environmental politics

Environmental Politics

Routledge
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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fenp20

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To cite this article: Joost de Moor (2021): Postapocalyptic narratives in climate activism: their place and impact in five European cities, Environmental Politics, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2021.1959123

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1959123

Published online: 01 Sep 2021.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2021.1959123

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Postapocalyptic narratives in climate activism: their place and impact in five European cities

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ABSTRACT

As climate movements are growing around the world, so too is a postapocalyptic form of environmentalism. While apocalyptic environmentalism warns of future catastrophe in case of inaction, its postapocalyptic sibling assumes that catastrophe is already here or unavoidable. Here I explore the overlooked strategic implications of postapocalyptic narratives in climate change movements. I present data from a qualitative study of climate activism in five European cities: Malmö, Hamburg, Antwerp, Bristol, and Manchester, based on ethnographic observations and 46 qualitative interviews. I argue that postapocalyptic narratives are indeed widely present but are, following the logics of appropriateness, habit and affect, kept out of strategizing; in turn, this enables a continued focus on climate mitigation. Debates about the need for strategies to adapt to present or unavoidable climate disruptions tend to be foreclosed, though exceptions like the co-creation of local adaptation measures are discussed.

KEYWORDS Climate change movements; postapocalyptic environmentalism; climate mitigation; climate adaptation

Introduction

For more than two decades, climate change movements (CCMs) have been organizing to promote and demand scientifically sound and socially just responses to the climate crisis, demanding in particular that governments take action to mitigate climate change. Since late 2018, new campaigns like Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion have brought millions more to the streets (de Moor *et al.* 2020). Yet while demands for climate action are increasing, so too seems to be a realization that we are beyond the point where climate change can simply be 'solved' (Stuart 2020, Friberg 2021). Indeed, many societies are already experiencing considerable disruption, and both popular and scientific discourses increasingly acknowledge that climate change will cause significant further disruption in the decades ahead – even in the most optimistic scenarios (IPCC 2021). Some argue that we are

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consequently witnessing a shift from 'apocalyptic' to 'postapocalyptic' environmentalism. While the former portrays ecological crises as looming on the horizon, the latter describes the spread of 'environmental activism based on a catastrophic loss experienced as already having occurred, as ongoing or as impossible to prevent, rather than as a future risk or threat' (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, p. 563).

The strategic impacts of such a shift could be profound, potentially shifting debates to coping with, rather than preventing, environmental crises. However, few have analysed the place and impact of the postapocalyptic turn in today's CCMs. Looking at five north-western European cities (Malmö, Hamburg, Antwerp, Bristol, and Manchester), I therefore ask: How do climate activists relate to the idea of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic environmentalism, and how does the presumed spread of postapocalyptic environmentalism affect their goals and strategies? My analysis proceeds in three parts. First, I explore the nature and place of postapocalyptic narratives in the five studied CCM scenes. Second, I analyse how the sense that it might be too late to stay within 'safe' limits of climate change affects campaigns to demand climate mitigation. Specifically, I examine whether postapocalyptic environmentalism undermines this work by painting mitigation as a lost cause, or whether there are mechanisms that shield it from such an impact. Third, I examine whether postapocalyptic environmentalism might introduce new goals or strategies. In particular, I explore whether postapocalyptic narratives increase the focus of activism on adaptation in response to unavoidable climate impacts.

In what follows, I therefore discuss the emergence of postapocalyptic environmentalism in CCMs, before outlining my research design and methodology. I then present my empirical findings and discuss their principal implications.

Postapocalyptic environmentalism in climate change movements

Backed up by climate science on a rapidly closing window to prevent a 'Hothouse Earth' in which 'a cascade of feedbacks' irreversibly accelerates climate change (Steffen *et al.* 2018), climate activists have long maintained a 'now or never' message on climate action (Kenis and Mathijs 2014, de Moor and Wahlström 2019). Yet climate activism has repeatedly been unable to force sufficient climate policy action; consequently, it has had to find ways to continue campaigning despite its earlier warnings that time had run out. In particular the mobilization around the 2009 COP15 Climate Summit in Copenhagen has been depicted as a traumatic moment for climate activism (Fisher 2010). Movement framings of COP15 as the last chance to effectively mitigate climate change brought record numbers of activists to the streets, but the Summit's failure to deliver was highly

demobilizing (Hadden 2015); not until the run up to the 2015 COP21 Climate Summit in Paris did CCMs regain their strength (Cassegård *et al.* 2017). The Paris mobilization had learned from Copenhagen by focusing on expectation management: COP21 was an important moment for climate politics, but it was not *the* most important, let alone last, moment to save the planet. Rather, it was framed as a stepping-stone for movements that would subsequently force effective climate action by taking matters into their own hands (de Moor 2018, de Moor and Wahlström 2019). However, in the most recent global climate campaigns led by Fridays For Future (FFF) and Extinction Rebellion (XR), the 'now or never' message has been recentered, particularly in responding to the alarming 2018 IPCC report on the closing window for staying within the 'safe' limits of 1.5 degrees of global warming (de Moor *et al.* 2020).

The consequences of this history of centering and decentring the 'now or never' message for CCM goals and strategies has remained understudied, even though its impacts could be considerable. Indeed, we could expect that the continuous expiration of activists' deadlines for meaningful action should alter, if not outright undermine, their ability to campaign, especially for mitigation. Only recently have authors like Cassegård and Thörn (2018) begun to address this gap by exploring an increasingly dominant postapocalyptic narrative in environmental movements. While climate activists in the Global North previously foregrounded an 'apocalyptic' framing of disasters as immanent but therefore preventable, they now increasingly conceive of the apocalypse as already present or unavoidable. Many communities in the Global South have long experienced environmental apocalypse (Whyte 2017). Now, after decades of disappointing climate politics, and with climate disruptions becoming noticeable even in more privileged parts of the world, postapocalyptic narratives are also becoming central among CCM groups based in the Global North (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, Stuart 2020, Friberg 2021).

Though seemingly profound, we are only just beginning to explore the spread and implications of postapocalyptic environmentalism for climate activism. Until now, research has focused on the emotional impact the narrative has on climate activists. How activists deal with emotions like fear and hope(lessness) has received considerable attention (for an overview, Stuart 2020). Kleres and Wettergren (2017) argue for instance that in Northern CCMs, emotions like fear and hopelessness are widespread but seen as unproductive and are therefore managed through 'feeling rules' that prescribe how emotions should be handled in particular settings. By contrast, Cassegård and Thörn (2018) emphasize that postapocalyptic narratives are seen by some to produce hope through the acceptance of loss and the imagination of what is possible after the apocalypse. Likewise, Stuart (2020) found that XR activists in the UK increasingly recognize that severe

climate disruptions are inevitable, but derive from it a sense of 'radical hope' that focuses on 'saving what can still be saved' (p. 503).

Strategic implications of postapocalyptic environmentalism

While focused on emotions, these studies already point clearly to the potential strategic implications of postapocalyptic environmentalism. Yet research on this topic is relatively rare; deeper understanding is clearly needed if we consider that changes in a movement's problem definition (e.g. from apocalyptic to postapocalyptic) may change its perception of appropriate responses (Benford and Snow 2000). To address this possibility, we need to improve our understanding of the place of postapocalyptic environmentalism in CCMs, including whether it features in spaces of strategizing, and how it might be related to change as well as continuity in movement goals and the means used to pursue these goals. This overall goal I break down into three related aims.

My first aim is to get a better understanding of the nature and place of postapocalyptic environmentalism in CCMs. While Cassegård and Thörn (2018, p. 563) argue that 'postapocalyptic discourse is both rooted in, and different from, apocalyptic imagination', it is implied that postapocalyptic environmentalism increasingly replaces apocalyptic environmentalism. The authors argue that postapocalyptic environmentalism 'breaks with the temporality of progress as well as that of apocalyptic scenarios to be averted, instead evoking a temporality of continuous catastrophe' (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, , p. 573). However, postapocalyptic environmentalism could complement rather than replace apocalyptic environmentalism in CCMs. For instance, activists may feel more optimistic at some times than others, inching towards or away from postapocalyptic perspectives, or they may feel that while some catastrophes are already here or underway, others can still be prevented. Still, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives may also present contradictions – especially in terms of the kind of strategies each warrants and the emotions associated with them (e.g. optimism vs pessimism (Stuart 2020)). Considering that social movements need clear, coherent narratives to inform their identities and courses of action (de Moor and Wahlström 2019), such contradictions must be managed. For instance, the postapocalyptic narrative might be kept out of strategic spaces, since hopelessness and fear may be seen as undermining mitigation-oriented climate action (Kleres and Wettergren 2017). Considering these possibilities, I address the need for an understanding of the exact nature and place of postapocalyptic narratives in CCMs.

My second aim is to assess how climate activism's traditional focus on mitigation may be affected by the presumed spread of postapocalyptic environmentalism. Arguably, the sense that it is too late to meaningfully

mitigate climate change could undermine efforts towards that goal. According to Jasper (2006, p. 75), 'We may opportunistically abandon earlier goals so as to increase our strategic capacities instead of continuing to deploy them in fruitless pursuit of our original goals.' However, for the most part, CCM campaigns appear to continue focusing on mitigation (de Moor *et al.* 2020, Stuart 2020). While this may suggest that the spread of postapocalyptic environmentalism is in fact quite limited, it could also indicate that its spread does not directly alter goals and strategies (Friberg 2021). I therefore address the need for a better understanding of the competing frames or mechanisms that could prevent it from affecting traditional movement focuses on mitigation.

My third aim is to explore what changes postapocalyptic environmentalism might cause in CCM goals and strategies, and in what ways it is limited from having such an impact. Even if the traditional focus on mitigation is not directly challenged by the spread of postapocalyptic environmentalism, it might still produce additional goals. Cassegård and Thörn (2018, p. 573) argue that 'postapocalyptic narratives can be the wellspring of a *postapocalyptic politics* in which activism arises as a response to loss.' They for instance describe how the Dark Mountain collective, which is best known for its artistic, self-titled edited volumes on topics like 'restoration and renewal' or 'death, loss and renewal', organizes 'cultural activism (. . .) [that] is meant to facilitate a mental or cultural adaptation to loss rather than to prevent it.' (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, p. 562–563). One main issue that postapocalyptic environmentalism could thus raise is how society should deal with those climate disruptions that are no longer considered avoidable. This is indeed what activist-scholar Jem Bendell has recently begun to promote in his call for 'Deep Adaptation':

> Bold emissions cuts and carbon drawdown measures are still necessary to reduce as much as possible the mass extinction and human suffering of climate change, but we must also prepare for what is now inevitable [. . .] as we no longer assume that society as we know it can continue. (2019, p. 79)

Bendell's call for a shift in focus to 'preparation' has become highly influential in some CCMs, with the above quote appearing in the XR handbook. It spells out a broad call for adaptation, including not just material interventions to alleviate specific climate risks, but also social, economic, political and cultural adaptation that radically restructures society in the face of futures characterized by climate disruptions. This view overlaps with the notion of 'transformational adaptation,' which goes beyond mainstream techno-managerial responses to specific climate risks, by seeking to redress fundamental drivers of climate vulnerability by focusing on social inequality (Pelling 2011). While each have distinct focuses, both approaches highlight the political and even contentious nature of climate adaptation, thereby painting a role for social

movements to engage with the topic (Zografos *et al.* 2020). The political nature of adaptation becomes especially clear when considering the significant climate justice implications adaptation can have (Schlosberg *et al.* 2017). Radical approaches like deep and transformational adaptation particularly object to the ways in which mainstream climate adaptation tends to overlook the needs and preferences of vulnerable communities by prioritizing economic and urban growth (Meerow and Mitchell 2017).

Given CCMs' focus on shaping society's long-term engagement with climate change, their increased focus on climate justice over the past decade and a half, as well as their current momentum, CCMs would seem to be among the prime candidates to politicize climate adaptation. Research focused outside Europe indeed indicates that movements 'are turning increasingly to adaptative responses to a changing climate' (Schlosberg 2013, p. 47). Examples include mobilizations to demand climate justice in response to extreme weather events like hurricanes Katrina and Sandy (Bullard and Wright 2009, Dawson 2019), as well as engagement with adaptation in US environmental justice movements (Méndez 2020). However, it remains unclear what role adaptation plays in the more narrowly defined, self-identified CCMs that in recent years have become such vocal political actors – especially in Europe (de Moor *et al.* 2020). Thus, adaptation is deeply political, and broadly conceived, fits within CCM agendas to politicise climate change and advance climate justice. While a postapocalyptic perspective is certainly no precondition for engaging with adaptation, its spread could reinforce the importance of adaptation on movement agendas.

Explaining strategic responses beyond a logic of consequences

While not commonly used in social movement research, I will draw on March and Olsen's (1998) famous distinction between the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness to explain strategic responses to postapocalyptic environmentalism. Developed in the literature on international relations, the logic of consequences emphasizes how 'human actors choose among alternatives by evaluating their likely consequences for personal or collective objectives' (March and Olsen 1998, p. 949). The logic of appropriateness emphasizes how 'action involves evoking an identity or role and matching the obligations of that identity or role to a specific situation' (March and Olsen 1998, p. 951). While the former sees political action as instrumental behaviour, the latter underlines how politics involves identities that prescribe what actions are conceivable. While both logics have in common a degree of reflexivity, Hopf (2010) has added a 'logic of habit' which underlines that much strategic action involves the habitual repetition of well-established ways of doing. Finally, recent work by Markwica (2018)

stresses the logic of affect, which underlines how emotions can directly inform action, as well as inform the prioritization of logics of consequences or appropriateness, or of different goals or norms within them.

Being complementary, each of these logics helps explain varying responses to postapocalyptic environmentalism. Implicitly, a focus on the logic of consequences has been predominant in research on social movements. Activists are often considered as instrumental actors who pursue strategies that maximize success within the confines of limited resources and opportunities (della Porta and Diani 2020). This approach would explain a straightforward change in goals and strategies in response to an emerging postapocalyptic narrative: as climate catastrophe becomes seen as unavoidable, a focus on adapting to its impacts becomes increasingly preferable. A logic of appropriateness could help explain how movements whose collective identities have developed around a desire to stop climate change might be hesitant to adopt goals that deviate from these identities. Indeed, research shows how movement traditions determine what is considered appropriate, so that strategic decisions may be intentional but also constrained by the habitus of a group or movement (Doherty and Hayes 2012). A logic of habit could explain a lack of change in goals and strategies by pointing to the unreflexive reproduction of strategy in CCMs, which may present the most efficient use of scarce resources. Finally, a logic of affect may help explain how emotional responses to postapocalyptic environmentalism could influence strategies. For instance, Markwica (2018) relates fear to inaction and hope to persistence, and furthermore stresses that the logic of affect interacts with the logic of appropriateness, thus resembling Kleres and Wettergren (2017) argument about feeling rules: how activists mobilize emotions is structured by the culture of the group. This could help explain why postapocalyptic narratives would be shunned from strategic spaces: by triggering emotions of hopelessness or fear, they could contradict the appropriateness of continuing to pursue mitigation. In the analysis, I will illustrate how these logics of action interact to shape CCMs' strategies.

Research design and methods

I have taken a decidedly exploratory approach to provide one of the first analyses of the place and impact of postapocalyptic environmentalism on climate activism in north-western Europe. To find examples of strategic continuity *and* change, cities were chosen for their active CCM scenes and their exposure to climate impacts like flooding and urban heat, which I expected to increase the odds of postapocalyptic activism in response to such impacts. Thus, across four countries – Sweden, Germany, Belgium, and the UK – as many cities were selected: Malmö, Hamburg, Antwerp, and Bristol. I studied multiple cities, not to test comparative hypotheses, but to

increase diversity and the study's exploratory reach. For instance, the four countries differ with regard to relevant policy-making processes (e.g. in relation to flooding), thereby increasing variation regarding contextual opportunities for movements to shape adaptation-related policies (e.g. Hegger *et al.* 2016). Additionally, I used data from a pilot study in Manchester (UK) (de Moor 2019). Considering that it followed a sufficiently similar methodological approach, I was able to integrate its findings.

I conducted qualitative interviews to get a detailed picture of the impact of postapocalyptic environmentalism in these cities' CCM scenes, selecting interviewees with the aim of finding strategic continuity as well as change. Based on the assumption that by default I would find examples of strategic continuity because most climate activism appeared to remain focused on mitigation, I purposefully sampled groups that had adopted goals relating to adaptation. I first held interviews with local civil servants, Green Party politicians, and specialists working on climate-related issues in each city to identify activist groups who had been vocal on adaptation. While this approach helped identify groups with some focus on adaptation, these interviews mostly indicated limited social movement engagement with topics beyond mitigation (except in Antwerp, see below). To add entry points, I also contacted and interviewed members from several well-known CCM groups like XR and Friends of the Earth. Again, interviewees could only indicate groups with *some* focus on adaptation, who were in turn contacted and, if possible, interviewed.

While trying to cast a broad net, this selection procedure ultimately yielded a sample representing the typical socio-economic bias of environmental movements (Staggenborg 2020): Interviewees tended to be highly educated and white, but diverse in age and gender. It is possible that I overlooked relevant groups representing different demographics (such as described in studies of American environmental justice movements) because they formed separate networks, or worked on climate-relevant topics using different framings. Furthermore, through this approach, I did not encounter 'collapsologist' groups described in earlier studies on postapocalyptic environmentalism (Cassegård and Thörn 2018). Otherwise, I was able to obtain a broad overview of each city's CCM scene through eleven interviews in Antwerp, eleven in Bristol, ten in Malmö, eight in Hamburg and six in Manchester. Between 2017 and 2020, I conducted 46 interviews of typically one to one-and-a-half hours, and all but one were recorded and transcribed. The appendix provides an overview of organizations covered in each city, as well as the interview numbers that the quotes below refer to.

I used a semi-structured funnelling approach (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) to interview activists, loosely following a topic list that addressed, first, how activists perceived the climate crisis and the kind of action that

requires, which in most cases, revealed serious doubts that dangerous climate change could still be prevented. We then discussed if and how their strategies responded to this diagnosis, including whether the interviewee and their group perceived a need to complement a focus on mitigation (which almost all interviewed groups had) with a focus on adaptation.

In addition, I carried out ethnographic observations to get a better understanding of the everyday processes through which climate activists make sense of and respond to the climate crisis. Within the scope of this project, it was possible to study one organization in detail: a Bristolian grassroots organization, referred to under the pseudonym 'Carbon Free', which aims to accelerate the transition to zero carbon in the wider Bristol region. From my interviews, it had become clear that Carbon Free had ongoing internal debates regarding the severity of the climate crisis and its strategic implications, thus allowing me to observe (post)apocalyptic environmentalism in action. For four weeks in October 2019, and one week in January 2020, I observed all meetings and activities of the group to gain an insider perspective. While these observations informed the analysis, I only have space to cover some of its details.

Combined, these data offer an overview of climate activists' views of, and (lack of) engagement with, postapocalyptic environmentalism across five European cities, providing an optimal basis for exploring this underresearched topic. In a first step, I analysed data based on summaries of interviews and observations that were made immediately after data collection. I could thereby develop an initial overview of key findings. In a second step, I coded to verify initial interpretations through a more in-depth analysis. Following Lichterman (2002), I applied a combination of open and closed thematic coding (using NVivo software). Most themes, such as perceptions of the severity of the climate crisis or the need for activism on mitigation or adaption, were derived from theory and applied to the data through closed coding. Additionally, some themes, such as the importance of limited resources, emerged inductively from the empirical material, and were then systematically applied through open coding. Following the principles of 'meaning coding' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015), my aim was not to count the (co-)occurrence of specific themes, but to organize the large amount of data around core themes and to enable interpretations of manageable subsections of the data in light of the main research questions.

The nature and place of (post)apocalyptic environmentalism in climate activism

Most activists included in this study combined apocalyptic and postapocalyptic views of climate change. Some for instance subscribed to the postapocalyptic notion that major disruptions were already here or underway –

referring often to the exceptionally warm and dry European summer of 2018 – but also believed that some impacts could still be prevented:

> It's like we're really starting to feel the consequences. Even in Sweden. [. . .] The extinction we talk about has already begun. [. . .] Often we talk about climate change as something [. . .] later. But it's already happening. It's just that it will get worse. (Interview 34, XR, Malmö, 2019)

While typically still perceiving a window of opportunity to avert some impacts of climate change, activists often felt that humanity was unlikely to catch that window. This ambiguity was captured by one interviewee saying:

> Well, of course, sometimes there are reports it says it's already too late. But many reports say there is a chance that we still have these 10 years. And it's kind of like, yeah, we are all aware that there is no guarantee that this will work. Either it might fail or it's already too late. (Interview 28, XR, Hamburg, 2019)

Some activists explained that it differed from time to time how pessimistic they were about this, but rather than lingering on concrete disruptions down the line, they expressed an unwavering commitment to action:

> It changes for me at different times. I think, fundamentally, I really struggle with the whole thing, which is, we want to get to zero carbon by 2030. I believe that is necessary. I believe it is not going to happen. And I'm committing myself to this work to try and make it happen, which I do think is possible. (Interview 17, Carbon Free, Bristol, 2020)

> Some days I think it's too late. [. . .] It's not permanent. But I am convinced you can always try to do something. [. . .] I guess that's what everybody thinks in this group. (Interview 33, Friends of the Earth, Malmö, 2019)

Yet even when 'trying to do something', the ambiguity between apocalyptic and postapocalyptic views persisted. In Carbon Free, I observed activists who publicly promoted mitigation, but privately expressed strong doubts about the achievability of that goal, mentioning for instance that achieving the IPCC's 10-year window of opportunity to avert dangerous climate change was 'hopelessly unrealistic' (Interview 20, Carbon Free, Bristol, 2020).

Notably, activists often mentioned that while they worried at a personal level, their groups rarely explicitly discussed climate scenarios. Limited meeting time was typically taken up with arranging the practicalities of upcoming events. While some interviewees regretted this, others believed their groups were productive, precisely because they did not have to explicitly discuss climate scenarios:

> The nice thing is that [. . .] we don't have to talk about how big the issue is and that we're facing a climate crisis. This is basically the premise that we're all here on and [. . .] this is really a good foundation for working together. (Interview 28, XR, Hamburg, 2019)

In sum, postapocalyptic environmentalism loomed large among activists in the scenes I studied, but remained largely unspoken and did not replace apocalyptic narratives. Activists oscillated between both perspectives, or acknowledged both preventable and avoidable disruptions. Postapocalyptic diagnoses were often shallow and abstract, taking the form of an underlying worry rather than an explicit discussion about specific threats or their implications, and they were often accompanied by a combative refusal to give up. A closer examination of the complicated relation between (post) apocalyptic diagnoses and strategizing will further expand our understanding of their nature and place in climate activism.

Strategic continuity in response to (post)apocalyptic environmentalism

Refusing to give up, most groups did not significantly change their goals and remained largely focused on mitigation. For instance, much of the campaigning that interviewees were involved in during the period of data collection was under the banners of FFF and XR. These campaigns make broad demands such as 'declare a climate emergency' and 'listen to the science,' but their more specific demands are clearly focused on mitigation. XR for instance demands that 'Government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025,'[1] and FFF demands to 'Keep the global temperature rise below 1.5°C'.[2] Most other campaigns that groups were active in also focused on mitigation, such as Carbon Free's campaign to get its region to zero carbon by 2030.

So, what enabled this continued focus on mitigation, despite widespread pessimism regarding its achievability? The main mechanism that I found to enable this was to keep postapocalyptic discussions out of spaces for strategizing. For instance, within some XR groups, discussions about how bad climate change would likely get, were relegated to therapeutic or informal spaces where activists could share hopelessness and other emotions, in turn enabling themselves to continue their mitigation-oriented activism. Specific motivational frames were in place to deal with this contradiction between mitigation-oriented strategies and postapocalyptic sentiments. One XR Malmö interviewee indicated that:

> Within extinction rebellion it is talked about that (. . .) we need to be brave, like we need to act even if we don't know if we will succeed. (Interview 35, XR, Malmö, 2019)

Likewise, a Manchester-based activist argued that:

> It might be a delusion that we're operating under, but (. . .) it's sort of essential in order to be able to (. . .) continue to do what you do because (. . .) once you

> accept that something is too late, then you just fuck it off, don't you really? (Interview 44, Community Retrofit Organization, Manchester, 2017)

Remaining engaged in mitigation-oriented activism was therefore seen as necessary and self-perpetuating: As long as people are campaigning, and see others around them doing the same, it remains possible to imagine a way out. This was reflected by others who indicated that they and the people around them became active in climate activism precisely to overcome the feeling of desperation they felt when 'passively' consuming climate news. Therefore, they felt that it would undermine their primary motivation if they were to consider desperate scenarios or the need to adapt:

> I guess it's very simple. If you're active, if you're doing something, and you're into it then you're not sitting looking at the figures, the bad, the black horizon. Because you are doing something. So maybe it's a way of protecting myself from that. (Interview 33, Friends of the Earth, Malmö, 2019)

Thus, while Cassegård and Thörn (2018) described how some activists can find hope in postapocalyptic narratives, my findings suggest that others actively marginalized such narratives to stay motivated. Yet in doing so, they foreclosed discussions of the potential need for, and meaning of, strategic responses to postapocalyptic scenarios, including through engagement with questions of adaptation.

Most agreed that, considering the lack of progress on mitigation, adaptation was becoming an increasingly important challenge for society. However, adaptation was typically not considered as an additional or alternative goal. Acknowledgement of the contentious nature of adaptation or its justice implications was rare. Instead, many climate activists continued to view adaptation as a defeatist and techno-optimistic excuse for inaction:

> There is this sort of iron curtain between the green tech way of looking at the future that we're going to adapt our way out of the situation by technology and sort of not really mitigating stuff in any powerful way. And the other way is the way of the environmental movement, I would say, which is really focused on mitigation and very sceptical about any technological solutions. (Interview 40, Fossil Free, Malmö, 2019)

Others believed adaptation should be left to governments and specialists to take care of. Particularly in Sweden, it was felt that 'we are still in a country that still trusts that the government will take care of us' (Interview 37, Naturskyddsföreningen, Malmö, 2019). Occasionally, interviewees expressed a lack of confidence in government capacity to implement sufficient adaptation measures. Some even agreed that adaptation is a political issue that would benefit from the involvement of CCMs. Yet beyond that, critical perceptions remained limited and abstract. Many activists did not see

a particular reason why or how their groups should get involved with the politics of adaptation.

Others did indicate that they were finding more room to discuss post-apocalyptic views. For instance, they experienced that defeatist and hopeless connotations around adaptation were disappearing in their respective movement scenes, thereby creating more space to address this topic. Moreover, activists who had become accustomed to postapocalyptic notions through long-time engagement had gradually come around to the idea that adaptation was an important topic – even for CCMs. Some believed this was a wider trend, induced through disappointments like the failed 2009 Copenhagen climate summit:

> It's become more about the adaptation thing. [. . .] For myself – and I have a sense that it's a motivating factor for quite a lot of people in the world I inhabit in this movement – is that people got very motivated about climate in the late 90s, early noughties, and it felt quite depressing and disempowering very quickly – Copenhagen being the main spike in that. (Interview 13, Community Food Organization, Bristol, 2019)

However, while some thereby found space to consider the relevance of focusing on adaptation in general terms, they were often still inclined to prioritize mitigation. For instance, while some applied a local justice perspective that underlined the importance of local adaptation politics, this perspective could simultaneously be outweighed by a global justice perspective that foregrounded mitigation. A Manchester-based activist who indicated that she was 'really interested personally in bringing more of that [. . .] very community-based adaptation' into their group said that:

> Although actually, if you take a wider view at climate change, the point of working on reducing carbon emissions fits into issues around justice, because really, [. . .] the climate change effects are going to be unjust. (Interview 42, Community Retrofit Organization, Manchester, 2017)

While adaptation was often described as something that could be done at a later moment, the window of opportunity for mitigation was seen as rapidly closing, even if only to make the difference between more and less catastrophic outcomes:

> We definitely have to prepare for a different future. Many of us are thinking about that. And I heard people talking about like making an eco self-sustaining community. And yes, I could also imagine that. But I think it's a matter of priority for now. We only have 10 years and this one to three next years are kind of like crucial. So in preparing for a future which will maybe be there in 20, 30, 40 years, that's like a long time. (Interview 28, XR, Hamburg, 2019).

This prioritization of mitigation over adaptation in a context of limited resources meant that many activists simply had not had the time or capacity

to discuss in depth the state of the climate crisis, its consequences, and the kinds of responses that required. Activists from Antwerp explained that:

> Indeed, it gives a bit of a sense of giving up if you are working on adaptation, but we are already at 0.8 degrees, so we have to adapt and we have to campaign on that. But there's a lot to do and people can't do everything. We have a limited capacity. (Interview 11, Climaxi, Antwerp, 2019).

Finally, some of those most inclined to focus on adaptation indicated that it is not at all clear at this stage what would need to happen more specifically, because the nature of local threats and potential injustices was still unclear. By contrast, mitigation was seen as a clear task, including any measure to cut back greenhouse gas emissions. A Bristol-based activist linked the difficulty of imagining what adaptation should entail to the emotional challenges of the uncertainty implied by working with a postapocalyptic perspective:

> At times when I feel more the pessimistic side of it (. . .) I think we should all do something like the work that reconnects and feel the reality of what's happening and act from that place. But it's very difficult to understand what that action would be. And I think myself, I have a desire to avoid feeling the despair of what I think is really going to happen and to avoid that by doing action [. . .]. And I see that in other people as well. (Interview 17, Carbon Free, Bristol, 2020)

Mitigation, in other words, spells out a much clearer path for action than its alternatives, rendering it the preferred goal – even if its achievability is in doubt.

The exceptions: climate adaptation as a response to postapocalyptic narratives

While keeping mitigation central, some of the activists willing to more openly consider postapocalyptic scenarios occasionally found room to incorporate those views into their strategizing – though often only implicitly. In this section, I will discuss these exceptions, which can all be broadly defined as forms of adaptation to (anticipated) impacts of climate change.

Most commonly, activists considered the relevance of the work they were already doing in light of preparing for climate impacts. For instance, some involved in local food and energy projects saw what they were doing not just as developing more sustainable ways to produce, but also as adapting to the growing risk of disruptions in global supply chains. A Bristol-based activist argued that:

> My experience of like trying to develop a locally connected agro-ecological farm is more to do with adapting to climate change really than trying to stop it. (Interview 13, Community Food Organization, Bristol, 2019)

Some activists indicated that their mitigation-oriented activities had become informed by preparing for postapocalyptic scenarios by promoting social relations that would protect society and especially vulnerable groups in the face of climate disruptions. By organizing collective action, and by doing so in an inclusive way, they hoped they would strengthen social capital, bring diverse groups together, and promote equality, so that 'society will respond to the consequences of climate change with solidarity instead of fascism' (Ethnographic observation 2020, Carbon Free).

I found that activist groups in Antwerp engaged with adaptation most extensively. This was largely due to the fact that the municipality of Antwerp had in recent years involved various civil society groups in 'co-creating' local adaptation through their Stadslab [city lab] 2050 project to involve civil society in imagining the city of the future. The municipality had decided that co-creation could democratize adaptation as well as mobilize private property owners to share the costs of adaptation. While later expanding to other neighbourhoods, the municipality decided to initially work mainly with the neighbourhood of Sint-Andries, because of its large share of privately owned homes and its reputation for community involvement with environmental issues. In particular, a local chapter of Transition Towns, which had long worked based on the premise that 'we are not going to wait for governments' to act on climate change and who had gradually shifted focus to 'absorbing the shocks that are inevitably coming as a community' (Interview 6, Klimaatrobuust Sint-Andries, Antwerp, 2019), was eager to co-create adaptive measures. With the support of the municipality and under the new banner of 'Klimaatrobuust [climate-robust] Sint-Andries', they began, among other things, to green the neighbourhood and introduce soft surfaces to increase its ability to literally absorb climate-induced heat and flooding. The combination of a demand and supply of participation thus boosted civil society engagement with adaptation as a response to a growing perception that major climate disruptions could no longer be prevented.

However, this approach was also criticized. For instance, a campaign called Ringland, which opposed plans to restructure Antwerp's ring road, was interpreted by one core organizer as a direct critique of the city's adaptation policies. The group advocated building a tunnel rather than the municipality's preferred above-ground solution. The tunnel, according to the organizer, would not only improve the city's air quality, but also open up a large space for a green park-ring that would act as a sponge for climate-induced flooding and urban heating. This argument was formulated in a direct critique to the city's dominant co-creation approach:

> So here and there, a piece of green is created in the city, but like that we will still be working for another 100 or 200 years to address the heat island problem of the city of Antwerp. If you want to do something about the heat island of the

> city, you need something else. You need a measure that really makes a difference. That is a disruptive measure and Ringland was such a disruptive possibility that has been dragged through the mud. (Interview 7, Ringland, Antwerp, 2019)

Thus, a main argument for Ringland was a concern about the scale and speed of current adaptation interventions, as well as their social justice implications. After all, co-creation would mainly benefit those privileged communities in possession of the resources needed to participate. Nonetheless, adaptation was excluded from the campaign's public framing, which remained focused on the publicly salient issue of air quality.

In Hamburg, local groups also campaigned around infrastructure in light of adaptation. A longstanding debate existed around the development of the Elbe River, which provides the entry to Hamburg's inland sea-harbour. While the city wanted to deepen it to allow bigger ships to come in, some campaigners argued that this could increase tides and undermine the strength of dikes, thus increasing flood risks. While some groups therefore saw this debate as adaptation-related, others preferred to frame the conflict in terms of nature conservation and economic growth, and adaptation did not become central to public campaigning.

Discussion

So, what do these findings tell us about the place of postapocalyptic environmentalism in CCMs and its strategic implications? Whilst Cassegård and Thörn (2018) showed that some groups specifically organize around a postapocalyptic narrative, my analysis of a more general cross-section of European climate groups clearly challenges the notion that postapocalyptic narratives replace apocalyptic narratives, or that their spread has necessarily inspired a shift in goals and strategies. While many interviewees at least privately shared parts of a postapocalyptic narrative, and while some were even prepared to consider whether this should have implications for movement goals, ultimately this rarely affected their strategizing. Contrary to a logic of consequences (March and Olsen 1998), activists rarely shifted focus to dealing with the effects of climate change that they had come to see as unavoidable. Indeed, staying focused on mitigation was sometimes an unreflexive response to a lack of resources that restricted groups to the repetition of well-known repertoires of action, thus suggesting that strategic continuity partially emerges from a logic of habit (Hopf, 2010).

However, a more encompassing explanation for why mitigation-oriented responses remained prioritized in the distribution of scarce resources is provided by the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1998). I found that strategic continuity for many presented the only 'appropriate' option. This is due in particular to the roles of emotions and identity. I found that

many activists felt an emotional need to stay optimistically focused on the possibility of meaningful mitigation, thus underlining the logic of affect and Markwica's (2018) observation that hope, rather than fear, leads to persistence. In turn, being engaged in mitigation-oriented activism rekindled hope for a way out. These emotional responses were not strictly individual, instead being intertwined with the logic of appropriateness through feeling rules (Kleres and Wettergren 2017) that present norms about correct ways of dealing with emotions. This process clearly links emotions with the reproduction of climate activists' collective identities as based in a continued fight for mitigation, even if things look bleak. The need to continue the focus on mitigation was for some activists related to a need for a clear picture of the kinds of action and outcomes that were required. Clarity was experienced as motivating and was contrasted to uncertainty about what action beyond mitigation would entail. Shifting from an apocalyptic to a postapocalyptic narrative, in short, carried the emotional challenge of hopelessness and a loss of identity. This narrative shift therefore almost never presented a 'wellspring of a *postapocalyptic politics* in which activism arises as a response to loss' (Cassegård and Thörn 2018, p. 563). While I have also discussed exceptional efforts to translate postapocalyptic narratives into a focus on adaptation, these efforts mostly presented cautious add-ons to a continued commitment to mitigation.

In short, although postapocalyptic environmentalism appears to be an increasingly important undercurrent in the CCM scenes that I have studied, a logic of appropriateness, and its interaction with a logic of affect, clearly keeps this narrative from shaping strategizing. Until CCMs develop narratives that change this sense of appropriateness, this may be unlikely to change. I stress the logic of appropriateness not to dismiss these groups as irrational, naïve, or ineffective. There are clear, viable reasons to minimize global warming, even if the difference that can be made only concerns the *extent* of the coming apocalypse (a way of thinking many activists seem to follow). It is in line with a logic of consequences to develop narratives that support that work. As others have noted before, the logics of consequences, appropriateness, habit, and affect are ideal types that in reality are intertwined (Markwica 2018).

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored how climate activists in five north-western European cities relate to the idea of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic environmentalism, and how the presumed spread of postapocalyptic environmentalism has affected the goals and strategies in each of them. I found that whilst postapocalyptic environmentalism has spread widely in these scenes as a diagnosis of climate change, it has complemented rather than

replaced apocalyptic narratives. Within many groups, both apocalyptic and postapocalyptic narratives were present, with each having their own function or place. Postapocalyptic narratives have not (so far) produced significant shifts in movement goals and strategies, for instance towards a focus on adaptation to (expected) catastrophic impacts; they were often kept out of strategizing, to prevent 'dark thoughts' from demotivating activists, and enabling continuing work on mitigation, which in turn rekindled hopes that the apocalypse could still be averted. Even where activists were more inclined to consider activism beyond mitigation, they tended to prioritize mitigation as providing a more urgent and clear call for action.

The continued focus on mitigation despite postapocalyptic narratives is partly in line with the logic of consequences, since mitigation is still seen as a valid goal, if only to avoid the most catastrophic scenarios. However, additional explanations are clearly needed. The logic of habits accounts for the ways in which resource constraints limit CCM groups from engaging in deep strategic reflections, instead reproducing their traditional focus on mitigation. Fundamentally, the reason why mitigation remains prioritized should be seen as resulting from a logic of appropriateness, by which decentring mitigation in favour of more postapocalyptically informed goals is seen as inappropriate. This perceived inappropriateness is in part due to a logic of affect by which many still see optimistic hope as a precondition for action. Still, it is important to emphasize the exceptions. I have found clear variations in the way individuals and groups respond to (post)apocalyptic narratives, with some going much further than others in exploring new goals like adaptation. The example of Antwerp shows most clearly that contextual variations can matter as well: City-level policies can effectively increase civic engagement with climate adaptation, but may rely on pre-existing social or material capital and may exclude communities that lack resources necessary to participate in co-creation (Mees *et al.* 2017).

By keeping postapocalyptic narratives out of strategizing, and instead perpetuating apocalyptic narratives in strategic spaces, many CCM groups are able to keep their focus on mitigation unchallenged by the growing sense that it might be too late to avert catastrophic climate change. While this usefully enables a continued and even escalating global effort to avoid some of the worst climate change scenarios, it also limits important discussions about the strategic implications of present or unavoidable climate disruptions. This topic appears to remain the exclusive terrain of dedicated 'collapsologists' (Cassegård and Thörn 2018). Particularly given the climate justice implications associated with climate adaptation, there is a need for 'mainstream' climate activism to find ways to engage with these issues as well and to overcome the sense that it is not sufficiently clear what a shift away from mitigation could entail.

Notes

1. https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/
2. https://fridaysforfutureusa.org/

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ESRC: ES/M010163/1]; Stockholms Universitet [Environmental Research in the Human Sciences Area].

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Appendix

#	Date	Place	Duration (minutes)	Organization (small organizations are anonymized; max. 1 affiliation indicated to prevent identification through cross-referencing)
Interviews Antwerp				
1	12 October 2018	Online	81	Community participation organization
2	3 December 2018	Online	77	City of Antwerp
3	4 April 2019	Antwerp	92	Community participation organization
4	4 April 2019	Antwerp	74	City of Antwerp
5	4 April 2019	Antwerp	113	Local environmental movement organization
6	4 April 2019	Antwerp	94	Klimaatrobuust Sint-Andries
7	5 April 2019	Antwerp	67	Local environmental movement organization
8	5 April 2019	Antwerp	60	Environmental neighborhood organization
9	5 April 2019	Antwerp	89	Local environmental movement organization
10	8 April 2019	Antwerp	67	Local environmental movement organization
11	28 June 2019	Online	78	Climaxi (two interviewees)
Interviews Bristol				
12	20 February 2019	Online	65	Green Party
13	10 April 2019	Bristol	49	Community food organization
14	10 April 2019	Bristol	62	Local environmental organizations, academic expert interview
15	11 April 2019	Bristol	86	Carbon Free
16	14 January 2020	Bristol	83	Carbon Free
17	15 January 2020	Bristol	71	Carbon Free

(*Continued*)

#	Date	Place	Duration (minutes)	Organization (small organizations are anonymized; max. 1 affiliation indicated to prevent identification through cross-referencing)
18	16 January 2020	Bristol	~25 (not recorded)	Extinction Rebellion
19	15 January 2020	Bristol	69	Carbon Free
20	20 February 2020	Online	73	Carbon Free
21	25 February 2020	Online	51	Reclaim the Power
22	17 March 2020	Online	28	Community organization
#	Date	Place	Duration (minutes)	Organization (small organizations are anonymized; max. 1 affiliation to prevent cross-referencing)
Interviews Hamburg				
23	4 January 2019	Online	28	Local government consultant
24	14 January 2019	Online	44	Academic specialist interview
25	19 February 2019	Online	62	Academic specialist interview
26	22 February 2019	Online	22	Environmental movement organization
27	31 March 2019	Hamburg	173	Environmental neighborhood organization
28	1 April 2019	Hamburg	93	Extinction Rebellion
29	1 April 2019	Hamburg	152	Environmental movement organization
30	31 July 2019	Online	71	City of Hamburg
Interviews Malmö				
31	2 January 2019	Online	17	Friends of the Earth
32	1 February 2019	Online	24	Local environmental movement organization
33	27 March 2019	Malmö	78	Friends of the Earth (follow up)
34	27 March 2019	Malmö	93	Extinction Rebellion
35	28 March 2019	Malmö	88	Extinction Rebellion
36	28 March 2019	Malmö	66	Green Party
37	29 March 2019	Malmö	74	Naturskyddsföreningen
38	29 March 2019	Malmö	47	City of Malmö
39	29 March 2019	Malmö	34	Environmental neighborhood organization
40	27 June 2019	Online	55	Fossil Free
Interviews Manchester				
41	12 April 2017	Manchester	93	Community food organization
42	13 April 2017	Manchester	69	Community retrofit organization
43	20 April 2017	Manchester	80	Community retrofit organization
44	28 April 2017	Manchester	101	Community retrofit organization
45	5 May 2017	Manchester	120	Community food organization
46	25 June 2017	Manchester	87	Community food organization