

## *Introduction*

Convinced that business-as-usual must be over, an increasing number of people have come together across national, disciplinary, cultural and other organisational boundaries to take climate actions and attain a more sustainable society. At the same time as organisations and state agencies have declared a ‘climate emergency’, people have taken decarbonisation into their own hands through direct and sometimes radical actions. Climate activists across generations and borders demonstrate in the streets, while people also take a stance via mundane professional actions at work and in their everyday lives. In this coming together, the pursuit of personal politics is merging with civic, state and corporate commitment to the point where, it might be argued, we are witnessing a rebirth of community relations and alternative ways of collective organising. As activism becomes increasingly dispersed and diffuse, communities are seemingly no longer tied to a specific geographical spot, organisation, group or even shared identity. This book is about this new configuration of the environmental movement and what it accomplishes – a bridging between business and society.

It is not only street protesters who proclaim climate change as a ‘crisis’, ‘disaster’ and ‘emergency’ (Höijer 2010, Hoggett 2011), but throughout history humans have experienced the climate as uncertain and have met it with fear, anxiety, mythologising and taming (Hulme 2008). To emphasise the seriousness of the situation, and to align the language of the people with scientific discourse, journalists have even proposed that we should no longer be told that there is human-induced ‘global warming’, but instead ‘global heating’ (Carrington 2019). In line with this increased emphasis on urgency, David Attenborough, a UK-based acclaimed natural world broadcaster, told UK Members of Parliament in July 2019 that ‘we cannot be radical enough in dealing with [climate change]’ (New Scientist 2019b). People across generations agree (Thunberg 2019), and popular culture is also littered with images of a dying planet, with pop artists who

directly engage their young fans in climate change and environmental issues (New Scientist 2019a, Reilly 2019, Abidin et al. 2020). This growing movement is reflected in opinion polls, showing that ‘93% of EU citizens see climate change as a serious problem’ (European Commission 2019). Consequently, many people seem to have been influenced by a growing knowledge movement, furthered in different media, which has made it possible to express and understand personal experiences of storms, droughts, floods and heatwaves as being caused by human polluting behaviours (Painter 2013: Introduction). The expressed emergency has led to pockets of climate anxiousness (Weintrobe 2012) and fed practices of self-critique, generative of a broader eagerness to mobilise and transform the way humans are to live and thereby survive in ‘togetherness’ with other species on Earth.

Many politicians and business leaders mimic this climate change movement and have gathered their forces to publicly call for radical and economically beneficial climate change action. Business, it is proposed, can ramp up the speed of the transition and accelerate responses (Newell 2020). The United Nations (UN) Global Compact meeting in 2020 was tellingly entitled ‘Making Global Goals Local Business’ (United Nations 2020), and the World Bank report, ‘Growing Green – The economic benefits of climate action’, makes the strategic move beyond ‘climate adaptation’ clear. It is ‘climate action’ that is needed:

Adaptation will remain important as current heat-trapping emissions commit the work to further warming. But to prevent climate change that exceeds our adaptation capacity, climate action to significantly reduce emissions must become a greater priority to all countries. (Deichmann and Zhang 2013: Introduction xxi–xxii)

### **Climate Action through Renewable Energy**

Renewable energy technology has become a focal point in the active response to knowledge about a potentially disastrous future of climate change, with its uncertainties and decision-making complexities (IPCC, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2011b, 2014, Howarth and Painter 2016). Most people can directly relate to ‘renewables’, as wind, wave and solar power technologies are often referred to. Involving both industrial actors and individual users, renewables have become one of the key paths to decarbonisation across business and society (Mitchell 2008, Vasi Bogdan 2011,

Dauvergne 2016). Although at heart quite technical and dry, renewable energy constitutes a cornerstone in policymaking, public and private investments, business as well as civil society activity, leading to a range of concrete organisational and corporate approaches, from large-scale wind and solar farms to grassroots, self-organised renewable energy communities to individual homeowners having solar panels installed on their roofs. Renewables complemented by energy saving insulation function as useful material objects and gadgets for the mobilisation of citizens (cf. Marres 2012), or even ‘activists’, governed as self-organised ‘ethical consumers’ (Dowling 2010:491), or ‘prosumers’, that is, people who produce, consume and at times sell by owning the means of production (Burke and Stephens 2017, Szulecki 2018).

Renewable energy technology is compelling for many reasons, politically and existentially. Renewables are said to decouple economic growth from greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, thereby suggesting that it is possible to continuously progress economically (Jan, Farhat Durrani and Himayatullah 2021), albeit under the auspices of sustainable development (IPCC, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2011a:16). Given that both solar and wind are sources of infinite energy, they provide an optimistic image of the future, which stands in stark contrast to the dark, depressing thoughts about disaster and the finitude of humanity on Earth. This view of the infinity of renewables, and their seemingly indestructible non-exhaustive existence in nature, may be what creates such an alluring comfort for humans – a mentally and materially appealing focus for climate actions. This aesthetic dimension is perhaps best expressed in the art of Kurt Jackson, exemplified in the mixed media piece from 2020 *Late sunlight on the tumulus bracken, Warren’s Barrow, Carland Cross*, reproduced on the cover of this book. In contrast to the criticism of progress raised in debates about the Anthropocene, driven by dismissal of modernist aspirations (e.g. see Haraway 2015, Latour et al. 2018), renewables seem to enable wanted technical fixes that succeed in repositioning ideals of progress and liveability. Renewables facilitate new structures, politically raised to be publicly enjoyed.

Located at the intersection of national, international and personal politics in the growing ‘knowledge economy’ (Powell and Snellman 2004), renewable energy has been heavily debated but also brought

into citizen education programmes (Kandpal and Broman 2014). Renewable energy brings both obstacles and opportunities for citizens, engineers, investors and public officials, and has under these conditions thrived and resulted in a transformation of the environmental movement (Jamison 2001, Toke 2011a, Leach and Scoones 2015). The Alternative Technology Movement (Harper and Eriksson 1972), which grew out of environmental concerns in the 1970s, is partly responsible for this transformation and turn towards commercialisation via renewables (Eyerman and Jamison 1991, Smith 2005, Elliott 2016). Here, the technology itself is what holds hope and agency, conceived as it is to be an already existing utopia within an immature society (Eyerman and Jamison 1991:76). The domains of society and business have been bridged by such a hopeful conception of renewables, not only underpinned by climate regulations, subsidies and voluntary carbon markets, but by people who come together based on their shared belief in its promises (Walker et al. 2010). From village groups to businesses, and from ‘green insider activism’ in state agencies (Hysing and Olsson 2018) to employee activism in large polluting corporations (Skoglund and Böhm 2020) and ‘green investor activism’ (Belfiore 2021), we are witnessing the growth of a dispersed climate activism pursued by people who take renewable energy actions across organisations. In practice, these actions manage to merge the political idea of ‘power to the people’ with the equally popular notion of ‘individual responsibility’. It is nevertheless unclear how this political entangling has succeeded in unfolding to such an extent, aided by renewables.

Despite existing climate scepticism and resistance to renewable energy, a shared worldview seems to have emerged among people who think positively about finding a solution to climate change. These people come together across national, disciplinary, cultural and other organisational boundaries to take action in the here and now. Instead of erecting structures for political change, new organisational forms arise with human efforts to accomplish change. To make sense of this broad and boundaryless movement, this book focusses on climate activism by investigating the community relations that animate it. With the growth of renewable energy solutions, we see a conglomeration of activist-business-state, massaged and glued together by a new outlook of both activism and community, which can no longer be easily distinguished as civic action (cf. Lichterman and Eliasoph, 2014), nor located in civil society. When environmental activism becomes boundaryless, communities

become more fluid, linking the individual to the collective beyond localism and globalism (Reitan and Gibson 2012, Doherty and Doyle 2013). As the face of activism changes, so too does the way people are told to take action and choose to do so by gathering and pursuing their personal politics collectively. The cult of the individual, charismatic, underdog activist has in some cases been infused by, and in other instances replaced by, a communal inclusion of mundane everyday activism. We thus ask: how are community relations formed and how does climate activism bridge society and business via renewable energy technology? This is the main question this book seeks to answer.

### **Activism in Transition**

In the 1960s and 1970s, environmental activism was, and still is, considered part of broader civil rights movements and grassroots quests for increased democratic participation (Eckersley 1992). Yet, since at least the early 1990s, with the rise of neoliberal governance systems, green activism has engaged in ever closer dialogue with the private and public sectors (Hemmati 2002, Dauvergne 2016). Many transnational environmental activist groups, such as WWF, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, with millions of supporters worldwide, challenge and resist, but also work closely together with state institutions and corporate organisations, to address environmental issues such as pollution and climate change (Wapner 1996). While studies of environmentalism have focussed on how movements target private and public sector organisations, it has become evident that contemporary environmental movements are active across the public and private divide (Ronit and Schneider 2013). At the same time as the environmental performance of corporations and public authorities can be challenged more or less aggressively from an external location (MacKay and Munro 2012), more subtle collaborative approaches are widespread and popular (Kourula and Halme 2008, Pacheco, York and Hargrave 2014), especially in the advancement of ‘corporate environmentalism’ (Mirvis 1994, Hoffman 2001, Bowen 2014) and ‘CEO activism’ (Chatterji and Toffel 2018). This results in tight alliances between businesses and civil society that prosper based on multiplying notions of commercial activism (see Table A.1 in Appendix).

Large parts of social theory nonetheless treat activism, and specifically environmentalism, as something that happens externally,

separate from state authorities and businesses, for example via ‘challenger movements’ (Bertels, Hoffman and DeJordy 2014) or even ‘shareholder activists’ (Goranova and Versteegen Ryan, 2014). This external position has furthermore been emphasised as being of theoretical importance. It secures the possibility of ‘true critique’ delivered from an outsider position with a clear political target or ‘anti’ (Dixon 2014:220). The question is nevertheless whether such a clean and clear-cut external position is still fruitful to uphold, empirically and theoretically, if we are curious about climate activism in the energy transition.

In the world of work, internal political acts have long been recognised as playing an important role. Whether through whistleblowing (e.g. Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch 2016), union activism (Byford and Wong 2016) or humour (Taylor and Bain 2003, Fogarty and Elliot 2020), there are innovative ways in which people can enact their political imaginaries at work (Scott 1990). While the emphasis in such studies of resistance has been on organisational hierarchies, and how workers attempt to counter managers to improve exploitative work conditions (Bain and Taylor 2000, Ekman 2014), research on activism in workplaces underscores the existence of wider political movements and links to society at large (Meyerson and Scully 1995, Scully and Segal 2002, Skoglund and Böhm 2020). Here, activism is studied as a boundaryless political force, rather than as a co-construction of corporate responsibility (e.g. see Sonenshein, 2016, Girschik 2020), with the aim to understand how a political movement may take shape within organisations that on the surface look apolitical, or by contrast, are outspokenly political.

A clear case of the latter in the energy transition is Ecotricity, one of the UK’s biggest renewable energy companies, founded by the activist and ecopreneur Dale Vince. Ecotricity not only lobbies for greener governmental policies and strict climate change targets, the company also takes an activist stance against fellow energy businesses, particularly the emerging fracking industry, producing campaign videos that have a lot in common with those produced by environmental activists. ‘In fact, Ecotricity has teamed up with Friends of the Earth, one of the largest and most influential green NGOs, in its campaign to oppose fracking in the UK’ (Böhm and Skoglund 2015). On the one hand, Ecotricity follows economic reasoning, clearly wishing to position itself as a green champion, gaining a competitive advantage in the

energy market (Cronin et al. 2011). On the other hand, it also seems to follow, invent and sustain certain political imaginaries, fortifying the ideas and hopes many people have of a greener world to come, via very material means.

Descriptive insights on how the environmental movement, and specifically climate actions, are increasingly becoming enmeshed in a variety of organisational settings can be found in both popular culture and various academic fields. This book will engage with both to analyse a set of ethnographically collected empirical materials, mainly based in the UK, by finding common ground in social movement theory, political science and organisation and management studies. We need to establish a cross-disciplinary conceptual understanding between these three areas of thought, due to our research interest in a climate activism that is productive of a rich variety of organisational arrangements, and especially those that bridge business and society. This broad theoretical, and for some readers perhaps excessively panoramic, approach is also vital due to already established intellectual exchanges between these three areas, and a resonance with the empirical experiences we have had in the field. Instead of holding on to the academic canon, it thus seems more fruitful to let go and craft an experimental attitude towards existing studies.

While social movement theory mostly focusses its explanatory power on environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society groups (Yaziji and Doh 2010, Vasi Bogdan 2011, Fisher and Nasrin 2021), political science authors have developed concepts of green deliberative democracy and citizen voicing (Smith 2009, Bäckstrand 2010, Dryzek 2013) that stretch to the remains of grassroots activism in political programmes of ‘energy democracy’ (Burke and Stephens 2017, Szulecki 2018). A blending of activism and formal politics is also advanced when ideas of ‘ecological modernisation’ (Hajer 1995) are brought into studies of renewable energy technology development (Toke 2011b). This focus on modernisation has been taken up by Corporate Social Responsibility scholars (e.g. see Curran 2015), especially those with an interest in ‘ecological citizenship’ (Crane, Matten and Moon 2008a:167, 2008b:151), including voluntary engagements driven by managers’ personal values (Hemingway and Maclagan 2004). Conceptually, however, these studies keep the environmental activist in an external position, occasionally to be brought in to be managed or governed.

In contrast, scholars have slowly begun to investigate how ‘internal activists’ (Wickert and Schaefer 2015:107, also see Briscoe and Gupta 2016) and ‘organisational activists’ (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman 2009:552) enliven all sorts of political imaginaries in professional contexts. Among these approaches we find researchers who seek to understand how minorities and marginalised members change and recompose their world at work (Zald and Berger 1978, Scully and Segal 2002, Marens 2013). Early on, Meyerson and Scully (1995:589) developed the concept of ‘tempered radicals’ to describe organisational members who are ‘outsiders within’. These are individuals who ‘may be playing parts in movements bigger than themselves and their organisations’ to accomplish change, starting with their organisation (Meyerson and Scully 1995:598). In contrast, ‘internal activists’ can also be conceived as less disruptive and more aligned with already established and accepted corporate responsibility and core values that need to be properly acted upon. Girschik (2020:35) states that ‘internal activists believe in and identify with corporate responsibility and may mobilise others in an endeavour to promote different ways of thinking about and doing business’. The activist struggles undertaken are in this latter case often smoother since the internal activists seldom disrupt the core business. Yet how citizen-activists, businesses and state actors are entangled by activism pursued at work is still not well recognised and understood (cf. Briscoe and Gupta 2016:673).

These previous studies on business organisations show that activism is either seen to enter business, to work from the outside-in, or alternatively, that activism grows in a bottom-up manner, spurred by notions of corporate responsibility to work inside-out (Davis and White 2015). In the case of the energy transition and environmental employee activism, however, such empirical distinctions are hard to sustain (Skoglund and Böhm 2020). Focussing on the organisation as the level of analysis, with its inter-dynamics of ‘inside-out’ or ‘outside-in’, including diverse forms of ‘boundary work’ (Langley et al. 2019) is insufficient and unsatisfactory due to the boundaryless attribute of climate activism. Tellingly, the intensified calls for climate actions, with a spread of activism across domains, have thus also been studied by a growing number of scholars taking an interest in ‘green inside activists’ in state agencies (Hochstetler and Keck 2007, Olsson and Hysing 2012, Hysing and Olsson 2018, Abers 2019). While these studies still show how activists wish to transform how the green environment is treated within their own organisation (with policy



implications), they also illustrate the existence of a much stronger will to connect actions taken ‘from within’ to others in efforts to accomplish a wider transformation. Hence, insider or employee activism can thus utilise a host organisation as a means for political ends.

Before the boundaryless attribute of activism was spotted in relation to employee activism and insider activism, it was well observed in digital activism (Hill and Hughes 1998, Maxey 1999, Postill 2018), and perhaps boundaryless activism is easier to accept when tracing activism digitally. Through digital tools, it has been suggested that political enactment travels in a less regulated manner, from keyboard to keyboard and screen to screen, across the Internet between interconnected countries via ‘cybercitizens’, ‘transnational citizenship’ and ‘virtual communities’ (Hill and Hughes 1998), for example in the case of the Arab Spring (Mason 2013) and the #MeToo movement. In contrast to a traditional leftist historicity of organised revolution, digital activism therefore resonates with theories of dispersed and disorganised activism, flowing flexibly across the political spectrum (Meyer and Tarrow 1998), shaped by digital networks and fluid communities that transcend local and global politics (Reitan 2010), disconnected from a specific activist citizen and target group (Mercea 2016).

The political dimension and effects of this expansive digital activism are nevertheless debatable (cf. Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019, Dean 2019). The spontaneous and processual character of ‘hashtag activism’, with their ‘algorithmic politics’ and affective potentialities, demand the recognition ‘that there is no politically pure position from which to operate’ (Pedwell 2019:134). There is no longer an ‘outside’ to neoliberalism and capitalism, or at least, no longer a safe one (Dean 2019:179). Digital activism performs from ‘within’ (Vlavo 2018), and the pressing question that both activists and academics ask themselves relates to this repositioning or even trans-valuation of politics: how can you work from within established structures, systems and hierarchies, with a wish to outmanoeuvre them, without yourself being defined by them (Scoones, Leach and Newell 2015)?

Inspired by this repositioning of activism, our main priority is not to better understand how activism permeates professional organisations and sometimes grows from the inside via so-called ‘internal’ activists. We are much more interested in thinking about climate activism as boundaryless and in relation to the ‘complexity’ that climate change repeatedly has been offering to political decision-makers (e.g. see,

Schneider and Kuntz-Duriseti 2002, Heazle 2010, IPCC, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014:114, Incropera 2016). This has generated a wide range of ‘uncertainties’ that are not only making decision-making difficult but alongside which warnings of post-political conditions (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014) and de-politicisation (Evans and Reid 2014) have grown. That is, hand in hand with the realisation that agreement on formal political decisions to mitigate climate change has been problematic, follows a general tendency to configure human behaviour based on adaptation and a capacity to cope (Chandler and Reid 2016). At the same time, as emphasised earlier in this Introduction, it is notable that calls for ‘action’ seek to complement ‘adaptation’, and that uncertainty is constructively met by the material-mental promises of renewable energy, its allure of infinity and hope.

There are very few question marks and precautions regarding renewable technologies, it seems. So, alongside all the political complexities and de-politicising uncertainties, climate activism spreads via renewables productively across organisations, but perhaps without any distinct cultivation of a political subject, namely an identifiable activist nurtured as a unified collective (Decreus, Lievens and Braeckman 2014). Hence, just as the energy system is in transition, it appears that so too is activism. The energy transition corrals and is infused by a boundaryless activism, indistinct political subjectivity and yet a forceful human relationality. To trace and understand this prolific environmental movement, we thus suggest there should be less focus on individuals identified as activists, and more analytical attention paid to the sort of human relationality and organisational force that underpins climate activism. To accomplish this shift in perspective, we turn to knowledge production about community formation, and specifically a theoretical expansion of the very limited concept of ‘epistemic communities’ (Haas 1992). This concept and slightly outdated framework were developed with other political complexities and uncertainties in mind: post-Cold War international affairs (Zito 2018).

### **Climate Activism and Community Formation**

We only affiliate ourselves loosely with existing research on epistemic communities, previously mainly understood as a community of professionals and experts who share knowledge to steer changes in policy when there is high uncertainty and political complexity. In contrast to