily question them. For him, this raises the question whether climate protest is just a phase

in the life of a young person or whether we are witnessing a more lasting change in discourse. Arne Harms invites us to consider so-called regenerative cultures as an invisible yet intimate form of activism. As a practice that requires turning inwards and practising self-care, regenerative culture is about forming a resilient self in the face of political inaction and needs to be understood in the wider context of environmental decline. In her text, Paula Serafini argues that a joint global movement based on a decolonial, ecofeminist ethic of care is required to fight the multiple interconnected challenges of our times.

Science

Looking at scientific understandings of climate change, Larry Lohmann examines the relationship between climate movements and the climate and energy sciences. He demonstrates that not only are the constituents of mainstream climate movements predominantly white, male and from privileged classes, but that climate science is also equally biased. In his piece, Franz Krause grapples with the fact that anthropological insights and expertise are not taken up by policy makers and institutions involved in the fight against climate change. Similarly, anthropological expertise has been largely absent in dealings with the Covid-19 pandemic. Worried about this trend, he suggests that anthropologists highlight paths from their research insights to policy changes.

Specific forms of activism

Alexander Könsler urges the social sciences to attend to recent climate protests and their development, as they exhibit new forms of mobilisation. Drawing on his own research, he argues that doing research in rural areas is just as important as focusing on urban activism. Mario Krämer describes primarily leftist climate activism as a rather new phenomenon and deals with traditionalist origins of environmental conservation, as the former often causes scepticism among traditionalist groups. Due to the emergence of new narratives about environmental and climate protection, even among moderate ecological traditionalists as well as the far right, Krämer appeals for the anthropological exploration of those groups and their strategies. Despite growing commitment to renewable energy in Germany, Werner Krauß highlights the importance of place-based efforts to cope successfully with global climate change. In their everyday conversations and daily routines, some concerned citizens suggest departures from a carbon-intensive way of life, making hidden climate costs visible. Based on observations in Bali, Indonesia, Annette Hornbacher talks about nascent environmental activism on the island, finding a local understanding of climate change that markedly differs from Western views. In Bali, representations of climate change include both meteorological shifts and societal change. Hornbacher thus points to a general 'mood of crisis' in the wake of the island's turn to a modern, consumerist lifestyle. In Sophie Mahakam Anggawi's account of the Balinese punk collective 'Denkol', she shows how activists spring into action in the face of a careless and unreliable state response to the pandemic. The piece shows how civil efforts to protect the environment create an alternative support infrastructure that re-enfranchises abandoned parts of society.

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Institute of Anthropology, Heidelberg University. All of us came into contact with contemporary climate protest movements in 2018 and have been involved as participants, action-strategists as well as coordinators ever since.

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