

## **Environmental activism as counter-hegemony?**

### **A critical discourse analysis of (self)representations of radical environmental organizations across cultures**

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**Abstract:** Whereas many established environmental organizations have failed to challenge the dominant discourses of neoliberalism and sustainability, radical activism is rejecting claims from power elites that undertaken actions are sufficient to confront a climate emergency. Yet, to successfully mobilize larger publics to resist complacency, such radical organizations need to self-present in such ways as to achieve legitimacy. They must project identities (of activists and followers) that are counterhegemonic, yet acceptable. This study offers a critical discourse analysis of online manifestos of three more radical environmental organizations (Extinction Rebellion in the UK, Deep Green Resistance in the US, Pracownia na Rzecz Wszystkich Istot in Poland). It offers a description of the linguistic patterns and visual means recruited for issue- and self-representation and identity construction within each cultural context. It analyses how activists position themselves by looking at rhetorical resources and media affordances applied to promote the opposition to mainstream cultural values as a desirable, even necessary, orientation in a climate emergency. The study combines a critical discourse approach to mediatized identity constructions and a cultural approach to activism. Through a comparative lens, it captures the nuances of self-presentation, self/other positioning, and legitimization across different cultural contexts.

## **1. Introduction**

NGOs and charity organizations, including those devoted to environmental activism, are embedded in the social and cultural matrix of neoliberal democracies (Fletcher, 2010). They help overcome shortages produced by capitalist arrangements, thus mitigating dramatic tensions and inequalities produced by consumerism-driven economic systems founded on depleting of natural resources. In turn, they allow donors to relieve guilt connected with excessive consumption and accumulation of wealth (Krause, 2014). Charity work is tightly intertwined with the fabrics of civic societies and, due to cultural capital and ethical priorities, rarely questioned. Why would anyone criticize Greenpeace's anti-war stance, PETA's messages to eliminate violence to animals or Costa Foundation's projects to build schools in the coffee-producing countries? Save the most egregious cases of greenwashing undertaken as part of corporate 'social responsibility' of the largest polluters, few critics would undermine the mission and actions of environmental organizations (Klein, 2014).

Yet at the time when anthropogenic climate change has been shown to threaten humanity, are environmental organizations capable of challenging the foundations of the economic, social and cultural systems that are destroying the planetary balance? In view of the failures of mainstream environmental activism, should established environmental organizations be dismissed and more outspoken movements, such as

UK's Extinction Rebellion, US's Deep Green Resistance, or Poland's Pracownia na rzecz Wszystkich Istot [Polish for 'A lab for all living creatures'], embraced as the solution?

Radical environmental movements are united by the philosophies of deep ecology (Devall & Sessions, 1985; Naess, 1989), but divided by political constraints on activism and dominant cultural practices of campaigning. Some make do with leaflets and letters, petitions and boycotts, policy proposals and independent risk-assessment reports, media stunts and sit-ins or strikes, while others engage in die-in performances, blockades and traffic disruptions, lock-ups, supergluing stunts, economic sabotage, or property damage. As a result, such organizations may be variously presented by mainstream news and elite media as 'dreamers', 'fighters for a lost cause', 'brainwashed lefties', 'eco-terrorists', or 'dangerous clowns' (Bergmann & Ossewaarde, 2020; Persson, 2016; Short, 1991).

This study follows DeLuca (1999) in claiming that radical environmental activism has counterhegemonic potential, as its discourses challenge elite and mainstream cultural values and, in turn, face cultural backlash. Despite the fact that countercultural dimensions of environmental movements in the past are relatively well-researched (Zelko, 2013, on Greenpeace), since the advent of online media, the field of environmental campaigning has witnessed more forms of direct public outreach by environmental movements. These discourses now largely bypass news/media organizations and thus are capable of reframing the issue (Lakoff, 2010) and present the threats differently. With new channels allowing for self-representation without gate-keeping, radical environmental movements explain their stances, articulate their aims, justify their projects and mobilize the public in new ways.

This study offers a comparative critical discourse analysis of online manifestos or 'mission statements' of the three abovementioned, arguably more radical, environmental organizations (Extinction Rebellion – XR in the UK, Deep Green Resistance – DGR in the US, Pracownia na Rzecz Wszystkich Istot – PRWI in Poland). The analysis starts with a description of the textual and visual means recruited for issue- and self-representation and group identity construction within each cultural context. The aim is to verify to what extent and how these movements position themselves as counterhegemonic in terms of 'disarticulating' certain mainstream cultural values and challenging mores. Specifically, the study looks at convergences of rhetorical resources and media affordances that tend to be applied to promote the opposition to mainstream culture as a desirable, even necessary, social orientation and activity in a climate emergency (Wozniak et al., 2015).

This project aims to weave together the critical discourse approach to entextualized and mediatized group identity constructions with a comparative cultural approach to radical social activism. Through a cross-cultural comparative lens, one is more likely to capture the differences in self-presentation, positioning and legitimization across different national contexts. Assuming that radical environmental action is counterhegemonic, it seems interesting to reveal on which identity constructs it is based to be still acceptable to a larger public in each case (the UK, the US and Poland). The choice of environmentalism, and particularly climate change activism, is particularly pertinent to the situation in which projected consequences of temperature

and sea rise become a global, rather than a regional or national threat. Last, but not least, the critical discourse perspective answers a recent call to enact a social and political mission of humanistic research, as it is 'language [that] has played a key role in shaping protest and in forming the falsehoods through which power has been taken and consolidated' (Ladegaard & Phipps, 2020, p. 68).

## **2. Environmental activism as counter-hegemony**

The notion of counter-hegemony was introduced by Antonio Gramsci (1995) to trace the developing of ideas and discourses that challenge dominant, socially shared and behaviorally reproduced assumptions and beliefs (i.e. ideologies). In contrast to other neo-Marxist approaches, this notion envisions the possibility of social change (other than a revolution) through mobilization of sufficient cultural resources that challenge and invalidate – disarticulate – hegemonic ideological constructs and cultural values. In the context of environmentalism, counter-hegemony can be employed to explain some of the cultural criticisms of, and mobilization against, consumerist economic governance that allows the indefinite exploitation and pollution of Earth's resources (mineral deposits, fossil fuels, land and fertile soil, clean air and water, plant and animal species) to enable constant economic growth. The more stringent version of the criticism of neoliberalism constitutes the intellectual foundation of 'green radical' organizations (Dryzek, 1997) that see 'sustainability' as a ploy only.

In the context of developed societies, radical environmental activism is counterhegemonic because of its mobilization against the values that are the cornerstones of the western civilization (Klein, 2014): economic prosperity, technological progress, individual freedom and meritocracy. Environmentalism, which often advocates curbing some of these values in the name of social justice, protection of endangered species and community rights, is likely to face backlash. For example, the philosophy of deep ecology (Naess, 1989) was devised to articulate an ideological alternative to neoliberal instrumentalization of nature. Deep ecology proclaims the inherent worth of living beings regardless of their utility to humans, societies or economies. It also calls for a rethinking of modern cultures in accordance with the ethical and legal implications of the view that ecosystems should be protected from human intervention, not because they should be saved for future generations of humans to exploit, but because the 'natural planetary order' should be protected (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Needless to say, because of its ethical radicalism, deep ecology has not generated much following in most western cultures (except recently in the case of ethical veganism).

The critique of 'biocapitalism' and the discourses of 'sustainability' achievable through technology, as well as of totalizing constructs of 'the Anthropocene' that underlie mediated discourses of climate change, are the subjects of recent ecoscholarship (Grusin, 2018; Stibbe, 2014). The climate change emergency calls not only for decommodifying the planet, its flora and fauna, but also asking new questions about hierarchies and hegemonies: What is worth preserving from extinction? What kinds of 'resilient' lifestyles are worth pursuing in a climate-changed world? Can all humans join a common environmental project disregarding the exploitative colonialist past and

its resultant inequalities? These dilemmas make radical environmentalism complicit in pertinent existential questions and its mobilization calls for urgent action often going unheeded amidst confusion about what exactly should be done and why.

In view of all-encompassing nihilism regarding environmental policies and despite their laudable motivations, many environmental organizations have ‘tamed’ their demands and registered as NGOs and charities to become embedded in the social and cultural matrix of capitalist democracies (Fletcher, 2010). They help overcome and mitigate tensions, injustices and inequalities produced by capitalist systems. Some of them seem to endorse the ‘discourses of sustainability’, which are now perceived as a hegemony’s response to radical environmentalism, a response that is aimed at diffusing the tension around the environmental crises and disarming the radicals (Filho, 2000).

Also, to somehow fit in with the cultural mainstream in order to propagate their aims, environmental organizations have used the same rhetorical techniques and media strategies as corporate organizations: social marketing, advertising, promotional stunts and new media technologies. For example, DeLuca (1999) analyzes how environmentalists make use of image events – spectacular protests staged according to the logics of televisual news media – to illustrate the ‘fit’ between environmental activism and hegemonic culture. It is not to claim that these organizations have lost their counterhegemonic potential altogether (cf. Zelko, 2013, on the capacity of Greenpeace to mobilize alternative lifestyles); it is to point to *how* counter-hegemony tends to be discursively produced, mediated and reproduced nowadays. This discursive aspect is the lens for the present study.

Admittedly, much extant research is devoted to the non-discursive forms of radical environmentalism and the examination and validity of various means of activism: from distributing leaflets and publishing open letters, through publicizing petitions, policy proposals and independent risk-assessment reports, or organizing boycotts, banner drops, pranks and other media stunts. Environmentalists’ performances, documentaries and appeals were studied, as were the motives and consequences of their acts of trespassing, picketing, traffic disruptions and production blockades, economic sabotage, or even property damage (Klein, 2014; Rosteck & Frenz, 2009; Short, 1991; Zelko, 2013). For example, in the US organizations such as Earth Liberation Front, Earth First! or Radical Environmental and Animal Rights have been analyzed from the perspective of security studies, as they have earned a reputation for ‘eco-terrorism’ having been presented as enemies of the American society rather than an anarchist counter-hegemony that they see themselves as. Yet such organizations believe it is capitalism that is the problem and try to frame and publicize their activities in this way (Hirsch-Hoefler & Mudde, 2014). Even in the case of Earth Liberation Front, whose activism involves committing property damage on companies that privilege profit over environment, the terror label is inadequate, as the targets are never people, and violent acts are resorted to only after pleas and petitions for redress have been rejected (Amster, 2006; Cullman & Curry, 2011). In this study, it is assumed that political constraints on activism and dominant cultural practices of activist campaigning enable articulating only some counterhegemonic ideas across different countries.

Regarding articulation, some research on radical environmentalism adopts a rhetorical perspective, with profuse, yet loose, understanding of rhetoric as a means of communication, persuasion or mobilization (Hansen & Cox, 2015). For example, Short's (1991) analyses *agitative rhetoric* as a set of symbolic communicative practices and focuses on environmentalists' strategies and tactics used to achieve generate public attention in order to distinguish radical from moderate forms of environmental activism. Schwarze (2006), by contrast, indicates the rhetorical capacity of environmental *melodrama* to mobilize ecological attitudes. Rosteck and Frenz (2009) employ the semiotic category of *myth* and the genre of *jeremiad* to analyze the rhetorical efficacy of Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, while other scholars try to pinpoint the optimal ratios of *apocalypticism* and *scientific rationalism* in the context of 'adequate' environmental mobilization (Johnson, 2009).

Given the assumption that environmental action is counterhegemonic, it is crucial to know on which cultural identities activists' self-presentation should be based to be acceptable to a larger public in different societies. Through a comparison of three environmental organizations across cultures, it is possible to trace distinguishing patterns that construct counter-hegemonies discursively through rhetorical projections of activist and follower identities ('we') and articulations of alternative values.

### **3. Cultural identities as discursive constructions**

Cultural identities are attributes of social groups understood as imagined communities rather than physical collectives (Anderson, 1991), and need to be performed repeatedly in various social contexts to be maintained. Identities give meaning to groups' public interactions and are often emotionally anchored. That is why blanket descriptions and stereotypes enable cultural identities to be easily reproduced, whereas confronting and criticizing cultural identities may give rise to anomie and conflict between 'us' and 'them' (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; van Dijk, 1998). Even though cultural identities are largely inherited through socialization into a given tradition and lifestyle, when subjected to critical reflection, they may be open to either gradual or radical change.

Cultural identities are mainly performed through contextualized communication practices (discourses) that are structured by social relations, institutions and ideologies and set over a course of time (Collier, 2002). Rather than looking at cultures as essentialised amalgams of traditions, lifestyles, mindsets and stereotypes, critical scholars see culture as a site of *struggle* where competing interest groups inhabiting particular cultural identities vie for consent (persuasion), hegemony (ideology), and control (power), which they can extend to economic and political dimensions (Mendoza et al., 2009)

Struggle is experienced in most power-laden social relations, but may be made more visible when certain identities, communicative practices and discourses become explicitly counterhegemonic (Hall, 1992), as is the case with radical environmentalism. Such struggle is what sustains the continuing circuits of cultural (re)formation that might be empowering and disempowering, privileging or disadvantaging, inclusive or exclusive, conventional or unique, or predictable or novel (Nakayama & Halualani,

2010). In other words, hegemony and counter-hegemony co-function in identity projections. In this study, cultural identity is viewed as constituted, performed and maintained through communications (discourses), which can be mapped through attention to representative texts by means of language-oriented critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Peeples, 2015).

Critical discourse analysts look at how elements of social reality (including the environment) are represented in public texts and how these texts construct and reproduce meanings which are often overlaid with ideological investments. Given a strong rooting in linguistic analytic categories (from word choice and grammar to style and speech acts), CDA aims to identify and interpret linguistic patterning typical of given thematic or institutional formations in order to relate it to social and/or cognitive theories that would explain it (Fairclough, 1993; Gee, 1999). CDA is thus fine-tuned to expose the naturalized, culturally dominant representations of environment and society on the one hand, and to capture alternative frames, narratives and rhetorical devices that undermine or disarticulate hegemonic discursive constructions on the other (Carvalho, 2005; Hansen & Machin, 2008; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos, 2004; Stibbe, 2014). CDA, as is the case with many qualitative methods, allows data-driven, inductive interpretations of relations between (1) the content/style of the text and (2) the possible intentions of the communicator, and (3) the likely effects on recipients, especially if the analysis is properly contextualized culturally.

#### **4. Data and method**

Given the comparative perspective of this study, its critical cultural orientation adopted and realized through the focus on articulations of counter-hegemony in environmental activism, and the discursive methodological approach, the datasets for the present analysis were calibrated to represent all these aspects. Three environmental organizations that can be placed on a more radical part of the spectrum (not that they advocate violence) were chosen to represent different national, cultural and social contexts and identities (the UK, the US and Poland). The choice of organizations was random, yet motivated with each organization's presence on the internet and prominence. The study does not compare the countries' NGO sector after all, but rather the ranges of culturally 'possible' means of self/issue-presentation vis-à-vis the mainstream.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) describes itself as 'an international movement that uses non-violent civil disobedience in an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimize the risk of social collapse'. Since 2018, with an increased visibility in the streets of major cities and online publicity, the movement is campaigning to gather a 'critical mass' of citizens to pressure the UK government to stop catering to corporate interests and short-term economic targets and to set ambitious targets for emission reduction (net zero by 2025) and transition to a green economy. The movement is not only disruptive in its blockades and demonstrations, but also productive in its calls for citizen assemblies and direct democracy in deciding on common targets. It champions social justice and solidarity as prerequisites for the green transition and aims to educate people about the science-based consequences of climate emergency and mass extinction.

Deep Green Resistance (DGR) is an American radical environmental organization founded in 2011, now claimed to be active in nine other countries. The group believes that 'industrial civilization' based on capitalism and patriarchy is endangering life on the planet and that mainstream environmental activism has been ineffective in making citizens aware of the scale of climate and extinction crises. Its intellectual background draws on elements of deep ecology and ecofeminism. It critiques western capitalist economic governance and shows how its exploitative systems percolate to different domains of social life. It has recently targeted profit-driven American energy companies and singled out fossil fuel energy dependency as the main problem to confront. It shows how emissions and global warming have impacted non-human species and educates citizens how to disrupt further growth of industrial civilization.

Pracownia na rzecz Wszystkich Istot (PRWI) was founded in 1990 as a non-profit organization by activists and scholars from one of Polish technical universities. It has a conservationist orientation with a record of intervening in structural planning and investment projects that would cause destruction of fragile natural habitats. It campaigns both online and in the field to raise awareness of cultural consumerist practices that devastate nature. Recently it has moved from strictly local to more global problems of sustainability and climate change. It uses appeals to national pride and cultural heritage, as well as to the rights of non-human beings to live. It resists the ideology of prioritizing constant economic growth in which it clashes with central and local authorities in Poland that stimulate it.

The corpus of texts subjected to the analysis was drawn from the organizations' official websites between January and March 2020. Even though each website is designed differently, it is possible to identify the sections that primarily describe the organization's aims, activities and mission, as well as its guiding principles and results of actions conducted so far. The corpus of textual data was aggregated manually to ensure thematic compatibility. Since the material in the Polish website is in Polish, the word count refers to this language version, but all presented examples are translated by the author using literal equivalence.

XR (word count 6750, 1 logo, 1 infographic, 3 photos)

1. About us (our story, our structure, our values)
2. Our demands
3. Beyond politics

DGR (word count 7100, 1 logo, 5 photos, 1 infographic)

1. About Deep Green Resistance
2. Guiding principles of Deep Green Resistance
3. The problem of civilization
4. The four phases of Decisive Ecological Warfare

PRWI (word count 5300, 1 logo, 1 drawing, 20 photos, 4 posters)

1. What we do (Co robimy)
2. About us (O nas)
3. Results of our actions (Rezultaty naszych działań)

As the advent of online media made environmental communication more direct, official websites are taken as main venues to promote environmental frames (Lakoff, 2010). The organizations use other social media channels to disseminate information, but these messages are congruent with how the organization defines itself, its mission, its priorities and its current objectives on its official website (Molek-Kozakowska & Molek, 2020, on XR's Instagram feed). The websites constitute elaborate repositories of highly relevant material for self-representation and evidence various techniques and strategies used to maximize appeal. As a result, they are prime sources for comparative critical discourse analysis (and synthesis) of cultural identities projected (regarding the activists and the interpellated followers), and the counterhegemonic articulations of opposition to dominant values.

For this analysis, all the textual and visual material that is available in the sections of the official websites of the three organizations that thematically pertain to 'who we are', 'our mission', 'what we do', 'how you can join' was downloaded and coded with linguistic categories used in CDA: (1) actors (nouns/proper names for entities, organizations and individuals classified as 'us' or 'them'); (2) circumstances (nouns for places and phrases for geographical and social positionings of these actors); (3) attributes (modifiers used to characterize actors); (4) predicates (verbs, including imperatives, for preferred actions and activities). The corpus was also analysed regarding accompanying visuals (photos, infographics, design) in order to grasp the role of the image in the self-representation, e.g., illustration, anchorage or relay (Barthes, 1977; Molek-Kozakowska, 2019). Repeatedly engaging with the coded text allowed identifying statements that re-occur (themes/semantic macrostructures) and co-occur (clusters/concordances) in patterned ways, or even as strategically salient denominations (keywords). At this stage attention has also been directed to rhetorical appeals. These were identified with classical designations for rhetorical categories: (1) logos (information, fact/figure), (2) pathos (evaluative and/or emotive expression, intensifiers and emphasis), and (3) ethos (evidentiality and credibility achieved by attributions to authoritative sources, e.g., science, regulations) (Harré et al., 1999).

## **5. Results: Rhetorical patterns of self-representation**

### **5.1. Extinction Rebellion**

XR represents itself as an increasingly 'global movement' that is responding to a 'global emergency'. Yet it highlights its British origins and acknowledges various culture-specific aspects of campaigning by alerting its followers to the fact that the landmark disruption stunts it organizes that are safe and effective in Europe (where many of its operations have been staged) may not be so for example in South America (a continent known for high death rate of environmental activists, according for example to *Guardian's* coverage). It also flags the 'responsibility of western societies' to help the poorer regions of the world to cut emissions. The organization repeatedly attacks 'political elites' and conservative 'government officials' for their close ties to corporate interests and their short-sighted visions of the country's future. Excerpt (1) below both summarizes the context that has brought about the 'rebellion' and illustrates the style of the manifesto, with emphatic modifiers (*irresponsibly, rampant, non-viable*) and



negative verbs (*ignore, fail, be complicit*) that portray politicians as so incompetent that their decisions make rebellion a necessity:

(1) Our government is complicit in ignoring the precautionary principle, and in failing to acknowledge that infinite economic growth on a planet with finite resources is non-viable. Instead, the government irresponsibly promotes rampant consumerism and free-market fundamentalism, and allows greenhouse gas emissions to rise.

XR acknowledges that because of the electoral cycle, even progressive politicians avoid ‘ambitious’ and ‘difficult’ decisions on cutting emissions, so its proposed solution – organizing climate-related ‘citizen assemblies’ that would give them a mandate to take ‘unpopular’ measures – is as important as its disruptions. The organization’s ethos is based on solid climate science as well as economic forecasting and social research:

(2) Citizens’ assemblies are conducted by non-partisan organizations under independent oversight. They are transparent, inclusive and effective [...] [they] demonstrated that the general public can understand complex information, deliberate on options, and make fair and impartial choices.

Much of XR activity is predicated on the trust in a mature civil society with sizable cultural capital that comes from collectively shared values of ‘justice and solidarity’. The website professes to mobilize a movement of ‘responsible’ and (self-)educated citizens who ‘understand risk’, have analyzed the data (logos) and worry about both short- and long-term consequences of ‘insufficient’ political action. The design, scale and motivation of disruptive protest activism is shown as logically justified:

(3) At the core of Extinction Rebellion’s philosophy is nonviolent civil disobedience [...] and rebellion because we think it is necessary – we are asking people to find their courage and to collectively do what is necessary to bring about change. We are promoting mass ‘above the ground’ civil disobedience – in full public view. This means economic disruption to shake the current political system and civil disruption to raise awareness.

It is not to claim that XR’s construction of activist identity is not full of passion. The use of the nouns ‘people’ (often to refer to ‘youth’, but also ‘urban and rural communities’ and the ‘indigenous’), and ‘governments’/‘leaders’, is superimposed on a Manichean polarity to legitimize a ‘rebellion’ against the ‘neoliberal regimes’ that are fundamentally exploitative, greedy and murderous (when it comes to other species). Meanwhile, the strict adherence to non-violent means of activism, and creating strong support networks for activists, puts XR on a high moral ground and builds their ethos:

(4) World leaders have failed to adequately confront the emergency and polite lobbying, marching, voting, consumer- and shareholder-activism, whilst having some value, have failed to turn the situation around. We are now on the brink and the only option left is civil disobedience – to disrupt business as usual, so that decision makers HAVE to take notice [caps in original].

Much of XR self-representation is based on aligning ‘we-activists’ with ‘we-humans’ against a common enemy – irresponsible elites (NB *we* is a keyword in the sample and appears on average 30 times per 1000 words; in comparison, *rebel/ion* appears 6/1000 and *disruption* 4/1000). The common purpose is often underlined by attributing such values and traits as *change* (5/1000), *disobedience* (3/1000), *non-violent/ce* (3/1000), *justice* (3/1000), *response/bility* (3/1000), and *life* (2/1000) to the activists. Yet, the section ‘Beyond politics’ that advocates citizen assemblies does not feature any self-references to XR as ‘we’, but adopts a more formal, impersonal, academic style to

justify the measure (see (2) above). Even though XR started as an ecological movement to highlight the loss of biodiversity in the context of ‘the sixth extinction’, its current vocabulary and argument (logos) seem to evidence its morphing into a political project.

Visually, each sub-page of the website is consistently coded with bright, saturated colors and black/white capitalized font for visibility and weight. The logo – an hourglass superimposed on a circle that indexes the planet – features profusely on the pages and in the photos of banners used by protesters. The photographic affordances (and ‘to-the-public’ video-talks to be accessed on demand) add to the legitimacy of XR as a sponsor of well-organized collective actions of determined individuals from all walks of life who stand for certain values rather than demand unrealistic moves or special treatments.

Figure 1. top of subpage ‘OUR DEMANDS’ on XR’s website (<https://extinctionrebellion.uk/the-truth/demands/>)



This cultural identity seems to balance the ‘youthful’ energy for ‘naughty’ rebellious pranks with morally justified activism against corporate greed and political inaction that condones it. At this stage of the discursive construction of its activist identity, XR is no longer to be dismissed as a fringe/eco-terrorist group, but as an embodiment of an alternative social project with a critical dissenting mass behind it.

## 5.2. Deep Green Resistance

DGR uses deliberately vague phrases to present the movement as ‘an analysis’ of the scale of natural destruction, ‘a strategy’ to counter industrialism that causes it, and ‘an organization’ of both aboveground and belowground activists that carry it out. As a result, its manifesto oscillates between two extremes: it is much more explicit in criticizing industrialism and calling for sabotage than XR (cf. ‘any means necessary’), but it is also driven by respect and love for life of all creatures, as the two excerpts below illustrate:

(5) Civilization, especially industrial civilization, is fundamentally destructive to life on earth. Our task is to create a life-centered resistance movement that will dismantle industrial civilization by any means necessary. Organized political resistance is the only hope for our planet.

(6) We need all the courage of which the human heart is capable, forged into both weapon and shield to defend what is left of this planet. And the lifeblood of courage is, of course, love. [...] So while DGR is about fighting back, in the end this organization is about love. The songbirds and the salmon need your heart, no matter how weary, because even a broken heart is still made of

love. They need your heart because they are disappearing, slipping into that longest night of extinction, and the resistance is nowhere in sight

Rather surprisingly given DGR's militant character, apart from the word *life* (4/1000), some of the keywords in the sample include *courage* (3/1000), and *love* (2/1000). Its guiding principles include 'non-violent political action' (as its preferred mode of activity), 'solidarity' (with all the oppressed, and in America especially with the indigenous peoples whose land was stolen), 'justice' (to rectify the wrongs of 'overlapping systems of sadistic power built on stolen wealth, white privilege, misogyny, and human supremacism'), 'liberty' (understood as defense of physical integrity and emotional safety of members and sympathizers), 'character' (expectation of loyalty, commitment and courage), and 'security' (especially when ensuring that legal disobedience does not transform into illegal activity).

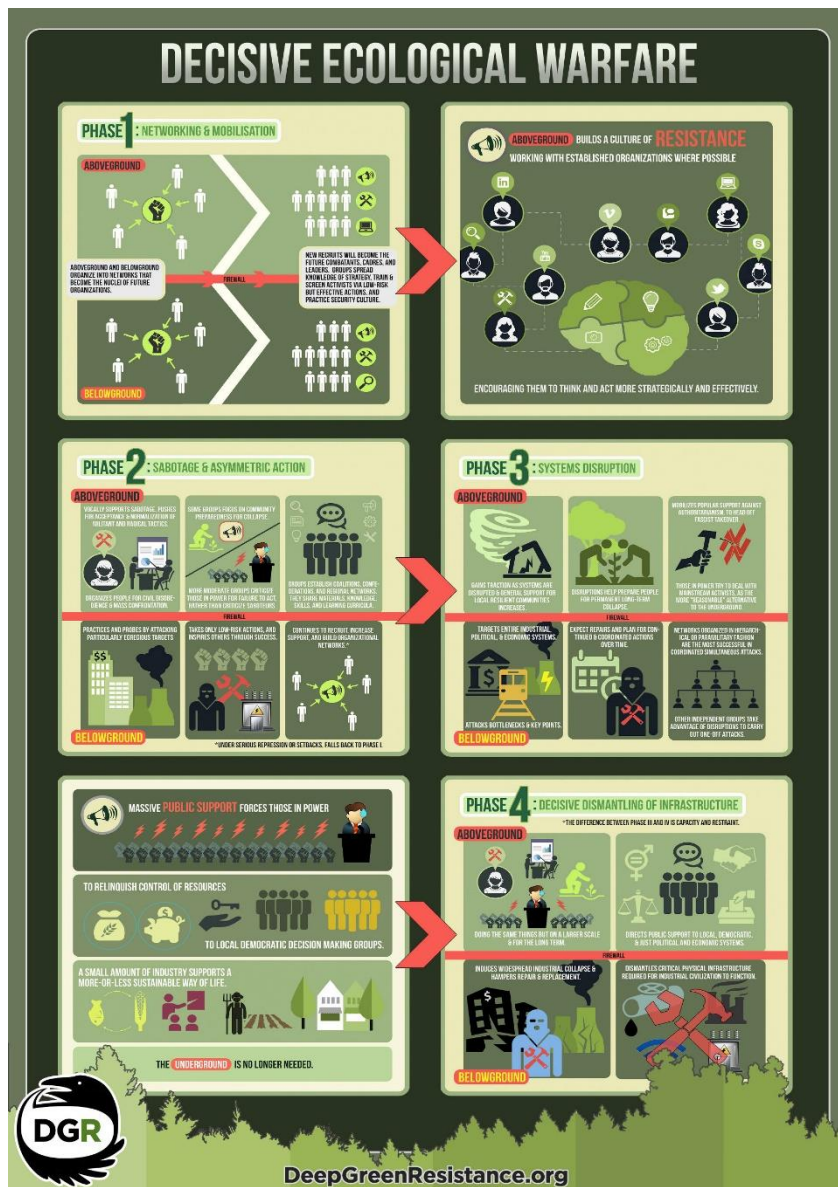
The last three principles are to project the image of an organization whose motives and actions are morally grounded (ethos), presumably against the accusations of hooliganism, anti-Americanism or terrorism. It is also the only organization here that publishes its 'code of conduct', which it justifies as an opposition to free-fall egoism-and consumption-driven existence:

(7) To reject the concept of a social compact is to reject all responsibility (which comes from the root 'to give in return') and ultimately all human relationships. The modern, Western, individualist, capitalist, code of conduct is that there can be no such thing as a code of conduct other than what benefits an individual the most.

The code is based on values endorsed by well-known civil rights movements and independence-seeking organizations, while the inspiration is drawn from 'successful freedom fighters', with quotes from Nelson Mandela and the analysts of the collapse of Soviet Union. The discursive construction of DGR's legitimacy is solidly based on the adherence to 'democratic' and 'libertarian' values, which allows the organization to attack the 'excesses of the capitalist industrialism and patriarchy' with more force.

Except moral ethos, the website presents the underpinning arguments (logos) for mobilization (pathos) in its sections on 'the problem of civilization' and 'the four phases of Decisive Ecological Warfare' respectively. The former is an adaptation of chapter 1 of the book *Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save The Planet* (Jensen et al., 2011) that uses bitter style to illustrate how 'industrialization [is taking] entire communities of living beings and turning them into commodities and dead zones' and ridicules the 'eco-campaigning as usual' as a 'deluded fantasy' that 'buying light bulbs, inflating tires, filling dishwashers, shortening showers', and offering the 'ever-crucial Global Warming Bracelets and Flip-Flops will save polar bears from extinction'. The strategy is explained at length, complete with objectives and aboveground and belowground operations at each phase, in text and through elaborate infographic (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A downloadable infographic for the four phases of Decisive Ecological Warfare (<https://deepgreenresistance.org/en/deep-green-resistance-strategy/decisive-ecological-warfare>)



DGR activists are aware that their actions will be met with backlash as they directly cause industrial ‘systems disruptions’ (phase 3) that challenge the core values of the American Dream with its ideological justification of (human and land) exploitation as the cost of wealth and prosperity. At the same time, they expose industrialism as producing a deeply unethical social system that borders on fascism and that ultimately needs to be abolished to bring (back) ‘sane’ and truly ‘sustainable’ human civilizations as viable alternatives:

(8) In this scenario the militant actions that impact daily life provoke a backlash, sometimes from parts of the public, but especially from authoritarians on every level. The aboveground activists are the frontline fighters against authoritarianism. They are the only ones who can mobilize the popular groundswell needed to prevent fascism.

The use of military terminology (*frontline, militant, warfare, asymmetric, resistance, fight*) is congruent with DGR’s radical stance and presents ecological activism in the context of a revolution rather than a campaign. Visually, it interlocks its green and grey palette with red or orange icons indexing threat and danger.

### 5.3. PRWI

PRWI's self-presentation strategies in their mission statements feature an inclusive 'we' which projects the understanding that the organization is working on behalf of the society and is not a special-interest group. It also uses formal language in order to foreground its ethos as an research-based entity that became an environmental movement because of deep social concerns. As PRWI has a predominantly conservationist orientation, it explicitly states that its values include 'preserving nature' in its 'pristine' state and preventing species' 'extinction'. This is ranked as more important than short-term economic development, even in a country such as Poland, which is often claimed to be justified in its drive to catch up with the western standards of living:

(9) Intense investments in motorways have threatened the habitats of wolves and lynxes. The roads would sever ecological channels that allow these predators to move, feed and breed. We call on government planners to redesign the road infrastructure to provide mandatory overpasses and tunnels.

In each of its actions reported online, PRWI argues that nature should be 'valued' and 'respected' for its own sake (borrowing from the ideas of deep ecology). That is why, it should be protected from 'irresponsible' investment projects (airports in provincial cities) and consumerist activities (winter-sports installations in mountain reserves). However, in its culturally grounded appeals, PRWI also calls for appreciation for local fauna and flora as a part of 'national identity' and a means to promote 'common cultural heritage'. It claims that individual's meaning of life also lies beyond consumption that drives climate change. Excerpt (10) exposes the conflict between 'developers' and 'nature' and explicitly aligns Polish interests with environmental conservation and the 'common good'. The emphatic, pathos-laden language of dissent inheres negation, intensifiers and sarcasm:

(10) SAY NO to the crazy idea of holding Winter Olympics in the Tatra Mountains (a range 1000 times smaller than the Alps) for the sole sake of promoting consumerism disguised as 'Polish national interest, prestige and development'. This bid would destroy the delicate balance in this endangered ecosystem that is now so hard to maintain.

In most of its campaigns PRWI challenges the dominant perception of 'national interest' as economic development by pointing to costs and losses in wildlife. It also brands the promoters of such investments as irrational ('crazy'), greedy and hypocritical. Repeatedly, it presents power elites and capital lobbies as 'enemies' not only of nature, but also of fellow citizens themselves, and positions itself as aligned with a range of other citizen organizations in their efforts to expose corporate and political greed. The presentation of the hunting issue below relies on a series of rhetorical questions that stress the recklessness, cruelty and backwardness of the tradition:

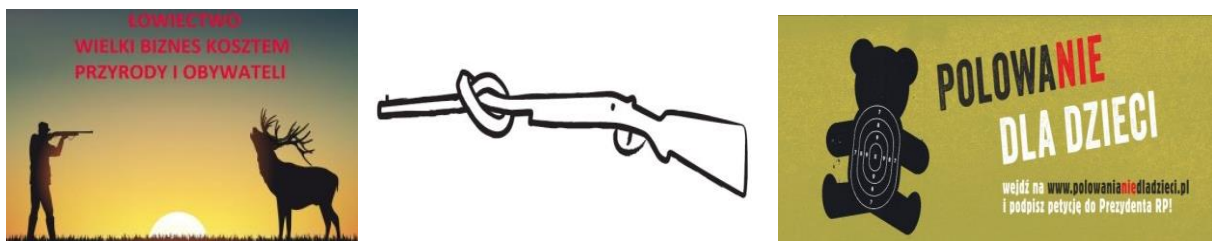
(11) How is it possible that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the middle of Europe children can participate in hunting trips? That adults allow children to be exposed to dangers of being accidentally shot and to the idea that making a creature suffer and die is an entertainment? Hunting Not For Kids is a common campaign of five organizations. [...] The ban on children's participation in hunts, however, is not something that the hunting lobby in the Polish Parliament would allow.

Despite its ability to stir controversy and exploit the feelings of outrage, the hunting issue is a minor problem when compared to climate change and loss of biodiversity.

However, PRWI's rhetorical logos is fine-tuned not so much to focusing attention on a singular issue, but more to presenting environmental activism as a positive social force that stems from defense of natural life and that challenges the destructive policies of even democratically elected governments. PRWI also subversively disarticulates the understanding of 'progress' in cultural terms: civilizational progress involves divesting from projects and behaviors that are exploitative of nature and as such take away our humanity. It also champions 'community well-being' as an overriding value, dismissing centrally-planned developments.

The multiple images accompanying PRWI's manifesto are supposed to illustrate the organization's successful actions ('activists in the field'), but also anchor (Barthes, 1977) their identifications with photo-realistic images of pristine Polish landscapes that are particularly worthy of preservation. The organization does not eschew drastic imagery (hunted animals) and clever artistic devices (Figure 3) to make its appeals direct and mobilizing. It publicizes flashy posters against hunting/involving children in hunting, or building coal-powered plants. Compositionally, it draws not only on photographic and poster-like materials, but substantially on graphic and generic affordances (green fonts, listings, clips from press materials, open letters) and hypertextual devices (links to studies, donation appeals, payment systems).

Figure 3: PRWI anti-hunting posters (<https://pracownia.org.pl/o-pracowni/rezultaty-naszych-dzialan>)



It needs stressing that in the Polish society with a relatively low level of cultural capital, and a relatively short history of democratic deliberation and civil participation (since 1989), NGOs are sometimes regarded as outposts of special interests or harmful ideologies. That is why PRWI uses intense branding to self-represent as a legitimate and independent organization (ethos). In addition, it highlights its 'experience' (since 1988), 'expertise' (science-based projects sponsored by academic institutes), 'openness to collaboration' with other organizations and movements (children's charities), 'engagement' (activism in the field, not just clicivism), 'perseverance' (success stories), 'independence' (no donations accepted from institutions that run/invest in unsustainable businesses), and reliance on rational appeals in decision-making rather than mere emotion and polarization.

## 6. Summary of findings

The counterhegemonic potential of XR is mainly socio-political in:

- renaming *climate change* as *climate emergency/crisis/collapse* to project urgency and to overcome complacency in mainstream nomenclature, thus

educating the public about the worst scenarios for the planet in contrast to the techno-optimistic narratives of the elites;

- condoning non-violent disruptive behavior and encouraging people of all walks of life to risk getting arrested through participation in mass stunts;
- inspiring people to forego their short-term economic interests (low electricity bills) and comfort (risk of getting a criminal record) for the common cause;
- contradicting official climate policy proposals and criticizing administrators for watering down ambitious climate targets;
- organizing climate-oriented citizen assemblies as alternative bodies to produce information on society's preferred directions of climate policies.

The counterhegemonic potential of DGR is mainly socio-economic in:

- evidencing that the exploitation of natural resources is intertwined with the values of capitalism and patriarchy, which need to be shed immediately;
- justifying belowground sabotage as complementary to aboveground campaigns as a coordinated strategy in four phases;
- exposing 'industrial civilization' as deeply exploitative and undemocratic and showcasing possible alternative 'human civilizations' that are far more sustainable;
- subverting the cultural values of the American Dream and related hegemonic orders of privilege in the US and beyond;
- justifying militant resistance as an ethical course of action.

The counterhegemonic potential of PRWI is socio-cultural in:

- stopping capital/development/consumerism investments that threaten the well-being of local communities as well as non-human creatures that cannot fend for themselves;
- bringing back the idea of 'the commons' – a problematic cultural formation considering the automatic invalidation of anything that is related to institutionalized communism in pre-1989 Poland with its ubiquitous and forced nationalization of private property;
- championing the 'right to life' of non-human creatures, thus subverting the idea that humans enjoy dominion over nature (Christian tradition and social mores);
- disarticulating the value of some established traditions associated with Polish 'national identity' and culture (e.g., hunting, eating meat) given the new ecological and social circumstances.

All three organizations communicate the need for more citizen engagement and acceptance of radicalism in environmental politics in comparison to established ecological organizations that seek donations (Krause, 2014). Yet, to build their legitimacy they have to use the discourses that are not detached from cognitive frames of environmentalism and from dominant value systems. While XR champions mobilizing critical masses of demonstrators and engaging mainstream citizens in policy change – through either disruption or deliberation, DGR eschews (even mocks) the 'campaigning-as-usual' approach and calls for the dismantling of industrial systems as an ethical priority. Meanwhile, PRWI undermines the cultural and ideological rationale of economic development. All studied manifestos underline the

severity of the ecological crisis and offer a vision of an alternative social system that is more congruent with nature's well-being, but all have to sacrifice their deep-green radicalism to constructing identities of activists and followers to be legitimate and palatable to a larger public to join in the project.

## **7. Conclusion**

Social movements and radical organizations have a history of interfering with dominant public opinions, disarticulating mainstream values and transforming culturally hegemonic identities. In the context of environmentalism, they reject the reassurance from power elites that actions taken – or planned – are sufficient in a current ecological emergency. According to sociologists, their strength, effectiveness and productivity may lie in prioritizing climate politics and setting ambitious agendas, fostering the public acceptance of alternative ideas, implementing green electoral politics and conservationist legislations (Amenta et al., 2010; Dryzek, 1997; Zelko, 2013). And yet, 'campaigning as usual' has not made much difference when it comes to the current rate of extinction, warming and pollution.

Radical environmentalism arises when mainstream politics ignores social conditions and caters to interests that make climate emergency even more severe, thus generating the perception of complacency and alienation. As hegemonic cultural identities and dominant media frames do not envision alternatives to neoliberalism despite its exploitative character (Hampton, 2015; Klein, 2014), counterhegemonic discourses of radical activism aim to disarticulate consumerist values and economic governance and mobilize social resistances to power elites' complacency (Dryzek, 1997). Despite cultural backlash and corporate media's attempts at their delegitimization (Short, 1991), radical organizations studied here use online communications to self-present as credible actors motivated by scientific and moral ethos, and acting on rational premises, even if these require a subversive treatment of cultural values, traditional mindsets and national identities. By appealing to emotions, both positive – community and solidarity, and negative – fear and disruption, such activism nevertheless walks a tightrope to project identities that are culturally acceptable in its 'radicalism' (Filho, 2000). This study has shown how such identifications are constructed discursively (textually, visually and rhetorically) in three different cultural contexts in order to bring their countercultural potentials into sharper focus. It revealed the political preoccupation of XR, the economic focus of DGR, and the use of cultural critique by PRWI, despite their shared attitudes to industrial capitalism, loss of biodiversity and issues of social justice and community values.

However, when viewed from an ecolinguistic perspective, environmentalist discourses follow similar patterns of representation of nature, landscapes or animals and plants, as do dominant (political, economic, cultural) discourses. According to Stibbe (2014), even ecological discourses are foregrounding human interest (human survival and well-being). These discourses also engage in what is called a discursive 'erasure' of nature – preserving only 'a trace' or putting a distorted utility-filtered 'mask' on a 'profound reality' of natural phenomena and entities:



When animals, plants, forests and rivers are turned into machines, objects, biological resources or stocks of natural capital then this shuts down ethical considerations of the intrinsic value of what is being destroyed. [...] Animals are still there in abstract terms like *biotic component* or *fauna*, and trees and plants are still there in *timber* and *flora*, but only in a faded form. (Stibbe, 2014, p. 601)

Critical discourse analysis can shed new light on how environmental activism continues to ‘open nature to exploitation’, often by only advocating ‘less of the same’ – sustainable fossil mining or limited urbanization – but often not managing to reframe these as parts of a fundamentally destructive neoliberal project (Lakoff, 2010). This is a paradoxical position that makes radical environmental organizations open to criticism from a philosophical perspective: Is their professed deep ecology a viable position? (Naess, 1989), and from a social-actor perspective: Is it possible to identify with an organization whose discourse opposes the dominant cognitive and linguistic structures and fundamental cultural values? (Fletcher, 2010). This study aimed to problematize the notion of ‘countercultural potential’ as a gradable and malleable notion to be mapped and evaluated from a discursive standpoint and a cultural identity perspective.

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