XR: Do you love the world enough to help build a broad-based movement?

They say, 'go big or go home.'

As some people know and others don't, before XR was XR, it was called Rising Up![1] - a small handful of activists interested in systems change, drawing on history and experimenting with methods that could bring us closer to getting systems change to happen. For about 18 months, Rising Up! - and as it made its transition into becoming XR - was an important part of my life. I felt super committed, in spite of the imperfections (as we know, all things have imperfections) and I believed myself to be in it for the long haul. Then, in autumn 2018, on the eve of XR mushrooming into something that now makes it a household name, I had a turning point conversation with a friend of mine who I hold in high regard as an activist. Suddenly a whole load of things that had been niggling me came to the surface. I began to realise that the imperfections that I'd noted were actually hugely valid and that my voice had gone unheard. And then XR went big...and I went home.

We're now nearly a year and a half into XR being big, and I've found it interesting to observe how the criticisms that people often make of the 'big' XR were things that I could see when it was small in the very early days, which have now been writ large across a movement. Just to be clear though, I'm not rubbishing the entirety of XR, and the things that I felt positive about in the early days I've also observed to have been scaled up. I joined XR because I was hugely inspired by people who had joined the dots about the need for system change (as opposed to isolated campaigns), that had studied histories of social change and extrapolated techniques that have worked in other contexts, and that sought to embed mutual support and well-being as part of its 'regenerative culture.' The people who worked to set up XR have inspired me in their boldness, their risk taking, their tenacity, and their ability to see the positive in any action that's been taken, even when to my mind it's been pretty darn shonky. XR exists as it does now because the people at its core acted like it was big before they ever really knew it was going to be; they made it happen because they created the belief in people that it was already happening. These are learnings that run counter to my introverted personality and I am grateful for them, and will take them with me.

Unlike many organisations, XR consciously sought to create a 'DNA' for itself, in the tradition of 'momentum-driven organizing.' This approach meant that patterns of behaviour were embedded firmly into the organisation's structure, the intention being for those patterns to remain as modes of operating at a scaled up level. Certainly that has been the case in terms of aspects of XR such as 'regenerative culture.' At the same time, however, as the organisation was developing I had the sense that there were many things that were not deemed to be important enough to be part of the DNA, or were not addressed though they should have been, and these things have been scaled up as much as the elements that were consciously included. Criticisms of XR as being 'too white' or 'too middle class' or 'elitist' are certainly things I could see not being addressed at a smaller scale. However, given that there are so many organisations that are too white/middle class/elitist, it can become a bit of a cheap jibe from people who aren't actually

engaged. In general it seems that folks with privilege still don't know how to address this problem even when trying, but I do wonder how things would look now in XR if that had been addressed at the beginning. In addition, other problematic areas which I've seen been scaled up from a much smaller group are the lack of decent democratic structures, the hierarchical and centralised nature of XR, and its lack of ability to take a deeper look at history, power structures, or strategies for change.

It took me a long time of working with XR to realise that I have a fundamentally different theory of how change happens. When I became involved, I was so excited to be with people who were actually focussed on precipitating shifts in how our system is organised. I imagined being part of the things that I believe most great movements have been built on – organizing in localities; building bridges across difference; working in solidarity with people who don't have the same level of privilege; Black Panthers-style breakfast programs; Latin American-style popular education to work out how we're oppressed and what we're going to do about it; building a base strong enough to challenge structures of power. These were my visions, none of which have ever had anything to do with XR.

There were several reasons why it took me so long to see that there was no place for my political perspective in XR. In part, I was so longing to be a part of something bigger, to not just be another fragment of the fractured left that seems to be eternally squabbling and in disagreement. I wanted to be a part of something that transcends sectarianism, where I made a commitment and stuck to it. I was also valued for my work in many ways, but it was never for my politics. When I brought up my perspectives, they were, in the nicest possible way, consistently shut down. My narrative didn't fit with the narrative of XR. So I resorted to supporting XR mostly by doing the behind-the-scenes work; dealing with the bank account, running workshops, working with the 'holding group' (an early strategy group), organising the Regenerative Culture working group in its early days, and other tasks besides (my non-claim to non-fame is that I wrote the tag-lines to the principles and values). I could never quite get behind anything enough to put myself at the forefront of anything. But I believed the time would come when I would find some aspect of XR that I could really get behind.

It was in that turning point conversation with my activist friend that I realised that was never going to happen. And I do understand why XR needed a singular narrative to get the wheels turning, and that my narrative didn't have a place in it. If you mostly agree with the narrative, it gives you something to get on board with, which is one reason why XR has been so successful. We're all so atomised, that being able to come together around an issue that has been mostly taboo to talk about and confront, feels very powerful.

The narrative of XR is that for significant change to occur, we need to reach the oft-cited statistic of mobilising 3.5% of the population to take civil disobedience, meaning that 2 million people in the UK would need to take to the streets, putting themselves on the line and getting arrested. But as I understand it, things are changing in XR now, as the incredible bursts of groups and networks and the actions taken seem to have plateaued, and numbers are dropping off. At the

same time, although the development of the social fabric of XR is hugely valuable, (as I believe all collectivism that is done with the aim of achieving a social good is, even if it doesn't actually achieve that social good), it hasn't been effective. This means that XR hasn't at an instrumental or material level provoked any actual changes[2]. No emissions have dropped as a result of XR's actions. No species have been saved. No laws have been changed. The government has paid lip service but continues to get away with inaction. And though XR has connected with thousands upon thousands of people, for the vast majority of people, it has not.

Of course this hasn't gone without observation in XR. People are starting to think again about the XR narrative and the way to achieve its goals. Maybe the narrative doesn't work, is the sentiment. And maybe progressively pissing off the public by having no tactic other than to block roads isn't going to work either. So a new narrative is needed – one which people can connect to, one in which it is recognised that the vulnerabilities that people face due to class, race, gender, (dis)ability and other factors are exacerbated by the climate and ecological emergency.

Well, given that XR has been largely composed of privileged people with resources, that's a start. But now seems like a good moment to interject with my own politics about why I don't think that narrative is going to work either. I may be wrong. It would be better for XR if I'm wrong, because I think that what I'm going to say makes things much more complex in terms of what needs to happen.

The approach of XR has been liberal and individualist. This means that it is believed that change will occur by convincing individuals through a powerful story that there's a problem, and these individuals will aggregate to attempt to influence politicians and 'important people' who will, when they have a sudden realisation of the urgency or feel pressured enough by the people involved, make a moral stand in taking the actions needed to avert further climate catastrophe than we're already heading for.

It sounds good on paper, but to me has always been a highly simplistic version of how change occurs that doesn't correspond with history, the politics of power structures, and the complexity of the economic system that we're living in. I still believe that change is possible, but not in that way. In my world-view, it's the way the world is materially organised in the first place that gives rise to certain ideas. Whether or not these ideas can be realised is also shaped by the way the world is organised. No matter how good or worthy or moral the ideas themselves are, it's very difficult to make them happen when the world is organised in a way that prevents them from taking hold. Because we're not billionaires – who have very different ideas to us about how the world should be organised, and also have the economic power to see their ideas happen, we need find ways to organise the material world differently so that we can build the power we need to influence how things are done. Essentially, because as individuals we don't have huge economic power or huge political power, what we're left with is to build collective power and to use our power in a way that is beneficial to what we want to see happen.

When we look back in time in the UK, we see this collective power in the might of the unions in

their enormous capacity for influencing the world around them, by having the cohesion to collectively withdraw their labour power when workers were not being treated well. The pinnacle of this power was in the General Strike of 1926. However, as we know, the context we now live in is entirely different. Union power in those terms is absolutely broken. After decades of neoliberalism, society is individualised and fragmented, and we all think different things in a plethora of different directions. In the first talk I went to by Roger Hallam in 2016, he talked of how we need to mount a General Strike. This was quickly dropped from the spiel in light of the fact of how hugely far off we are from a collective action on that scale that could possibly impact the material structures of how things are organised.

Because collective power is so far off from operating on that scale, we need to think about how to start from where we are to collectively build the power we need to have any hope of impacting the bigger picture in the direction of an equal, just and sustainable world. From this it follows that the conditions need to be created for a movement to occur that is powerful enough to challenge capital and impact the way things are materially organised. The outcome of this would be a large rise in the number of people participating, as well as indirect support from a broad base of society.

This is opposed to XR's current strategy of convincing politicians to be nicer and make better decisions in terms of law-making and upholding the law. Politicians don't have the power to make these changes even if they want to, due to current levels of corporate economic control. Therefore, a strong narrative about the Climate and Ecological Emergency is only a minor part of what needs to happen. There are some elements of XR who currently believe that XR is losing momentum because people can't relate to its narrative, meaning that a better, more relatable narrative is needed. I would like to posit that changing the narrative is only going to provoke minor changes in XR's current capacity for getting people on board. Although there is a strand in XR that wishes to create a more relatable narrative by talking about the vulnerability that we face, and by acknowledging that many groups will be more vulnerable on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity and class, I can't see any shift in how XR views its responsibility in terms of material structures of support. All I can see is that XR continues to believe it needs to get the penny to drop with people that there's an emergency and that they need to join XR to deal with it.

I'm going to try and explain why I think that's an ineffective approach, but before that, there are two things I'm currently able to identify if there's any hope of a broad-based movement ever occurring. These are, respectively, Solidarity and Decolonisation work.

1. Solidarity, both material and in terms of mutual support.

It's widely acknowledged within and outside of XR that the organisation is currently largely composed of people with privilege and resources. In addition to the privileges that people inherit due to being of a particular class, race, gender, sexuality, or ability status, the resources that people may have could be any of the following: surplus money, capital (eg. a house that you

don't have to pay for even if you have no money), time, good health, energy, emotional support, access to healthcare, stable housing, citizenship status, and many other things that enable you to engage in activities over and above what you need to do to get your basic needs met. All of these things make it much easier to turn up to XR and get involved. And the correlation between level of privilege and level of involvement looks to be extremely strong, thereby further marginalising those with less privilege.

A strange contradiction is that although the levels of privilege are clear, it's not clear what's really floating around in individual pockets. In addition, as I understand it, XR currently has large funds of cash to draw upon. What seems to be an enormous blind spot is that people without privilege and resources are not going to be able to participate without systems being created to enable them to do so. How can someone take a day off work if they are on a zero hours contract and don't know what their next pay cheque will look like? How can anyone (except someone with a tonne of privilege) meet the '20 hours per week' volunteering time to be involved in the central tasks that need doing for XR, thereby having an undemocratic level of participation in XR's development? How can someone without citizenship status be involved in civil disobedience?

In addition, there are certain groups who are very much on the frontline of dealing with the climate and ecological emergency, and these groups need resources to be made available to them. Not only do they need resources to be made available to them, but they often need those resources to be without the strings attached of conventional funding so that they can work out what best to do with them. The most obvious frontline would be the people in the UK who've already had their houses flooded out. But anyone without an economic surplus, plus disabled people (who already lack access to medical resources), people of colour (especially migrants, but recognising that people with citizenship status increasingly get deported), and young people are all examples of people absolutely on the frontline, already experiencing the effects of running out of resources and a growth in authoritarianism. Amongst 'progressives,' there is more money floating around than we care to think about, and culturally we've learnt that individual money should be kept for individual (or family) gain.

So in short, it's not good enough to create a narrative that draws people into getting involved, even if you make the group 'more accessible.' People need to know that there are others at their backs. If you actually want to build a world of care, put your money where your mouth is and make that money accessible. Don't leave a small, central group in London to hold onto the purse strings. And the action taken by XR may need to start to look very different from its usual civil disobedience if it's going to start to build its numbers. There are so many ways in which this could happen and here are a few examples: baby boomers could pledge to sponsor young people. Union-style subscriptions could be made to aid people who can't participate for economic reasons. Youth centres could be funded in poor and working class communities. Education networks could be funded, where people have the time and space to process together why their lives are as they are and what to do to transform their situation. But these are all assumptions about what people on the frontline of the climate emergency feel they would

need for their participation to occur. What you need to do is listen to them.

2. Decolonisation work.

When I started writing this article, I called it, 'XR, do you love the world enough to build a broad-based movement?' I went on to change the title to, '...*help* build a broad-based movement.' XR needs to take itself out of the centre of its own story. There are lots of people and groups who are never going to want to be a part of XR, even if they believe in systems change and are working on the climate emergency. There are lots of groups who have been doing awesome work on climate justice for a really long time and it would be patronizing to be trying to get them to join. There are lots of people for whom it is never going to be comfortable to be in XR – because it may always be an organisation of privilege with a centralised decision making structure that isn't democratic enough. In that light, XR needs to work out what it is if it's not trying to inspire/educate/take care of/save everybody else. To my mind, we need a broad-based movement with the people who are at the frontlines of ecological breakdown at the centre. We need alliances and coalitions between different groups. XR can be a part of it, but it can't be the central organisation that everyone else has to join.

At the same time, within XR itself, I see the need for a profound level of work to decolonise. There are all sorts of messages that I've received from XR which implicitly suggest that it's okay for some people to have more power and status. Messaging such as, 'are you going to be able to look your grandchildren in the eye and be able to tell them that you did everything you could to avert climate catastrophe?' and, 'we all need to make a sacrifice.' Neither of these messages remotely recognises how different and difficult the work is for people with less privilege, resulting in sacrifices that remain largely invisible. And messages like these are horribly guilt-tripping for anyone who is not in a position to 'do everything they can.' They suggest that it is only people in XR who have the knowledge of what needs to happen and the moral compass to take action of this kind. I don't know how many privileged people I've heard saying something like, 'this message really stuck with me and I knew I had to drop my life and do everything I could,' while having no concerns at all about having to make rent.

I've also heard about the praising and celebration of someone who has benefited hugely from working in the City of London (thereby contributing to more emissions than most of us) joining XR, and about the chiding of a lorry driver for his fossil fuel based line of work. I've heard a story about white people shouting, 'we love you,' towards the police, and a woman of colour being silenced when she attempted to highlight that people on the receiving end of police violence find that pretty fucking problematic [my phrasing, not hers]. And on the XR website, one of the things you can volunteer to do is to make connections with 'notables,' presupposing that you are a person who is important enough to know other important people, and that important people are actually important. There is no box to check to volunteer as someone who is embedded in a local community working for the betterment of that community. But that's because there's no acknowledgement of the intersection between people working to build community/better their conditions and the climate crisis. In addition, I've heard prominent people from XR talking about

how they intend to invest their wealth in a community where they can go and live to survive climate catastrophe. To my mind, retreating to a community that is supposedly safe enough to navigate and survive social and ecological collapse is about as likely as billionaires building bunkers or going to live on Mars, but it's a part of the same elitism.

As a person who lives with chronic illness, I found that XR as an organisation had no real appreciation of what it means to show up when you are a person that faces more barriers. For me, there was no avenue for contributing to the political development of the organization as it was impossible for me to manage that many meetings. I could never keep up in that way, which meant that my participation was primarily to carry out practical tasks, which I could do in my own time. Although I have class and ethnic privilege, I am a lived example of how the ideas and imagination of people on the margins can so easily be ignored. A group always has a mainstream and a margin. The mainstream of a group must continuously examine and work on its relationship with its margins, ideally meaning that those on the margins find their way into the mainstream (where as a mainstream they will again need to examine their relationship with the group's margins). If this doesn't happen, the group will start to die. And if we look to nature, we start to recognise that the margins are where the most growth occurs. The edge is where it's at and you need to learn to listen to it if you want things to grow.

So as a network of highly privileged and highly resourced people with an idea of your need to decolonise, my questions for you are: How are you going to do your decolonisation work with the levels of love and authenticity needed in order to play your part in building a broad-based movement? How are you going to ensure that XR narrative and actions are led by people on the frontlines, the people already at the intersection of disadvantage and climate emergency? How can you ensure that your actions are not gimicky, that they are not irritating to the people that need support, and that they provide genuinely useful solidarity? In any area of privilege that we have, we need to work to recognise it and to decolonise ourselves from our own superiority/saviour complexes that are an inevitable result of class, race, gender, sexuality, and being able-bodied, but also from the sense of superiority that takes hold from having gained status through knowledge and achievement. Wisest are those who know they do not know, and the closer we get to recognising that we really don't know anything about what the fuck to do in this situation, the wiser we can start to be in the humility of our actions and in the learning that grows as a result.

So when we talk about doing 'everything you can,' maybe that looks very different to the current XR model. Maybe it means finding ways to make connections with and build support for all those people not like you. Maybe it means not just confronting the climate emergency, but all of the intersections between the climate emergency and the way that power and privilege is distributed. Of course there's a huge contradiction: that change works best when organising with people from where they're at, but when the worst of effects of the climate emergency have not yet taken hold (in the UK context, at least), working from where people are at may feel like you are working on something that seems irrelevant to the climate emergency itself. But in a world which is now inevitably on a path to encountering climate breakdown - even if we find a way to

mitigate its worst effects - anything that we do to build community, structures of democracy, and a base of power that can counter injustice, are also ways of dealing with the climate emergency, because those are the things that we are going to need to survive.

I wonder if XR has the capacity for a change of direction at this point? I've seen how the formation of an organization's DNA really does set the precedent. I've also seen how flexible XR can be in its thinking and action, and that's a part of the DNA too. Ultimately, I believe Rebellion has got to look like something more than a handful of people with privilege politely asking their workplace if they can take a week of annual leave so that they can rebel by blocking a road where the cops have already conveniently installed the concrete road block and diverted the traffic. What XR has done is shift the overton window by getting people to talk about what was previously taboo. But can it ever hope to challenge power? Nothing is going to change until we impact capital, and although XR seems to be making moves away from road blocks to disrupting business as usual, I don't see how it's going to make much of an impact without growing its base/relating to a broader movement, and I don't see how that's going to happen without changing its emphasis from media sheen to building bridges with disadvantaged communities.

So, XR, I ask again,

Do you love the world enough to help build a broad-based movement?

Endnotes
1. For the sake of ease, I will refer only to XR throughout this article, although in its early days and preceding it, it was known as Rising Up!
2. Jeremy Gilbert, political and cultural theorist, [cites](#) XR's greatest success of last year being the adoption of the Green New Deal into the Labour Manifesto, which he believes wouldn't have happened without XR. As we now have the government that we do, we are still a long way off from this kind of instrumental change.